

# Do not feed the Platypus, please

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**Summary:** One cute but clueless boy, one computer genius, one Georgian gangster and a meddling roommate... a recipe for disaster? It all depends on the platypus' mood.

## Chapter 1

For the first time in his life, Carsten de Vries was dumbfounded. Stunned, besotted, his mouth hanging open, like a total idiot. Standing in the middle of the corridor, with a wide array of Spanish Flamenco dancers dolls at his right and bulls statues, mixed with some Picasso ashtrays and Miró whiskey glasses at his left. He couldn't stop looking at the counter on the opposite side of the mall's "Gifts and Souvenirs" Section, where he had entered, looking for a present for her mother.

He was oblivious to the many shoppers brushing him aside, not very elegant or carefully in their quest for the perfect Christmas gift. 'Spanish women were the worse' -he briefly thought after getting his fourth big stomp- 'and they all loved stilettos and were not afraid to use them in a jungle of avid shoppers'. How could those tarts not see him, at 6'2", tall, was unbelievable. Spanish men were not so tall like the Dutch; in fact they were short for his standards.

'The boy is lovely', was the only thought going through his mind, repetitive like a mantra, dulled by the soft commercial music. He just couldn't pry his eyes from the young, very small, really small 5'5" foot boy, dressed with an obviously cheap black half polyester suit for employees, wrapping up presents for the buyers, softly and professionally smiling at the customers -unaware of the true beauty in front of them, only piling up things for the boy to wrap them- with the hideous dark green paper and golden-silver plastic bags. He looked very young, with light blond hair and blue eyes, an unusual combination, clashing with the popular belief of what a Spaniard should look like.

Carsten had lived for a short period in Madrid, 17 years ago -when the hottest man alive was Antonio Banderas- and his idea of the typical Spaniard was that; brunette, mesmerizing dark eyes and well sun tanned. The boy was the total opposite. The man was fascinated of how his tiny hands were wrapping the things at full speed. He had never understood why all the employees placed the object perpendicularly over a piece of paper and then folded it, trying to make the squares meet the ends. There were two other girls standing next to him, also very young and good looking, but nothing that could be compared to the boy.

First, he thought that he had seen an angel, but quickly discarded the idea as the mischievous glint in the boy's eyes had nothing of angelic. In Carsten's view, angels were boring creatures, singing alleluias and such things, sitting on their clouds or helping old women to cross the street and saving children from falling from trees or windows; that was what his mother used to tell him when he was a small child. The boy had more a magical quality around him. Something ethereal and out worldly. Like an elf, without the ears, he quickly added to himself.

Perhaps it was his delicate moves, not effeminate, or his slim frame, or the way he was almost knowing before his colleagues would say a word, what they needed. He was busy trying to catch one end of the paper and trap it with the tape, when his hand would immediately look for the golden store tags to pass them to the girl next to him, looking for them in the debris of papers' pieces scattered all over the counter. The funny thing was, that she had said nothing and he had not looked at her at all.

Shyness hit Carsten with full force, turning red for the third time when another seller asked him if she could help him. "No, gracias" was the only thing he could utter to them. The just turned 40 years Dutchman felt a little embarrassed as he clearly realised he was making a scene in the middle of one of the most expensive malls in Madrid, standing in the middle, watching in a trance, a high class gift wrapper, half his size. Without thinking twice he said: "Wait! This one", picking a packaged set of porcelain dolls.

"Very good choice, sir. They're made by Lladró and from this year's collection. I will write you the certificate in one minute. Follow me, please." The tall woman said and led him to her own counter and started to write some cards and put several stamps on them.

"I want them for a present." He said almost crossing his fingers so she would send him to the big counter.

"I'm afraid that this year you will have to take it to the packaging counter. In Christmas' Season we have so many customers that we can't afford to spend time wrapping up presents, but as this is a delicate piece, I will pack it myself." The woman replied with her best professional smile.

"No need to. I'll make the queue. Thank you." Carsten said before she could start to cut the paper. Before she could come out from her shock, he quickly tore the credit card receipt from her hands and signed it with a Montblanc pen, not even looking at the ball pen she was offering him.

Standing in line to get the horrible figures wrapped he realised that his mother would hate them. Perhaps that Japanese looking girl in software development on the third floor would like them. After all she had fixed some very problematic bugs in the trading programs for Thwaites and Sons. Yes, she was nice, even if every time he had to enter her office he had to kick the hundreds of Sailor Moon girls, sitting around.

After 20 years of running his own software company, he was still not used to many of his employees' eccentricities. He had started it many years ago, when he was still a systems engineering student at Leyden, moving the headquarters to London 12 years ago, to a building in Heron Quays, in front of Canary Wharf. That mini real estate crisis had been a blessing for him, allowing him to buy those five stores from a Dubai based investment society in troubles at a ridiculous low price. He loved those high towers designed by Norman Foster.

The two women in front of him, had around four things each one of them and he noticed that they were both going to get the boy has he had just finished with an old man he was previously serving. He would probably get the false blonde as she was half done with her customer and that was the opposite of what he wanted. He looked around and quickly estimated that there was no chance he would get his dream object. Behind him, there was a grandmother, with four items and behind her, a very frail looking old man, supporting himself with a cane. Feigning that he had not seen them before, he let the old lady pass in front of him, sending her to the blonde girl, not caring much for her protests that he only had one thing while she had four. He had some problems to hide his annoyance at her, because he hated people telling him the obvious. He was more than able to count up to four. The other girl, a brunette with very big earrings finished with her customer and made a slight gesture towards him, but Carsten allowed the old man to take his place in the queue.

The middle age woman, now behind him, looked hopeful at him thinking that he would also let her pass, but the Dutchman completely ignored her as the boy was finishing the sixth package with only two more to go.

"Thank you and Merry Christmas." Carsten heard for the first time the boy's voice, a soft tenor, exactly as he had imagined he would sound. Soft and polite. He came forward to the counter, feeling a huge constriction in his throat.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to El Corte Inglés. Do you need a gift card, Sir?"

"No." He replied, cursing himself almost immediately. Great way to start a conversation! He took a deep breath to say something else, but the boy was now busy with the dolls, wrapping them first in tissue paper and then looking for individual boxes under the counter. He placed them inside with exquisite care and Carsten couldn't help to admire again how small were his hands. Too fast and efficiently for his liking, the boy, Marcial Fernández Martínez -according to his name tag- finished the packages and put them in a bag.

"Thank you, Sir. Merry Christmas" He said politely and somehow mind absently.

"Merry Christmas to you too." Carsten blurted almost turning red when the boy, Marcial Fernández

Martínez, looked at him in the eyes for the first time and softly and shyly smiled.

A strong push from the woman behind him threw him out from his reverie and away from the counter, losing Carsten's eye contact as the boy was already taking care of the woman's present. Eating his own fury at being so rudely cast out, he left the store, to be nearly ran over by the pedestrians.

He walked down the street towards the Plaza del Sol, passing by the famous 'Bear Shaking the Tree' statue, as he knew it, turning to the left and continuing to walk through the narrow streets towards Lhardy -a very old fashioned restaurant, known for serving the typical Spanish food at its best. His secretary had made the reservation for 8:30, but he had no problems to get a table, although he was half an hour earlier.

Sitting in one of the corners, against the wooden panelled walls, probably done in the XIX century like the Restaurant itself, his gaze travelled around the rest of the room. Nothing had changed in the last years and still the old waiters were there, taking their good time to bring the menu, like in the old times, when you were supposed to lose a full hour for lunch. In normal circumstances, Carsten would have gone to a modern decorated restaurant, a lounge, where waiters were fast, good looking and people were relaxed, in that easy going way that made more easy to start a talk, have a drink or two, dinner and then go for tumble or not. For a brief moment he thanked Bill Gates and Steve Jobs for turning the undesirable nerds like him back in the 80s, into the hottest guys in town. You didn't have to be good looking or waste your time flattering a half witted, but cute lad to get into his pants. The magical words: "I own a software developing company" were more than enough. Sometimes, he would have to use the second killing line "at our third floor we develop video games" if the boy was a little doubtful.

A very old waiter approached him with the menu in English, but he quickly ordered what he wanted. He was always ordering the same when in Madrid, sitting at the same table for the past 10 years. Why should he change? It was the easiest way and no resources were wasted. He took out his i phone to briefly look at his e-mails and agenda. Tomorrow his schedule was covered till 8 PM, but the store closed at 10 PM. He wrote down "Marcial Fernández Martínez, 20:15, full check."

He was utterly tired of dining alone at restaurants, at his loft or in the office. He was 40 years old, rich, intelligent, successful and bored to the point of tears. He also wanted to come home and find somebody looking exactly like this boy, waiting for him. A little elf, small, graceful and sweet tempered who could make him relax after a full day of work.

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Marcial was almost dead on his feet after standing in front of that counter from 10:00 to 22:00, wrapping things up and smiling to the customers, doing their best to ignore him. His working contract would last

till January 6th and there were no chances at all he would get another to help during the sales season. The numbers for the Christmas campaign were not looking well and many of the older employees would be fired after the Feast of the Magi celebration.

At least, he had two hours break and lunch included in the 750 Euros salary. Perhaps, he could get something in the telemarketing sector or as a waiter. Things were really looking gloom, but he couldn't complain as he had a job when most of his friends back in Villaverde Sur had nothing and Pelayo was waiting for him at home.

While fighting with a ridiculously huge box, he briefly thought why his friend had gone such in a hurry at around 8, when he normally waited for him to finish so they could catch the subway together. Hopefully, he would have left him something from dinner. Pelayo was not so upset as before since he had asked him to refrain to help him at the mall. It wasn't really his fault, he thought, Pelayo always wanted to be helpful and things were falling because his left hand was broken. Marcial had been more than nervous when he had been standing for so long, next to the porcelain things. Yesterday, he had overthrown a full load of 'Barbie Dream Princess' dolls in his effort to set them right.

Marcial greeted his next customer and somehow the man made him remember the tall foreigner standing in that corner that had been so nice as to let those two old people pass in front of him. That was real Christmas spirit, not only buying like crazy and pushing everybody around so you could be nice for one day.

At 22:20 the last customer was out and he said goodbye to the other two girls, María and Cristina, students trying to earn an extra Euro. He put on his jacket on top of the suit, shivering a bit under the cold night. Luckily the metro was less than twenty metres from the entrance and he ran to the station.

