

Moceniga Valley

June 1893

Fumana didn't know what name to give the muddle of emotions and thoughts that crowded her heart and head as she hurried along behind Petrolio through the countryside plunged in darkness. First of all, there was the silent thrill of knowing she was about to experience something new. An adventure all the more alluring given its unplanned nature: arriving right when she thought she had to go to bed, just as she had every other night of her young life.

Then, there was the profound and almost poignant gratitude for her harpoon: the first gift her grandfather had ever given her. That is, if you don't count having taken her in and raised her as his own daughter.

But on top of all that, the little girl felt a wave of pride flow over her from the harpoon that she so feverishly clutched as if some bandits could suddenly appear out of the darkness to take it away from her. It was a sense of pride she had never felt before. To be able to do the same job as her grandfather. And to have been brought on board, just like that, without suspecting or even wishing for it, to embark on a new life that seemed to her far more extravagant and wonderful than the one she was leaving behind.

Fumana, a girl of few words (just like her grandfather) and accustomed to spending days on her own, kept quiet and didn't even try to let on to all of what she was feeling. She simply followed her *nonno* off into the night, fighting thoughts of sleepiness.

The countryside was a friend to her. In all those years, it had never betrayed her. With all things considered, perhaps it had been her only true childhood playmate.

[...]

They arrived at the punt, which was hidden in the thick of some rushes on the edge of the Moceniga valley. The rivers Canalbianco and Po weren't suitable for that type of fishing. They were too vast and too deep, with treacherous currents and deceptive eddies rushing through them. In the rivers, life—which does exist, and plenty of it at that—flows away rapidly, forcefully, unstoppably and violently.

In the canals, on the other hand, and even more so in the valleys, everything would always seem motionless. As if nothing lived within the never-ending labyrinth of water and earth. But all you had to do was pause at the very edge of the dry turf, quietly listen in, and you could hear it all right away. In the vast expanse that stretched towards the invisible sea. The intense rumble of a thousand lives. The faint gurgling of freshwater as it mixed with saltwater. The rustling of stirred branches. The crunching, both near and far, of broken twigs under human footsteps, or paws, or beaks, or who knows what other creature, from heaven or from hell.

Along with the calls of birds, ducks, cranes, herons. Joyful one moment, sulky the next. And the subtle slaps from fish and frogs on the surface of the water, so smooth and so still that it resembles the purest oil, a green sheet of glass, a blanket of emerald sheen.

Fumana had never ventured out into the valleys alone. She knew they were a dangerous place for those who didn't know them like the back of their hand. You would find yourself lost within the blink of an eye. There were no roads nor paths. And her grandfather had explained to her many a time how the marshlands would even shift. Where last autumn there was a canal or a wide and seemingly shallow puddle, the next year you could find an islet covered in grass and bushes.

There would be no hope of getting out of there if you didn't know how to navigate by the stars. Or by using certain markings etched over the centuries by fishers and bandits onto the trunks of towering trees. Trees, some of which still stand and others reduced to ashes, so tall you couldn't fathom how they'd ever managed to grow there, where even reeds seem to struggle to keep their thin, feeble rootlets grounded in the precarious sludge.

They sailed for a while. Her grandfather manned the punt in silence, prodding a long pole into the shallow marsh and against the grassy banks of the little islets that ran alongside. It was almost as if their little boat were a needle, and the Moceniga valley were a giant sheet of cloth on which Petrolio could elegantly trace the intricate designs of his sophisticated embroidery.

The old fisherman set the pole back down inside the punt and lit his lantern. At this point in the journey, Fumana hadn't the faintest idea how long they had been rowing for now. It could've been a mile, ten, or just a few steps away from where they set off. All that mysterious wandering had made her sense of direction drift away. Yet rather than filling her with fear, this oblivion filled her with a surprising and exhilarating sensation of freedom. Of course, also owing to the fact that she knew her *nonno* would never let anything bad happen to her.

"Watch carefully now, m'dear," Petrolio said to his granddaughter. Without another word, he began to fish. And she began to watch. Sitting at the stern of the punt, she studied the old fisherman's movements, picking them up little by little: where the fingers tighten around the harpoon, how the arm is stretched out in a slow and steady motion so as not to frighten the fish or frog, how the strike is delivered, how the prey is collected... At the same time, Fumana also took in the air and felt as the breeze caressed her skin and combed her jet black hair against the pitch black of the night. She studied the darkness around her, familiarising herself with it, making it hers.

Fumana was used to spending entire days alone, and chatting even felt pointless, as well as tedious, to her. But oh, how she struggled that night, holding back the flood of questions pressed behind her lips!

What was the name of that strip of the valley where they'd stopped? And also, those plants that engulfed the surrounding marshlands, with long and soft branches that

grew thick like the tresses of a giant; how strange they were, weren't they? And why did Petrolino not stick all the fish that came wandering beneath the thin hull of their boat, attracted by the glowing orb coming from his oil lamp?