It was almost 23:00 when he arrived to the end station. Climbing the stairs up, made him feel how tired he was, even if he was only 22 years old. It took him a lot of effort to stifle a groan when he saw the police making a control, looking for aliens coming back from work. Things had changed a lot in the last two years since he came to Madrid from his small town back in Asturias. Back in 2007, this was the happiest place to be, it was easy to get a job as a waiter, nobody asked you anything and renting a flat was almost a child's play. Two years after a huge economical crisis, everything had changed. Nobody had a stable job; the bar he used to work was closed, the employment office was only good to get a stamp in your card, and he could only get rubbish jobs like this one... and he had got it because he was the only Spanish boy who had applied for it.

He showed with a tired gesture his ID to the policeman, throwing a brief glance at the other two policemen, almost losing their patience with an older woman looking desperately in her handbag for her purse. She truly looked "Indian" and perhaps was an illegal. He felt bad for her as they would detain

her and start the deportation process. He put back the ID to this wallet and decided to put it in his backpack, opening it and throwing it next to his 40 cm., life like stuffed platypus, always travelling with him.

Suddenly, a huge branch fell over the police car, making all of its alarms set off with a deafening sound in the middle of the night. The second of inattention from the policemen was not missed by most of the workers, waiting for their documents to be controlled and they ran over the last stairs, almost knocking Marcial and the policeman down in their stampede.

"Shit!" The officer cursed as the three aliens, standing next to the car, also ran away, but he didn't run after them. "OK, let's call it for a night. It's freezing in here." He growled as the other two policemen were checking on the car damages.

Marcial did his best to hide his smile while he closed down his backpack, taking good care that the stuffed animal wouldn't get cold. Pelayo could be a real hooligan when he wanted.

After climbing the four stores up to his small one bedroom flat, he fumbled a little with the keys, softly cursing, that, again, the light in the hallway was broken and nobody had changed the lightbulb. The elevator was broken since five weeks ago, but still nobody had taken care of it, and nobody was going to solve the problem in the near future. His living-kitchen room was clean, neatly ordered and there was a stew to heat on the fire, but Pelayo was nowhere to be seen.

The boy removed his jacket and suit, showered and changed into his night clothes. He came out of the bathroom, heated the food and started to eat only to remember he had forgotten to put the platypus out of his backpack.

"Sorry. I know you hate to be in that bag. Next time, I'll try to leave it a little open so you can look outside." He said, removing the object from the rucksack and leaving it on top of the table. After eating his dinner, Marcial washed the dishes and wondered for the second time where his friend could be so late. It wasn't like him to go out for so long.

He flipped through the channels for some minutes, but the confessions of a former bullfighter's mistress didn't catch his interest at all and he decided to go to bed.

## **Chapter 2**

The alarm clock beeped at 9 AM and Marcial got grudgingly out of bed, making a terrible effort to keep his eyes open. He quickly brushed his teeth, took a glass of milk and dressed for work. Pelayo was nowhere to be seen and his side of the bed was untouched. Strange. He took the platypus from the table

and put it inside of his backpack, leaving its head slightly out.

Outside the building, his friends Paco and Lucho were sitting in the bench in front of what had been the bar where Marcial had worked till the owner went bankrupt, four months ago. Both “old boys” were drinking a beer and the sweet smell of their cigarettes immediately hit him, almost making him gauge.

“Hi, Marcial. You going to work?” Paco chuckled not really being able to control his giggles.

“Yeah, still in the packaging business.” Marcial answered. “If you see Pelayo, could you tell him to leave me some of the stew I prepared? He should not eat it all by himself.”

Both boys laughed like crazy. “And we're still buying this shit when we could be high like you just with cider from Asturias. All right, we'll tell your boyfriend.” Paco said while he dried the tears coming out of his eyes.

“He's not my boyfriend. We just live together.” Marcial replied a bit upset at the laughing.

“Does he pay rent also?” Lucho chortled.

“You know he can't do it at the moment. He does his best to help.”

“Sure..... Why don't you get him a job in the zoo?”

“Be glad he's not here to hear you. He's quite sensitive about his looks. He can be very nasty when he's upset. Don't piss him off.”

“Probably he will scratch us with his slapped legs.” Lucho shouted almost bending with laughter. “No, better, he will peck us to death!!!”

Marcial opened his mouth to explain that the platypus was only a vessel, but the church clock struck 9:30, forcing him to realise that he was already getting late for work and the fine could be 10 Euros or losing a full hour of his break time. “Fuck you!” He shouted at them and started to run.

Two hundred metres from the subway entrance, the neighbour woman from the flat below his, stopped him and shouted at him. “Listen punk, tell your friend to stop cleaning the god-damn floor during my nap. He bangs the fucking bucket around for a full hour!”

“I will. He only wants to help. Sorry, I'm late for work.” Marcial said quickly evading the woman.

He arrived to work two minutes before 10 and his old supervisor reminded him that there was a "legion of young students, more trained than you, ready to take over your job and be 10 minutes earlier."

"What's wrong with him?" He muttered to himself as he stood next to a girl named Lucía in the toys section, as everybody avoided to go there, and all the good places have been already taken.

"Personnel Office has just told him that he goes into early retirement at the end of the year." She whispered back. "Welcome to El Corte Inglés Madam."

Around 20:30 Marcial had enough of packing toys and for the hundredth time he wondered why they had such big boxes when the toy itself was a small thing. He was a little worried because he hadn't seen still Pelayo, when normally he would come at lunch time to steal something from his dish. He smiled to the nervous woman in front of him and started to wrap the huge kitchen set, feeling that particular electric draft he experienced when Pelayo was around. He looked up and there he was, standing next to the mountain of plush animals, with his red hat set in his head. Marcial quickly broke a smile for him, but Pelayo answered by moving his head towards his right.

On the other side of the plush animals mountain, was yesterday's foreigner standing, the one who was letting the old people come in front, looking at him. For some strange reason, the boy felt very embarrassed to be under such close scrutiny and turned his gaze down, only to rise them horrified as Pelayo pushed the full bears' pyramid over the tall man.

Carsten couldn't believe his bad luck so far. The whole day had been full of these small setbacks. First, his laptop was strangely bathed when a glass full of water mysteriously poured over his desk and the battery loader for his i phone disappeared in his own hotel's room. His PA had to run to get him a new one. When he came back, Carsten found the item inside of one of his coat's pockets. Somehow, he had finished covered with teddy bears and he was completely clueless about how it had happened. He was not even near the table! He was a good 50 cm away!! Utterly embarrassed at what most probably would be blamed on his own clumsiness -how many times had people laughed at him for being so tall?- He knelt down to pick up the animals.

"Please, Sir. Let me do it. It wasn't your fault. The pile was not nicely done."

The boy's soft voice was like a balm for his ears (and pride) Carsten turned his head to find him also bending over the scattered pile of wretched things. He couldn't stop looking at the blond while he was placing the toys back in the table.

"Hello." Carsten said, feeling like a complete fool.

"Hello." The boy answered shyly, making the Dutchman lose his head.

"Have a coffee with me." He blurted out, immediately willing to hit his head against the table for being such a clumsy idiot. It had only taken him two seconds to ruin his opportunity. "I mean, sorry. I just wanted to compensate you for the mess I caused." He closed again his eyes, not believing his own stupidity for taking the blame for something he didn't do it.

"I finish very late, at 22:00." The boy answered, looking at him a bit shocked.

Carsten was very disappointed, but the remaining working part of his brain made him evaluate the words; it wasn't really a refusal. Just a delay. "Have diner with me then. I can pick you up at 22:00." He slurred the words before he could evaluated the best approach.

"I don't know. My friend, Pelayo might be waiting for me at home."

"Ah." Carsten's voice never sounded so discouraged in his life. The little elf had somebody waiting for him at home. 'Idiot!' He chastised himself, 'with a face like this, and do you expect him to be single and waiting for you?'

"He wasn't there yesterday and now he has vanished again. Perhaps he wouldn't mind if I eat with you." Marcial trailed.

Carsten couldn't believe his luck. That moron had stood up the boy almost twice in a row? Now or never. That was his chance. "Just going out to grab a bite, so you can go home early." He whispered with his softest voice, trying to sound as innocent as they come, unwilling to frighten the boy, because he was almost doubling his age and that was already a big handicap.

"OK, but I leave at 22:30."

"Great, no problem." The boy agreed, making Carsten almost turn into jelly under his smile.

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The Dutchman nearly stomped over Mountbatten, his PA for this trip. "No calls tonight. I'm out for dinner. Do you have what I asked this morning?" He barked as the man looked at his boss and repressed a sigh.

"Yes, Carsten. I've checked him thoroughly. No police record, no debts. Very erratic working sheet though. He was born in the northern part of the country. Asturias. He just turned 22 in December and graduated from High School when he was 21 years old. No further studies and very low grades. Lived

under his grandmother's care till 16 when Social Services took him away. Those files are closed, but he returned to live with her when he turned 18 and stayed in that little town till she passed away in 2007. He lives in a rented flat in a "popular area", pays on time and has a working contract till January 6th 2010. No money or debts at all."

"Good work. Thanks. When is the flight tomorrow?"

"At 11:00."

"Reschedule it at 16:00. Tell the boys not to come with me tonight. Give them a free night. Send the drafts to the legal office too."

"Of course, Carsten, something else?"

"Call van Houten, then Southwood and finally Boyle. Transfer the calls to my room. You take the night off too."

"Thank you." The man said, just wondering why his boss was in such generous mood.

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At ten o'clock sharp, Carsten left his hotel near the Prado Museum and took a cab back to Plaza del Sol. A traffic jam almost made him late for his date, but somehow he managed to be on time. More nervous than when he had to present his Ph.D. thesis or his first project to a stockbroker back in Amsterdam, 20 years ago, he stood in the cold night, in front of the mall's main entrance. Slowly the employees were going out and his little elf came out with one girl chuckling at his side, a backpack hanging over his shoulder. For a short moment he wondered when the boy had become "his" in his mind. He took several deep breaths in order to calm down afraid he would screw it up like he had already almost done, twice, in less than ten minutes, not a few hours ago.

"Hi. You're here." Marcial said.

"I wouldn't miss it. Where do you want to go? I'm a foreigner and I have no clue about the hottest spots in this city."

"Burger King. It's been ages since I was there." The boy replied smiling. Carsten had to do his best to hide his disgusted face at hearing the place's name. He was worth several millions pounds and now he was going to eat at a fixed price menu place?

"We could go somewhere better if you want. It's on me."

"No, it's fine there. It's faster and I have to take the subway home before 24:00. I have to visit my Financial Advisor tomorrow and he opens from 9 to 1 only. The queue is quite long."

"Must be a really good one if he has so many clients." Carsten said shocked. Didn't Mountbatten tell him the boy was broken? 'No, the little vixen was trying to look important to him. That's already a good sign; he's interested in me.' Carsten analyzed in less than a fraction of a second.

"Yes, lot of us at the employment office these days. My contract finishes soon and I want to find something else. Shall we go?" Marcial shrugged, rearranging the backpack over his shoulder. Carsten immediately noticed a platypus' head popping out from it.

"What is that?" He asked bewildered.

"A platypus. It always comes with me."

"Really? Do I have to buy him dinner too?" Carsten said deciding to go for humour to overcome his shock after hearing that weird answer.

"Pelayo would love it." The boy smiled again, making Carsten laugh loudly, a wave of relief going through his body.

"I thought this Pelayo was your boyfriend!" He said, melting under the serious, but adorable expression he was getting from the young boy. His frowning at him made him look younger, if possible.

"Pelayo is not my boyfriend! We just share the flat. We know each other since I was 10! There's nothing between us. We're just friends."

"But you have just said the platypus' name was that!"

"I guess you can call it like that. He wouldn't mind." The boy enigmatically answered as he started to walk towards the Mc. Donald's, instead of the Burger King, next to the mall. "Come, we're getting hungry." He spoke playfully as Carsten thought that he was also hungry, but for something else than burgers.

After ordering two menus with the double meat burger, the boy sat in the table, leaving one of the trays in front of the seat taken by the backpack with the stuffed animal. Carsten took the chair in front of him

still puzzled that the boy had placed the animal next to him, cutting his way there. He certainly had an appetite despite his slender frame.

Decided to break the ice, Carsten asked what he was doing for a job. The boy chuckled and the older man realised of his third stupid sentence of the day; he had met the boy while he was working. This was going downwards and he was looking more and more like a fool!

"In the moment, I'm wrapping things, but later I don't know. In Asturias, I was working in a restaurant for tourists since I was 18 and when I came here I did the same, in front of my building. Pity, it was closed four months ago. The crisis, you know?" He replied, but he didn't ask the logical next question "what do you do?"; a question Carsten was hoping to get so he could increase his stocks' value.

"Do you come from Asturias?"

"Yes, it's in the north, from a small town near Cangas de Anís. It's very beautiful with the forests and the streams running along in the Springtime. I used to go at dawn to see if I could catch a salamander or a frog before they would go to sleep. I miss it a lot, but there was nothing else to do in that small town. There were only 50 people living there and all of them were more than 70."

"I assumed you worked in a restaurant for tourists."

"Yes, it was 7 kilometres away, where the tourists are. Our village was too deep in the forest and had nothing nice to show. Most of the houses were abandoned and in ruins. I left after my grandmother passed away. My neighbours didn't like my lifestyle and Pelayo was somewhat nasty to them."

"Do you live since a long time with that friends of yours?" Carsten asked feigning to be not interested at all because perhaps this Pelayo character was only a friend, but it didn't mean that he wasn't interested in the boy and could pose a threat to him as most certainly he was younger than himself.

"Since we were 10. He came to live to the village right after my mother passed away in a car accident. He was always bothering the cows and chickens, but he also helped a lot with our house because we didn't have much money. My mother gave me the platypus."

"I'm sorry about your mother. Must have been terrible for you."

"I didn't realise it. I was sleeping in the car when it happened. I woke up in the hospital in Gijón a month later and stayed there for three months more. I went directly to my grandmother's house. She was the nicest person." Marcial told with a shaky voice, playing with the fries. Carsten opened his eyes, digesting the news. "My granny told me we hit a truck that night, but I don't remember it."

Carsten couldn't help to take Marcial's small hand into his larger one and the boy let it there.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I'm a total ass." He excused himself.

"No, it's OK. It happened long time ago."

"Do you study? You speak very well English." Carsten decided to switch subject.

"No. I hardly finished high school. I'm very stupid. Really stupid. I forget most of the things they tried to teach me. I remember them for a few minutes and then I forget them. It's been like that since the accident."

'Shit!!' cursed himself Carsten. What was going on with him? Fourth time! "I went to the Leyden University, studied Systems Engineering, made my thesis and live in London, where I work in a software developing company." He blurted at full speed, further reddening in the process.

"Wow. You're a clever person. I have troubles to program my mobile phone." Marcial replied, looking at him in the eyes. "Do you live in London?"

"Yes, near Canary Wharf, in a loft overlooking the Thames. It's very nice and near work. I live alone."

"I never was there." He softly replied, taking a second bite of his burger. 'For someone who had ordered two of these monsters, the boy was a very slow eater and the thing should be almost cold,' Carsten pondered as he drank from every word Marcial was saying.

"I was in Cangas, Gijón, once in Santander and now I live in Madrid. Do you travel much?"

Carsten was happy to get a topic where he would feel more secure; travelling and hopefully software, but when he opened his mouth to answer, his mobile phone started to ring furiously. "Excuse me. It's from work. I'll go outside." He said, repressing the urge to kill his stupid PA for calling him.

Ten minutes later, after arguing with Mountbatten over some silly details about his flight to Amsterdam, Carsten returned to find the boy still sitting there, fidgeting with his fries, his own burger finished and strangely the other also. Carsten briefly hoped that the boy was not like one of those bulimic top models, as the one he dated four years ago and finally dumped because the lad was driving him crazy with all his rituals around the food.

He sat in front of the blond with another question so they could resume their talk, but it died in his lips

when the boy smiled softly at him. I took him a lot of willpower to find again his voice. What was going on with him? He had just closed a deal for 24 million dollars this morning and he couldn't ask a single question to a cute kid?

"You really speak well English." That was not even a question! Carsten chastised himself.

"Thank you. George taught me. He was a fifty something painter living in the same village with my grandmother. He was English and painted landscapes for the tourists and mythological things, some Celtic also. He was very nice to me and a great lover when I turned 15. He was my first. Pelayo used to think he was too unstable for me, but he had to move back to England and I went to a foster home, as the Social Services people stuck their noses in my private life. I came back when I was 18."

Carsten nearly drowned with his drink when he heard it. "When you turned 15???"

"Yes, before he was only painting me. The guys at Social Services made a huge scandal out of everything and they put me away because I was not going to school any longer and my grandmother was taking some money from him. Her pension was truly miserable and he was only helping her. I was away for two years and a half, but when I turned 18, I came back and got a job in the Restaurant so I could help my granny. Finishing school took me very long."

The Dutchman needed a drink, a real one, not a cola in a plastic cup. Desperately. Fifteen and already in bed with a man? Even if boys were now starting at 13 years old, he couldn't match the angelic face he had sitting in front of him with a little slut taking money from his services, or the grandmother doing it, in a quite notorious way, to get the Social Services take a 15 year old away. On the bright side, he shouldn't worry about the age difference any longer. The boy like them mature... almost putrid.

"May I ask you something?" Marcial asked hypnotising him with his big blue eyes.

"Yes, of course. You have just told me all your life."

"Not all; just a part of it." He laughed, but turned serious. "Do you want to go to bed in my flat or yours? Pelayo is away for the night. He just called me."

"I think this is a little bit too much.... You don't have to do anything you don't want." Carsten said, nearly choking on his own words.

"I thought you wanted. Sorry. I would have liked it. Since I came to Madrid, I was with nobody and the last tourists, against a wall or in the forest, were really bad and lousy. I wanted to do it with someone I could feel related to. You were a nice person when you let those two old people go in front of you."

For the first time in many years, Carsten was speechless. Normally, he would ask to go somewhere else after flashing his money and most of the times he would get what he wanted. But here he was, sitting in front of a less than 30 Euros dinner, no fancy champagne, with the most breathtaking creature he had seen in his life, asking him for a tumble? He was perfect and painfully aware that he was not dashing, only normal looking, wearing expensive clothes to make him look better than he really was, light brown hair with grey eyes, fair skin. Very tall, well built, but not from a gym, intelligent, but for bed that was not mandatory. Nothing out of the ordinary unless you considered his banks accounts.

His common sense kicked in, firmly telling him that he was not dead and in gays' paradise. The boy must have been a professional. Pity, a real pity, but who was he to deny a well deserved happy moment to his dick?

“My hotel room. The orange juice is fresh.”

“Will they not charge you extra if I sleep there or do I have to go away after one hour?”

Carsten was shocked. What kind of question was that? He had heard that blond boys were stupid, but this one was rewriting the meaning of the word. “No, I pay for the room independently from the occupants' number.”

“Good. Let's go then.”

### **Chapter 3**

Carsten stopped the cab with an imperious hand sign and the car screeched its wheels in front of them. Afraid that the boy would have second thoughts, he nearly pushed him inside, only barking “Ritz” at the driver.

During the ride, Marcial took softly Carsten's hand reminding him of a small child. The older man couldn't help to squeeze it briefly, noticing how cold it was.

Getting to his suite was a slow torture for Carsten as he was about to explode in desire and take Marcial right in the fern-covered lobby. Nevertheless, he was able to control himself although his hand was shaking when he tried to slid the entrance card. After two fruitless attempts, he opened the door for his soon to be lover.

He couldn't help to gape at the grace of the slender youth moves, much better than any model he had

dated. Perhaps a dancer could be similar, but Marcial didn't have the swagger usual in many of them. It resembled more like a cat, with elegant, controlled moves, almost as if he weighed nothing at all. He stood by the frame, admiring the way he walked towards the coffee table standing in the middle of his living room. The boy stood there and turned to face Carsten, smiling shyly again, blushing and looking undecided. The tall Dutchman closed the distance between them with long strides, afraid of those blasted second thoughts, that might be assaulting the youth.

"You're so beautiful. Your beauty almost hurts my eyes." He whispered very softly, not willing to frighten him. His big hand delicately touched the right side of Marcial's face, stroking it almost reverent. He had to close the eyes when the smaller man kissed his fingers as they trailed the outline of his full lips. The man couldn't hold himself any longer and his arms grabbed the boy by his waist pulling him against his broad chest and kissing him deeply.

Marcial was surprised for a second, but quickly relaxed under the feverish kiss and draw his hands towards the man's head, softly caressing the nape of his neck. He slowly opened his lips, his tongue briefly touching the older man's, inviting him to go further. Carsten deepened his kiss, exploring now the boy's mouth as his hands started to slid the cheap wind proof jacket.

The boy's hands rested timidly over his shoulders, caressing them and pulling not so expertly Carsten's coat. Although Marcial was not really new to what was perspiring, his inexperienced touch was refreshing and utterly endearing to the older man. He had yet to master the art of undressing somebody with confidence. Carsten felt that he was again in control of the situation and this was a balm for his wounded pride and restored his confidence. He disentangled from the youth and whispered "Would you like to continue this in the bedroom?"

"You have chocolates." The boy said happily, making Carsten imagine many scenarios. Yes, he was an imaginative man. "May I have one?"

"Yes, of course." He answered taken aback as the boy seemed to forget him completely in favour of a chocolates box. He took a deep breath and went to fetch his little elf before he would forget the whole original idea, as he was busy with the brown box. "Here, try this one. It's filled with strawberries." He purred as he took one and delicately put it in front of the boys lips, shivering unwillingly when the soft lips caressed his fingers while eating the bonbon.

"Do you mind if I leave my platypus here?"

"No, it's all right. He can have the chocolates box if he wants." Carsten joked, more interested in getting the boy to his bed as soon as possible. "Come over here, let me help you with your suit."

"No, it belongs to the firm. It can't be ruined or they will charge me. I'll get it out by myself." He shyly replied, removing the jacket and carefully lying it over one of the sofas -near his backpack- while placing the sweeties next to it.

"Come, let's go, little one." Carsten whispered catching again the boy by the waist, his lips kissing his neck in a way that made him moan and writhe in pleasure, showing that he was really inexperienced and willing. Carsten couldn't hold back any longer and with a grunt he picked up the boy in his arms, marvelling at how little he weighed, exactly as he liked his lovers, small, slender and easy to manoeuvre them in bed.

He deposited the youth over the bed and renewed his hungry kisses all over his face and neck, almost tearing the hideous green tie he was wearing. Marcial only put his arms around his neck encouraging the man to come closer and rest all of his weight over him, arching his neck in a submissive gesture that rendered Carsten more confident. He was now decided to fully take the boy and not some oral sex and send him home.

The older man expertly unbuttoned the boy's shirt, and his hands travelled with soft strokes down to this belt, also easily opening and removing the trousers with one single and fluid move. He started to lick and play with the boy's nipples making his hips jolt upwards at the pleasure he was feeling. It was so endearing to have a responsive lover under him, nothing that could be compared to the well seasoned ones he was normally getting. "You're so sweet, little one. I thought you were more experienced in this."

"Sorry. I haven't been with anyone in the past two years and before it was only doing it against a wall and not getting the clothes off as I had to return to work." He replied softly blushing at his own words.

"You're incredible." Carsten told him, removing his cashmere jersey and expertly opening his shirt, revealing a well defined torso. He moved away from the bed going to the bathroom to look for the lube. He was more than determined to take the boy and show him what was a real man doing in a bed.

"Do you have protection?"

"Sorry?" That was a mood killer question. "I'm clean." Carsten replied more than upset.

"I've never done it without it. George made me promise that I would never do it."

"If you want so much a condom, I will look for one." He huffed. "I'm not sick, but believe me, it's much better for you if we do it bare." This boy could ask the most improper things at the worst time, he thought before returning to the bathroom to get one from his own stash.

When he was out he finished to remove all his clothes while he looked at the boy, only wearing his underwear, and laying over he brocade cover, looking transfixed at Carsten's erection. "Come lay against the pillows and I'll make you feel good. I'll show you what a real man can do."

Marcial slowly obeyed looking more and more like a frightened child. Carsten again settled his weight against the boy and resumed his kissing, this time more urgently than before. "I trust you. Do it bare." Marcial whispered in his ear.

"I'll be very careful, don't be afraid. We both will enjoy it. Just relax and let me take care of you." he whispered between his kisses.

Slowly he disentangled again from the boys arms and his hands briefly played with the hipbones, before removing the brief, releasing the member almost twitching and leaking. "So sensitive." He marvelled before taking it into his mouth, making the boy cry of pleasure. Carsten's tongue played a little with the tip before running it all over his length, with long and slow strokes producing small moans from the boy every time he was touching his member. His big hands steadily hold his hips so he could have more control over because the boy writhed under his touch.

When he felt that Marcial was relaxed enough, he left him, and poured a good amount of lube into his right hand and pressed it into the very small entrance. Marcial spread his legs to receive him better as the older man started to kiss him very slowly and his left hand secured the boys hip before he inserted the first finger, making him jump at the intrusion.

"You feel wonderful, almost like a virgin." He said, hoping that his words would calm the boy down and let him roam him. Carsten kept his moves slow, but decided while his kisses tried to distract the smaller man from his pain.

"Its been a long time since I felt so good", was the ragged response Carsten heard when he inserted a second finger and found the boys prostate making almost jump of pleasure and rub his thighs against the man's sides, his pelvis matching his intimate strokes.

Carsten continued with a third finger till the felt that the boy was completely relaxed and accepting his touch. "Please, take me. I want to feel you." He invited the man with a raspy voice, almost making him come at hearing it.

After coating his member with the lube again, he pressed its point over the entrance and pushed it only to make the head enter, leaving the boy some time to get used to his size. He started to pound him with very slow moves to ease the pain, resisting the urge to fully bury himself into this tight cavity. For Carsten, the youth felt better than a virgin, and after some minutes, he started to pound faster, enjoying

the feeling of being trapped and so deliciously squeezed.

Marcial had his orgasm before the other could be fully buried, but that was what Carsten had been looking for, expecting that this would relax more the little elf, writhing in pleasure under him. Not even giving him time to recover, he plundered himself into the boy, now taking a faster speed and riding him with all his strength as long as he could.

With a rapt groan he depleted himself into the boy.

"It was incredible, Marcial. It's been years since I felt something like that," he whispered again, covering the boy's face with kisses. As answer, the youth only kissed him briefly on the lips and hugged him.

"Do you want to take a shower?" Carsten asked a few minutes after laying together, holding each other.

"Would be nice, thank you."

He pulled the boy from the bed, giving him another kiss and took him to the shower stall, opening the door for them. For a second, Marcial looked undecided to share the shower, but he entered as Carsten pulled him gently in. "let me wash your hair, please," he whispered as he opened the warm water. He took some shampoo in his hands, and delicately put it into the boys head, softly massaging the head and marvelling at how soft his hair was, silky and thin blonde bangs.

The boy closed his eyes in contentment and purred like a cat under the man's massage, turning around so his bottom would be touching the man's member. For a few minutes, Carsten continued to massage him on the head and on the shoulders as the boy relaxed under his touch, laying his head against his shoulder.

"Hold on to the taps. I really need to ride you. You're driving me insane." He urgently breathed into Marcial ears, surprising himself with all the desire laced into these words. Not really understanding its meaning, the youth grabbed the taps as the big hands travelled towards his groin, stroking his member again, feeling the water also caressing him. He had to stifle a little yelp when those huge hands took him by the thighs, lifting him from the floor with ease and impaling him over the big shaft pressing against his bottom.

This time the taking was not gentle and contained as the previous had been. It was a real ride, made by a real man, crazy in his desire for him. He felt as both hands firmly held his tights, spreading his legs and secured them on the man's hips sides, forcing him to contract the muscles of his bottom, making the man moan like an animal. Marcial had to hold himself stronger to the tabs as the pounding was very strong

and decided, like an beast.

With another cry, provoked when the Dutchman hit his pleasure spot nullifying all previous pain, he let the whole weight of his back fall over his partner's chest, his throat arched over his shoulder. He couldn't react or move to match the powerful strikes so he decided to let the other have total control over his body, enjoying the incredible pounding, raggedly breathing when his lover would stop to recover his breath and make it last longer.

Unable to hold longer, they both came together, Carsten firmly holding him so he wouldn't fall.

"What have you done to me, little elf?" The man whispered before taking the slender youth back to the four posted bed. Just before falling asleep, he marvelled that Marcial's skin was smoother than the silk sheets. He clutched him in a possessive embrace as he knew for certain that he was not going to let this one escape easily.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Carsten woke up in an empty bed. Scrubbing his eyes to cast away the sleep, he realised two things. First, it was very late, more than 10 AM, according to his watch, and second, all the boy's clothes had disappeared along with the owner. He jumped out of the bed, cursing himself for falling in the most stupid -and oldest- trick in one night stands history; the sweet innocent dove that comes to you in the pub and robs you in the morning. 'True that they don't sleep with you and if they do, they have much more experience, but the boy could be a neophyte in such matters.'

He went to the chair, where someone had collected and placed all his clothes and found his wallet -with all his money- inside his trousers and his phone and blackberry also in the coat. He was puzzled for a while and then he loudly swore when he remembered his laptop and many of his projects, left all alone in the living room.

Everything was exactly where he had left it. Nothing had been touched. The boy had just vanished into thin air, without taking or asking for anything. That was not normal. People when faced with a rich guy, sleeping in a five stars hotel, stayed in the morning to get something out. It was his duty as man to kick them out, or pass the task to the PA's if the fling was too insistent.

The only missing thing was the chocolate box. No, he thought, the box was still there, all the papers neatly folded inside, what was away were the chocolates. Very strange. When had the boy the time or the opportunity to eat them and how could he eat so much chocolate? Beside the empty box, he found a small note in the hotel's paper.

"Dear Karsten, I'm not an orange juice man so I went away. I like apples. Sorry about the bonbons. I'll try to replace them. It was very nice to meet you. Good by, Marcial."

"Your grades were really low, boy. You do need some schooling." Carsten mumbled to himself as he picked his mobile phone and dialled his PA's number. "Come over here, now!" He barked, utterly frustrated that the little elf had disappeared -with platypus and all- so easily. 'The boy didn't leave me a fucking phone number, just for appearances sake!!' Carsten was sure that he had been incredible as he had heard Marcial moan like a heated bitch! Shit! That was just... infuriating. He was supposed to decide who goes away and who stays!!

Carsten dressed in no time with an informal attire and when he was lacing his shoes, he heard a soft knock in the door. Still cursing, he went to answer it.

"My, Carsten. Bad night? I thought you had scored a goal. Was the young pigeon sauce too strong for your stomach?" The PA asked with the earnest intentions to make fun of his boss. For another second, Carsten cursed his stupid Human Resources Department's recommendation to be nice, informal and allow his employees to call him on a first name basis, all to "keep the creative process fluidly running."

"At least I scored while you didn't as I can clearly see from your frustrated expression." He barked, showing his displeasure at Mountbatten's remark. "He's gone and left a note. I want you to find out everything you can about him: his friends, especially this punk he lives with, Pelayo something, past jobs and this mess with the Social Services. Move your ass, now!"

"We have to catch a plane in four hours! I don't have the time to do it!"

"I'll catch the plane, you stay and do your work. After all, there's nobody waiting for you in Amsterdam. Find out what I want, and perhaps you could be home for Christmas."

"This is not in my job's description! I'm a Personal Assistant!"

"Perhaps the people at the Employment Office will explain you what's on your next job description! Shit! All of you are always whining like babies and demanding more stocks! Well, earn then!"

"You had a really bad night." Mountbatten mumbled, crossed to no end with his boss.

"No, it was the best romp I've ever had and I want to repeat it as many times as possible. On a permanent basis would be the best. So, do your job, or my mood will be miserable. You know; if the boss is unhappy, he does not produce, your shares go down, he becomes depressed... and the employees suffer."

## Chapter 4

Marcial was very tired, but happy. It was 2 AM of January 6th, and he had just finished wrapping the last package; a huge doll. He would still have to pass by the Personnel Office to get his check, but then, he could go home with Pelayo and sleep. The soreness of his neck muscles was a very painful reminder of more than 12 hours standing behind a counter, smiling at everybody, no matter how nasty or mean the customer was. The real sellers were gone at 24:00 but the poor students wrapping packs, stayed so long as the line in front of the counters was monstrous. Marcial couldn't understand why people always left the shopping for the last minute... It was 21:30 and the customers were still looking for a present for their children. The Magi really could use some more planning in their lives, in Marcial's opinion.

He went to the Personnel Office and fortunately there were only four people in front of him. He got his check and the secretary told him that he could keep the uniform because there has been a 5 months substitute position just open, starting in mid January and if he wanted, he could take it. It was an nine hours shift from 14:00 to 22:00 in the toy store and the salary would be 750 Euros, plus commissions. Marcial was more than happy to accept it as he needed desperately a job to pay his 500 Euros rent.

When he left the mall, he saw Pelayo, resting his tall form against the wall, even if it was such a late hour, and the bus would pass at 3:15.

"Hi, you. Thanks for coming. It's really cold." Marcial said to his friend.

"It's cold, but no more than what we have back home." Pelayo shrugged. "Close that bag or the platypus will catch its death."

"You're right. I thought it hated to be trapped."

"I hate more to be cold."

They both started to walk down to the bus stop to sit in the bench to wait for the bus. A homeless passed by and shouted "Merry Christmas!" to Pelayo, who only hunched his shoulders.

"Do you know him?" Marcial asked sounding surprised.

"Yes, he saw me five days ago. Was really drunk, poor man. I took pity and helped him to open an ATM so he could sleep inside."

"That's nice from you, but one day you'll get in troubles with the police."

"They have to catch me first. I have a lot of experience running from the Moors around here."

"Nobody calls them like that any more. They're Spanish nowadays."

"Not real Asturians or Spaniards. All mixed over the centuries." He stated, wrinkling his pointed nose.

"So? I don't even know who my father was. Does it make me less?"

"I have no problems with you or your people. Your family was in that land since 300 years ago, working it and we always were around. We know each other and if there's any Moor blood in you, which I doubt, it doesn't show."

"You should update your thinking."

"I paid my beliefs with my blood and my brothers'. We were warriors and now we take care of the soil. This is our lot."

"You don't fool me. You helped those poor immigrants and many of them were Moors, as you call them. That poor woman was one."

"True, but I don't like when the ones who have to protect abuse their power. It's an insult to the fasces lictoriae in their shields."

"The what?? You speak really funny for a countryside guy."

"You're hopeless and you should read more. Try to find out what it means. The sword with the point down means the force subjected to the law. Study some more. It's so easy to do it nowadays!"

"You know I can't. I forget everything after a few hours."

"No, you don't. If you were so stupid as the doctors say, you couldn't know which bus you should take. You don't want to study, which is different." Pelayo scolded Marcial once more, like he had done on countless occasions. "Your bus is herre."

"I don't see.... Ah, you're right. Are you coming?"

"No, I'll go to speak some more with Carlos -the man you just saw. Bye." Pelayo shrugged, raising from the bank and limping a little bit from the right leg as he readjusted his red hat.

Marcial also stood up and made ample signals with his arms to the approaching bus. When it stopped in front of him, and before it would open its door, the boy shouted: "Come by in the afternoon, and I'll have the apple cookies my granny used to bake for the Feast of the Magi ready."

"Make for three." Pelayo shouted back so he could be heard over the opening doors noise.

\* \* \*

Carsten's personal life had been a total chaos since December 19th, the day he was officially stood up by a 22 year old wrapping gifts boy, as he used to think. After one of the most incredible nights in his long and rich experience, he had only got one single note, horribly misspelt. The boy, his platypus and the chocolates were gone in the morning and he had not been able to hear him leaving. He was practically sleeping over him!

The programmer was ranging from fury at being kicked out -not very subtly: "He didn't ask for my phone number"- and long for what he had lost that night. That boy, child, had been the most beautiful person he had ever seen and touched. He wanted him back in his bed, in his loft and in his life. It didn't matter if he was a little bit strange and not very intelligent as he had even admitted. He missed those big blue baby eyes, looking at him with a mix of shyness, awe and some mischief. Carsten hated this man, Pelayo -with no last name as he was not registered in the lease contract or any other bill. According to the reports from Mountbatten's hired detective, nobody wanted to speak about him and every question was met with silence or scorn. The best he had found out was, that Pelayo was the stuffed animal's name! Mountbatten was a real incompetent, in Carsten's view.

His mood was so bad, that his own mother castled him out after Christmas. He returned to London and worked like crazy as all the employees were away, celebrating (and rubbing it, according to him, in his face)

He turned in his bed to get his i phone and look in his agenda. Yes, he had some time free after January 5th and it would be possible to take a short holiday till the 8th. That should be enough time to fix this situation. He quickly marked the 6, 7, and 8 days as "Madrid".

He looked to the other side of the bed at the sleeping dark haired boy-man. Perhaps he was 25, but he was very well seasoned. An "emo", as they called themselves. He had been a decent fuck after one or two drinks at "The Laughing Buddha". Time to show him that this life was really for tears as the emo had been claiming the whole evening. He shook him awake.

"Hey, it's almost 3 AM. Should I call you a cab? I have to work tomorrow."

"There are no cabs at this hour. I'll go away in the morning."

"My chauffeur will drive you home, don't worry. It's a bad idea that we start something. I don't mix business with my personal life. Tomorrow, my PA will contact you and set a date, so the people at the Arts Department can check your material."

"You're an ass! Screw you!" The boy shouted jumping out of the bed.

Carsten had to bite his tongue not to say: "I've just already did", and preferred to flash a forced smile and use some bribery. "Come on, understand my position as your future boss. The others might talk and I have to keep the best ambiance in my firm. You can't cut the wings of so many creative personalities together." 'Yeah, a bunch of childish lunatics with egos befitting a king', but this formulation sounded better.

The Emo-boy finished dressing, and after throwing one last incensed look at him, slammed the door from his bedroom. Carsten phoned the concierge and told the man to call his driver and take the boy wherever he wanted. Also he should leave his card.

That was how things were done. Not leaving strange notes no matter how good looking you were. People had feelings. He had them and, no matter what everybody said at the office, he respected other people's feelings too.

\* \* \*

Marcial woke up very late. It was almost noon and he was still tired from working yesterday night. He looked around but Pelayo was away, as usual. Probably he would be drinking a beer or smoking something funny with Paco and Lucho. Stretching like a lazy cat and yawning like a bear, he remembered his promise of baking cookies for them. No, for the 3 of them. Perhaps Pelayo would bring someone for tea as he was waiting for nobody.

He jumped out of the bed, took a shower and got dressed with a very old pair of jeans and a decimononic brown sweater and his slippers. He drank a glass of milk as breakfast and realised that the minute he cashed the check, he needed to go to the supermarket. He took the two remaining green apples, washed, peeled and grated them, mixing it with some lemon juice. He looked for some milk, corn oil and one egg, whisking it all together and sprinkling some cinnamon over it. He mixed with the apples and added some meal and oats. With infinite patience, he switched on the oven, and formed the small balls with a spoon, placing them in the baking sheet.

One hour later, he had the last batch ready and put it to cool over the table. It was almost 3 PM and his

friend had not returned or called. Pelayo was behaving very strangely since he had dated that Dutchman, who by the way never called him again or passed by his job. Marcial knew better than to cry for him. He had enough experience with guys like him in the form of passing tourists. At least, it had been great sex. The best so far, in his opinion. Pelayo was convinced that the man, Karl, would return any time soon, but he knew much better; tourists got tired of him very easily. He couldn't talk nice, he couldn't remember what he had read, he couldn't understand most of the things being said and he couldn't remember -after a few hours- all what people had just told him unless they would repeat it several times. It was like at some point, his brain would overload with the information and just shut down for a while.

What was Karl doing for a living? Something good because that hotel room was truly nice, like those from the stars magazines. He had told him, it was something about computers, and he had been so nice to the platypus, giving it all the bonbons and buying dinner for it. Pity Pelayo didn't know how to behave and ate everything, not even saving one chocolate for him.

Next time, he would leave the platypus at home and Pelayo should get a life. "Hey, platypus, have you seen Pelayo today? Do you know where your master is?" He whispered to the animal, picking it from the chair it was laying. "No, of course, you will never tell me."

The ring at his door shocked him and he went to open the door. Marcial couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the tall Dutchman standing at his door, informally dressed and protecting himself from the cold with a big black coat, holding a small squared box in his right hand.

"Hi, I was near Brussels and thought that if you liked the others so much, I could bring you more." Carsten said, feeling completely embarrassed and engulfed by an overwhelming shyness when he saw Marcial's flashing smile directed at him.

For once in his life, Carsten was glad to be so tall, when the boy jumped to his neck and he could keep his ground, only swaying a little, more from the surprise at being so passionately kissed on the lips, in the middle of a scorched greyish white walls hallway, under the scrutinizing gaze of the neighbour woman next door. Even though he wanted to fully kiss back, Carsten let his common sense take control of the situation and split his embrace.

"Marcial, wait please. Your neighbour. She must be shocked..." He almost pleaded the boy, who immediately disentangled his arms from Carsten's neck and peered the hallway.

"Hi, Mrs. López. This is my friend..." He announced, very happily to the old woman.

"In addition to nuts, fag!" She huffed, slamming the door loudly. Marcial looked at her direction like a hurt child.

"Don't pay attention to her. She's just an old lady. You'll see bigotry everywhere. It's the fools' trademark."

"I'm not crazy. It's not my fault she doesn't like Pelayo and he's also nasty to her, spreading her trash in the corridor." Marcial whispered making Carsten strain his ears just to distinguish the words.

"Shh, don't worry. May I come in?"

"Yes, please. I missed you a lot, Carl."

"Carsten." He replied in a sombre voice. What kind of little slut was this boy? Jumping to much older persons' bones without getting the name right? This was a huge mistake, he thought, placing rather forcefully the chocolate box into Marcial's small hand and turning around, decided to leave once and for all.

"Sorry. Now, I remember. Your full name was Carsten de Vries and you come from the Netherlands." The boy said dutifully and then again the older man felt his knees melt like caramel at the inhibited smile from the boy. "I should have written it down, after I met you. Do you still want to come in? Pelayo is away for the afternoon. We could be together in the bedroom. He will not bother us, if we leave the chocolates in the living room."

Again, Carsten needed to take a huge breath in..... and let it out. Slowly. He couldn't believe that the young elf was again inviting him to his bed, after leaving him one morning without any explanations and nothing more than a few lines, horribly written. He opened his mouth to refuse, to tell that he had came all the way from London to speak with him, not frolicking in the bed like two heated animals, but the words died in his brain the minute the boy took his hand and playfully pulled him towards his lean body. Marcial rose on tiptoes and renew his earlier kisses in a more delicate and tender way than before, nothing like the animalistic passion he had shown in the hallway.

The big man again forwent of reason, clutching the enticing boy in his arms, smelling the intoxicating aroma of the apples and cinamonn on his hair. Almost blindly he walked towards the plywood table, covered with a shiny oilcloth. He pushed the boy's back against the edge of the table, to hold him on a firm grasp. He left the boy's lips to concentrate on his neck, enjoying the soft wimpering of his lover and the smell coming from the cookies batch placed next to them.

While Carsten was nibbling the boy's earlobe, he could feel the small hands starting to unbutton his coat in the clumsy way he found, once more, totally endearing, going for his belt and his fly. He nearly bit out of passion the he soft flesh he was licking when Marcial started to run his hand along his member.

Carsten took the boy by his hips and placed him over the table decided to continue right there what they had started, but he was pushed away softly.

"Let's go to the bedroom. I want to suck you." The boy whispered making Carsten shudder while an electricity bolt ran through his spine. Like an eel, the elf slipped through the Dutchman fingers and decidedly went towards a door at the end of the small room, removing his jersey and t-shirt with catlike movements, making him groan in expectation.

The bedroom was very small with space for a bed, a small table against the window overlooking a building with red bricks and exactly as ugly as the one Marcial was living in. For a minute, Carsten faltered at the sight of the hanging clothes in the neighboring windows. There was also a small library, full of some cheap and almost destroyed paperback editions of Spanish novels and a small closed closet, and a neatly made bed.

"I can show you the bathroom if you want. It's on the other side." Marcial smiled, making Carsten blush at being caught in the middle of his general inspection.

"No, no. It's really not necessary. Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude." He answered almost choking with the words as the boy smiled back at him with real happiness. He found himself returning the smile almost without thinking. Carsten gulped like a teenager when Marcial continued to reveal his body without any kind of shame, but not presuming of it.

"Do you want to do it with your clothes on? I can turn the heating up, if you're cold." Marcial offered, puzzled at the older man's delaying in removing his clothes. George was tearing his clothes off much before he could have finished to unbutton his plaid shirt. Coming to think, the customers from the Restaurant never put much out and preferred that he would suck them hard or went for the classical ride, positioning him against the wall in the back part of the tavern, getting only a few appreciation grunts from them. Nothing like when he was with George or the time he had been with Carsten in that fine hotel.

Once more, Carsten felt unendlessly abashed to look like an idiot in front of a much younger and inexperienced youth. Without replying, he removed his jersey, polo shirt and undershirt and continued by his trousers and underwear as he stared the boy sitting in the small bed. Carsten wondered for a minute if they two will fit in that small bed and realised that he could forget about doing something too exotic or break his neck trying.

Like a huge bear he approached the boy and sat beside him in the bed, resuming their kisses with much more ardour than before.

"Wait..." Carsten couldn't help to growl at the untimely moment the boy had chosen to speak. "I think I have some lube left from before." He said rising from the bed to look for something in the closet. He came back with a small tube and left it on the rickety bedside table.

Without saying anything, Marcial gently pushed Carsten against the mattress and kneeling over him, took his member into his small mouth and began to suck it with eager moves, making Carsten moan in pleasure at the boy's slow pace and decided, rhythmic and enthusiastic way he was blowing his cock. The Dutchman closed his eyes to revel in the feeling, not caring any longer about the room, the boy's strange remarks or even weirder actions. He let himself go into one of the best sexual experiences of his life.

He couldn't help to feel nearly enraged as the boy suddenly stopped and knelt over his hips. He almost shouted 'not now! Be quiet for Christ's sake!', but he was rendered speechless when the youth said in a sweet tone "would you take me now? I really want it."

Unable to speak without panting he just took the boy from his hips, marveling at how supple and velvety his skin was, so he could come under from him. I awe he saw the boy going to his fours on the small bed as he fondled with the lube's cap, applying a generous amount in his palm. He took a part of the gelly substance in his fingerprints and started to rub with care the small entrance, fighting hard against his desire to directly ram it. He took his time, stretching the pliant youth under him.

When Carsten felt that Marcial was more than willing to receive him, he inserted his glans first, letting the boy accommodate him before he continued almost impaling him right to his balls. Carsten felt the wonderful constriction of being so deeply buried inside that delicate creature. He noticed the boy faltered a bit under his weight and put his arm around his pelvis to hold him better and nudged him towards the metal headboard, so he could grab from there to avoid the momentum of his thrusts throw him down or be squeezed under the big man's form.

The groans he was eliciting from his small elf, made Carsten pick up the pace of his thrusts. The deafening creaking of the metal structure of the bed, became one of the most erotic sounds of his life, mixed with the faint smell of apples and cinnamon, still pouring out of the boy's skin. Unable to hold any longer, he ejaculated with an agonized cry, filling the boy like he had never done before.

His last conscious thought before falling asleep was: 'I can't live without him,' and he grabbed the youth before he would escape again.

\* \* \*

Marcial was very happy that they both had had such a wonderful time together. Being now crushed under the Dutchman's weight, efficiently trapping him, was not so incredible, but in a way, it was

endearing to see how much the other had enjoyed the sex.

Fortunately, he also had the idea of covering themselves with the blanket before Carsten would have fell asleep like a log, as it was so cold already at five. He lovingly stroke his face, but the man continued to sleep. Very carefully he disentangled himself from the bear hug, and looked for his clothes trying to be as quiet as possible. Marcial realised that it was almost tea time, that he had the cookies like Pelayo had told him to bake, but he had forgotten to buy tea at the grocery shop. He decided to go to the Chinese shop as probably they would be open, even if it was a holiday.

He entered his small living and looked around to check if Pelayo had been there, but nothing. Marcial hoped he was not cold wherever he was. He noticed the chocolates box, forgotten over the table in the mist of their frenzy lovemaking. The boy picked it up and placed it on the top of the shelf, hoping that perhaps if he hid it just a little, the box would be left untouched till dinner time. Pelayo should be distracted with the cookies and leave the Lady Godiva's box alone. He wrote in a small piece of paper "tea" and methodically put it in his right pocket.

He picked up Carsten's coat and hung it behind the door as he took his own one and went outside.

\* \* \*

Carsten awoke in the small bed. Alone. Again. For a second, he cursed the boy for repeating the same scene. He was nowhere to be seen in the shoebox flat he had. His bathroom in London was twice the size of the whole place. But he calmed down as he remembered that HE was in the boy's flat and he should return at some point to his own house.

He rose from the small, squeaky bed thinking, that by now, all the neighbours must know what they had been doing. The flat had paper walls! He decided to make a small check just to see how the boy was in the private life. The closet was very small and contained a few clothes, all informal and the hideous suit from work. Three pairs of well worn shoes, all the clothes were well folded and clean, that was a good sign, as Carsten hated disorder with passion. The place was very small, but it was very well cleaned.

Strangely he noticed that only very small things were hanging from the racks, Marcial's size. The Pelayo character should also be very small or a naturist, as there were no clothes for him and the bed was very small for two men to sleep in. 'I should stop my own paranoia. He said they were not boyfriends! The other must sleep in the couch! Better get dressed because meeting your boyfriend's roommate naked is for much younger people than myself.'

He dressed himself and went to sit at the small table, noticing the platypus resting in one of the four chairs. "You have a good life, don't you?" He asked to the animal, not really expecting an answer. "You

ate all my chocolates box," he laughed now. Lord! He was acting so out of himself these days! He felt a cold wind running through his back, chilling him to the bones. He shivered, but dismissed the sensation as it had been a draft. 'This place has more holes than a Gruyère cheese'.

"Hi, you are there!" Marcial said when he opened the door and saw Pelayo sitting next to Carsten.

"Yes, I was not going to let you escape again." Carsten chuckled, "and your cookies look great."

"Thank you. I went to the Chinese store to buy some tea. Do you want some too?"

"Would be great. I live in London." He chuckled, secretly glad that the boy was taking so much trouble to make him feel comfortable.

"I want a beer." Pelayo said, upset that nobody was asking him what he wanted. 'One good fuck to the boy, and I'm out of the game.'

"We have no beer left." Marcial shrugged. "It's only tea, sorry."

"Don't worry about me. I really like tea. It's not true that all Dutchman are buried with a bottle of beer in their hands. Those are the Germans." Carsten said, a bit puzzled with Marcial's remark.

"Scrap that tea! You know I hate it. I'll only take cookies. He brought chocolates for you, I know." Pelayo growled, looking very miserable.

"The chocolates are for later, after dinner." Marcial answered while he took the boiling kettle out of the mini kitchenette.

"I was thinking to take you to a nice place for dinner." Carsten said, feeling that he had been in weird conversations after sex, but this one was.... and there the boy smiled at him, and again he melted forgetting everything. He looked down at his steaming cup to hide his embarrassment and took a cookie from the dish. He couldn't help to feel puzzled; he had counted 12 when he had sat at the table, and now there were only 10. Carsten quickly dismissed it as he felt very tired from the flight and his bed sports and probably had counted wrong.

"OK, I'll put them high so the bugs don't eat them all by themselves." Marcial explained, taking the box and placing it on the highest shelf. To Carsten's astonishment the boy took a small handful of rice and carefully laid it over the square box. "Before you eat it, count them all."

"That was really low! I'm your friend!" Pelayo howled, truly enraged, snatching another cookie as

Carsten's eyes were fixed on Marcial's .

"What are you doing?" Carsten asked, not believing what he had just seen and heard.

"Keeping the bugs away. It really helps. Too much chocolate can't be healthy."

"Must be something from Spanish lore." The Dutchman muttered, truly astonished.

"In fact, it's Asturian lore. Keeps the trasgu away as they have to take care of the rice first. Millet would have been better, but I don't have any. I'll remove it when I'm back."

"Little vermin, you're not coming back till tomorrow and you know it. This time ask for apple juice and don't come crying to me the morning after, because no chocolate box will pay for this." Pelayo mumbled full of rancor, like a small child denied of her candy.

"Do you know any restaurant in Madrid that takes platypuses in?" Carsten asked as he needed to clear the ambiance.

"No, but the platypus stays here tonight. It's too cold for it to be jumping around." Marcial answered sweetly, clearing addressing the last sentence to a full brooding Pelayo. "It can finish the apple cookies."

"Thank God for small consolation prizes." Pelayo snorted.

"When will I meet your roommate?" Carsten asked. "I'm curious about him."

"But he..."

"Save it Marcial, this dummy needs at least 20 beers to see me. He thinks you're playing with the vessel." Pelayo interfered, making a shrug with his dark face and lifting his emerald green eyes to the roof.

"You'll meet him whenever he lets you see him." Marcial said in a formal voice.

"That's a truly shy bloke."

"Not really. He's not comfortable around people. Once you learn how to treat him, he's really good to have around. He's very helpful although a little harmful for the porcelain and delicate things when cleaning. His left hand is not very well shaped."

"Yeah, yeah. Tell him the story of my life, Marcial. Tell him about the Legion, too."

"I want that you move in with me. To London." Carsten blurted out, not believing that his mouth had truly said what he was thinking for so long.

"I start a new job next week." Marcial replied automatically, not really believing his ears. He? Move to another country?? With this good looking man?

"Just imagine me. Hungry. Upset. Chocolate deprived, in a toy store, full of packages piling up to the roof. His offer is better. This Godiva thing is good for a nice trasgu as myself." Pelayo suggested.

"Please Marcial, come with me. I'm sure you will find something to do at my company." Carsten pleaded for the first time in his life to a lover. Personnel should do its work and find something for his little elf to do; folding letters, taking care of the coffee machine, distributing papers or looking at the copy machine. Anything, but he needed the boy, living in his house, sleeping in his bed.

"I can't leave everything. I don't know about Pelayo. I don't know if he could stay here alone." Marcial doubted.

"Just take the vessel with you. I always wanted to travel more." Pelayo immediately answered.

"I want to take Pelayo with me." Marcial said with a resolute voice to Carsten's utter annoyance. The man considered that this was the moment to draw the line as he didn't want to have a destructive punk in his house. "Pelayo, the platypus, can come along. Pelayo, the human, stays here." He firmly said, boring holes with his eyes into Marcial's.

"Oh, no human will come with us, just Pelayo." Marcial answered running from the kitchen counter to kiss Carsten on the lips, happy as he had never been in his life.

"Come on, remove the rice so I can also celebrate with Godiva. She looks like a good girl." Pelayo almost pleaded, moving away from his place to avoid being hit by Carsten, as he carefully moved his chair to allow Marcial to sit on his lap.

"Carsten, we might have to buy some millet at London." Marcial said the best as he could between their ragged kisses.

"And chocolate for you platypus, dear." Carsten said catching the boy's lips again.

"You are going to spoil him!!" Marcial whined.

“Nothing would please me more, my love.”

## Chapter 5

After using all his resources, Carsten finally managed to convince Marcial to go out for dinner. The young boy had decided that it was not necessary because he had some spaghetti with tomato sauce left - much to the Dutchman's chagrin- and that it was really cold to leave the flat. After trying with several fine restaurants names, Carsten gave up and said the magical words; “Pizza, wherever you want.”, making his first mental note: 'dressing and teaching the boy what to eat.' Number two: 'get a teacher to polish him just a bit.'

“Really? I know a good place around here.” Marcial answered, his face lighting like a child in front of a bag full of candies. Carsten had to make a supreme effort to hide his discontent at the idea of continuing walking in this “popular areas” for one minute more than necessary. “Popular areas” was a very kind term for what the neighbourhood was; a vertical slum with substandard quality buildings, ugly designed and worse built. One on top of the other, small streets, no light and noisy, very noisy. 'Did everybody think in here, that they should share their musical tastes with the neighbours? Why were the streets so dirty? Was nobody cleaning the hallway? Where was the doorman?' was all what Carsten could think about.

“Wherever you want, but you must promise to have breakfast with me at the hotel. I still feel very bad after the orange juice misunderstanding.”

“All right. Do you know which bus we have to take to go to your hotel?” Carsten was astonished. Again. He had told the boy he was running a software company, a successful one, providing almost the whole London City, staying at one of the most expensive hotels in Madrid, and he thought he was taking the bus? He would only have to make a call and his driver would pick him up!

“That was most stupid from me....” Marcial said biting his lower lip. “I keep doing it. This is what the doctors mean when they say I forget what I learned a few minutes ago. You came here, so you must know how to come back!”

Note number 3: 'get a good neurologist and scrap the private teacher part.'

“No, Marcial, there's no need to take the bus, we can take a taxi or my car will pick us up.” He softly answered. He pondered that, after all, the boy had been a week in a coma with who knows which kind of injuries after a terrible car accident. That might well explain why he was acting like a small, without malice child, as if he were stuck in his 7 or 8 years. Everything was clear now, he was still carrying the stuffed animal his mother had given him. He shuddered to think that perhaps the thing might have been

in the car crash.

"All right, we can walk and then take a taxi. I'll go for my jacket. Pelayo stays here. It's too cold for him."

Going downstairs proved a real challenge indeed. Many of the lightbombs in the stairwell had been stolen and nobody had replaced them. On the second floor, Carsten saw the door of one of the flats open and seven people, all of them immigrants from Africa, standing around. He felt more than apprehensive to see them -and the way they checked him, from head to toes, valuing his attire.

"Bye Ngema." Marcial shouted, waving his hand to one of the men, sitting there, who answered with a big grin.

"Hi. Tell Pelayo he was right. It was where he said." The big man shouted back, laughing.

"I'll tell him."

"Who was that?" Carsten asked, totally horrified his little elf would speak with such people.

"Ngema. He's from Togo, or was it Benin? I don't know. He came five years ago, crossing the sea in a small boat. He's good friends with Pelayo. He sells videogames and DVDs in the street. Sometimes CDs too, but that is dead with the MP3 and such things."

"Do you play videogames? The company I work in is developing some projects." That was a good subject; all young ones liked them. Why was he still saying the "company I work in"? He should tell he was the owner... but would the boy understand the meaning? So far, flashing his money had not helped him at all.

"No. Too many bright colours and too fast for me. They make me dizzy and give me headaches." Marcial shrugged. "I read novels whenever I have time. At the public library."

"I thought you didn't like school." Carsten said puzzled, walking along with the boy, through the cold streets.

"I liked school. I was not following what the teachers said. I really tried, but I couldn't remember all those facts. I can read well, but I forget many of the things they say. I read well in Spanish, but in English I have some troubles. George didn't teach me writing, only speaking. I learned by myself, looking at his books. Reading entertains me, but I forget or mix the plots later, so I have to finish the book in one go and speak about it so I can remember about it later. During the weekend for example. It's better than TV. What do you do for a living?" He asked the last question, throwing again Carsten out of his senses.

"I develop software for many different kind of companies, banks, communications, e-commerce, insurance companies and some international organizations. We also are starting a videogames division, but it's very recent and still has to grow a lot." He mechanically answered, his mind trying to understand all what he has just heard.

"I thought you were in the hardware business."

Carsten didn't know what to say as he stopped dead on his tracks. "What?"

"Yes, like this Autonomous Systems and Robotics, artificial intelligence. You had a card from the European Space Agency. Don't they do such things?"

"How would you know about that?"

"The chocolates box you gave to the platypus; it had a small note inside "with compliments for a great job. John Meyers, General Director, ESA."

"We were developing some data analysis software for them. Nothing else." Carsten said completely dumbfounded. "How can you know about such things?" He asked more to himself than to the boy.

"I forget what I read or mix things, but I don't do it on a permanent basis, many of the things remain there and come back at some point. When everything works properly, I can do things very well and function like a normal person. Unfortunately, it's not always like that. It's as if something was on a permanent short circuit and for some brief moments, it would work fine again."

"The things you can't remember at one point, can you do it later when you're not under stress?"

"I don't know. It was much better when I went to the doctor when I was 16, but my granny thought it was bad he would make me take medications for lunatics and I stopped it. Also, those things are not good to have around if you're looking for a job."

"Can you not go to a doctor now? If the pills were helping before, they could do it now." Carsten asked, absolutly horrified that someone would still think like that. That stupid woman should have known that her grandchild was sick! It could be from a brain tumor, a cerebral dysrhythmia to almost everything! From where exactly was this boy coming?

"What for? I'm fine. I finished high school. Besides, it takes a long time, a full day, to visit one and I need to go to work."

"How can you be a waiter if you forget everything?"

"I write everything down in a pad with the table's number." Marcial replied, looking at Carsten as if he were an idiot.

"And if someone asks about today's specialities?"

"I write them in the pad in the morning so I don't get confused. It's not that bad. I have a job, whereas many of the boys around here, get nothing and they're cleverer than I am. Their schooling was not better than mine. It took me longer because I could only study three subjects by term, but finally I managed to do it. I even made the Entrance Exam to University and got a 7.9 over 10. It was a good day."

"It's not as if you forget things, you know them, but you can't tell when they ask you." Carsten pondered, baffled, as they continued to walk in the narrow street.

"What were we going to do? You wanted a videogame. Sorry." Marcial asked, stopping in front of a man sitting under a lamppost with a blanket full of cd boxes.

Carsten was totally taken aback. They were supposed to eat pizza. From where had the boy got the idea of videogames? There he realised; he had asked about the other man, the vendor and he mentioned that his company was "developping videogames" and that his clients bought software from him. Marcial could really mix things.

"We wanted pizza." He explained as softly as he could.

"I know. It's around the corner, but when I said Ngema sells videogames you wanted to buy one." He replied, looking at him in the eyes and smiling.

That was really creepy, weird for Carsten. He had thought, almost like a flash about installing the new 'Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2' for in the Relax Room, despite the Personnel Office's complains about it being too violent and counterproductive for his employees, when he had seen the men standing on the hallway. Carsten was sure he had said nothing. Trying to hide his discomfort, he casted a brief look at the videogames sprawled over the blanket and immediatly saw a well known necrophage demon. Carsten felt his bile rose to his throat and his fury almost blinded him. 'Ghouls warfare' was one of their latest babies! Released last November! Eight million dollars and four years work, just thrown to the trash! Now on sale for 5 Euros!!!!

"Let's go. I will never buy illegal copies from my own products."

"It's not yours, you have to pay for it first." Marcial replied smiling at him.

"Are you pulling my legs boy?" Carsten retorted, truly furious at this boy feigning an innocent look. This was too much, no good fuck was worth of it.

"He made the copies, not you!" Marcial replied opening his big blue eyes and slightly upset that the man was taking the credit for the immigrant's work. "Ngema told me they cost around 3 Euros each one of them."

Carsten felt himself falling inside the hole and landing in the Mad Hatter house. No, he corrected himself, better hunting the Snark as nothing made any sense at all. He remembered the part when The Baker recalls that his uncle once warned him that, "though catching Snarks is all well and good, you must be careful; for, if your Snark is a Boojum, then you will softly and suddenly vanish away, and never be met with again."

He took a deep breath and looked again at the boy, looking for signs of deception or scorn, but he saw none. "My own company created that videogame. It's in the market since November 2009, and those copies there are not the ones we sell. Somebody made a copy, without our authorization and sells it on the street. I don't get paid for it, and my employees don't get money for all the effort they put into this project. This CD should be sold in the mall where you were working, with an holographic stamp as authenticity proof. Otherwise is pirated. A bad thing to do. Illegal. If the police officers see this man, they should take him to prison." He said starting almost shouting to finally lose all the steam, utterly defeated under the boy's kind gaze.

"Pelayo says that it's not fair how you show them. Those poor guys have enough with living in a cementery to be gunned down by teenagers, and they're not so ugly. Actually, they're quite shy and afraid of humans." Marcial said in a very formal and serious tone.

"I can take a critic over the product, but tell your friend we sold several million copies of it." Carsten growled not happy at all how the date was turning out.

"I'll tell him. We go for pizza?"

"Whatever, Marcial." He sighed dejectedly, not really understanding anymore what he was doing there.

They both entered in a small place... with paper tablecloths to Carsten's horror! Not even in his student years, he had been in a restaurant of such category. This was too much, he thought as the image of a cockroach running in the kitchen -visible from the entrance- flashed through his mind. No, no fuck

no matter how magical it was, was worth a food poisoning.

"Marcial, I remembered that I have to make some phone calls and my mobile ran out of battery. Do you mind if I go to my hotel and we eat something downtown?" He asked sweetly, praying the boy would accept his excuse. That man sitting on the counter, totally drunk, was looking at his elf rather insistently, and Carsten was one step from hitting him.

"Oh, yes, no problem. I think we can catch the subway still. Today is a holiday. Wait, I'll say hello to Francisco and we go."

"Good." Carsten replied and to his horror, Marcial went to speak with the lecherous old man drunk. Mental note 4: "speak with the boy about good friends".

"I'll tell him not to pay more than one beer for Pelayo. If he comes back home drunk one night more and starts to mop the floors at 23:00, my neighbour will complain to my landlady." Marcial explained Carsten when he returned to his side.

Mental note number 5: "Get Marcial away from that punk!" Carsten heard the man saying "greetings to Pelayo."

Carsten was never more happy in his life to see a taxi driver as he only ordered: "Ritz"

"Where to? Don't make me lose my time, dude." The man huffed.

"Ritz hotel, Plaza de la Lealtad."

"Yeah, sure." The man snorted as he drove the car away.

When they finally arrived to the hotel, Carsten went directly to his suite, pulling Marcial by the sleeve after the young lad seemed to hesitate in the lobby, apauled by the langorously decorated stance. They entered the room and Carsten asked Marcial to wait at the living room as it was a business talk. Somewhat concerned that his little elf would escape again for some unknown and unexplainable reasons, he served him a cola and placed him in front of the TV, with small box of chocolates. In Carsten's experience, bonbons, were a useful thing to have around while dealing with his elf.

After speaking with on of his software developers for some minutes and with his financial advisor more lengthly, Carsten needed to sit for a while on top of his bed. He had no idea of what to do next. For the hundreth time he asked himself if this was what he wanted really. True, he was crazy about Marcial, but could he live with him? So far the boy had been polite and sweet natured, almost like a little boy, but

there were so many strange things around him. That friend of his, although it had been established that the punk would not come along, the stuffed platypus, his tendency to speak with the most unsavory characters, his strange mood swings ranging from absolute idiocy to the most weird and disturbing remarks.

What should he do? He had come this afternoon and the boy didn't even remember his name, but was jumping to his bones, completely happy to see him and somehow he seemed to be unable to fake anything. He had accepted to move with a total stranger to another country in less than two minutes. He was very beautiful and not exactly stupid, but these strange "lapses" were nerves breaking for a logical, mathematical and well organized mind like his own.

Carsten briefly considered that if things didn't work well, he could always send the boy back home with a nice check. After all, piling up money in his banks accounts was useless if he never enjoyed it. Anything, before giving it to his annoying sister and her husband, always making fun of him because of his chosen lifestyle. That man had been one of his reasons to leave Noordwijk behind and start again in London, where people were more cosmopolitan and minded their own business.

## Chapter 6

Carsten was surprised to see the boy, sitting exactly where he had left him more than half an hour ago. The brief thought of 'he doesn't run away every time he can,' flashed through his mind, but again the boy threw him out of balance with the question "do you want it here or in the bedroom?" when Carsten softly petted his head.

"What?? No! I was just being nice before we go out for dinner!"

"Do you really want to buy me a pizza?" Marcial asked with true shock. "Normally, you should go away after what we did, unless you want some more."

"Yes, that's what I said earlier. I only needed to make some phone calls. It's done and we can go out now. There must be a nice place nearby." Carsten answered, still debating with myself if he should be angry with the youth for hinting that he was one of those old sex driven perverts or sad because he believed that 'he was only a good, no, an excellent fuck, worthless of something else.'

"All right. Thank you." Marcial answered, rising from the couch. Carsten noticed that the chocolates were untouched.

"You didn't attack the bonbons. You must be hungry by now. Come and I'll get you a big one." He

commented, smiling as he picked up his coat and made mental note number 9: "get some good clothes for the boy, those look from the Salvation Army store."

"I don't like chocolates. I prefer apples and strawberry candies. Sugared almonds are nice too." He shrugged.

"But the other time you finished a full box!" Carsten shouted almost losing his patience.

"Not I, the platypus. You gave them to him. I thought about replacing the chocolates, but I didn't know where to send them. Sorry about it." Marcial explained in a sweet voice as he dressed again with his well worn jacket.

"Whatever," Carsten mumbled, deciding to overlook the answer before he would fight with the blond. For the tenth time, he couldn't help to think that his elf was definitively strange. He took the boy's elbow and steered him out of the room, closing the door without gentleness.

They walked towards the big Cybele statue and Carsten stopped for a brief moment to contemplate it - standing in the middle of the traffic: the nature goddess surrounded (and suffocated) by many cars and buses.

"She's very beautiful," Carsten said mind absently, not expecting that the boy would understand and much less could answer his remark.

"She might be, but I wouldn't like her to have around. She was a very nasty woman."

"Boy, she's a representation of the Mother Earth. She oversees the crops, the rains and the animals."

"Tell it to Attis. Only because he was good looking, he got Cibeles attention and she forced him to remain a virgin under her service. When he fell in love with a nymph, she punished them both by killing the nymph and driving him mad. In his madness he unmanned himself and bled to death, but the goddess changed him into a fir tree. Ovid tells us the story. If she was so in love with him, she shouldn't have been so jealous. She couldn't expect that he would be a virgin for the rest of his life." Marcial seriously replied.

"Where on Earth did you learn that?"

"In a book. Pelayo recommended it to me. It's nice. Short stories."

"When did you read it? I thought you were forgetting or mixing things." Carsten asked, becoming furious as he realised that this boy had been playing him for a fool.

"I do it, most of the time, but if something catches my attention and I read it several times, I can remember it, and he has explained me the stories many times over. I read it when I was 16, in the juvenile centre. I remember most of the things I read at that age."

"When you were taking your medications...." Carsten pondered more to himself, losing part of his anger when he remembered what the youth had told him a few hours before.

"Perhaps. There were like four pills. I don't remember the names, but I think it was because I stayed always in the library as I couldn't walk well due to the injuries."

"But your accident was when you were ten!"

"Yes, the car crash. At 16, George had some troubles with his drugs and stabbed me. It was not really his fault, he was not prepared to see a trasgu, no matter if he was an artists and painting them for the tourists. I think a Xana would have been better. Trasgus can be impressive the first time you see them, but they're really nice guys. They are very helpful in the house, although sometimes very mischievous and break something down. Although people say they're small, they're really tall, almost 6 feet, with deep green eyes and black faces, but don't mistake them by Moors, because they hate them. To look like Moors, its part of their punishment for fighting in Holy Ground. You should not shed blood there, no matter which are your reasons to do so. Diana was very territorial."

"You don't make any sense, Marcial. Why were you in a foster home? Why did you say you were stabbed?"

"The stabbing was not really done on purpose. George had been taking a lot of mushrooms and he accidentally saw the trasgu, became very afraid and attacked it, but staggered and fell on top of me, stabbing me on the left side. He said that he was a demon I had brought with me to his house, and pushed me over the window. Luckily, it was a second floor and only broke a leg and the left elbow. The police took me to the hospital and then the Social Services people came and they took me to a Reformatory as there was nothing else available. They said that my grandmother had neglected me -is that the word? I don't know- and that she was pros-ti-tu-ting- me since I was 13. That's a long word, but I think I said it right."

Carsten was horrified and mute whereas Marcial didn't seem concerned or disturbed by his own story.

"One doctor said, that I needed to take medications for the rest of my life because I was sick and he gave me a lot of pills. I spent almost two years in that place and finished my primary school and started the high school. I had left school after the car crash as I had lost five months in the hospitals and with the rehabilitation After it, I was very stupid, so my granmother decided that it was a waste of time. I worked

at the house and then with George, cleaning and cooking, sometimes posing. He was nice as to help my grandmother. I learned also woodturning there and it was very nice, but who needs a turner nowadays?"

"Why did they say "prostituting"?"

"The first thing we did today? It seems you can't do it till you're 16 and I did it since 13 with George. It's bad, but he was very happy with me. The whole mess was due to the mushrooms. He should have trusted his normal dealer and not tried with the cheaper one."

"The man tried to kill you in one of his hallucinations!!! Do you still defend him? I hope he rots in prison!"

"He was in prison for 9 months, but then he was sent back to England, to an institution. He was also wanted there and the Spanish authorities decided to send him overthere, as I was not a reliable witness. He went mad with grief and the closure was horrible for him. Pelayo did also everything he could to make his life miserable, even if I asked him to leave George alone." Marcial said still resentful at his friend. "It was an accident. George would have never hurt me. Those crappy mushrooms did it. Now he must be furious at me because I didn't keep our secret."

"Good for him."

"Pelayo was overzealous. After all, he should have never been there. He says he came in to protect me because George was drunk and he didn't like when he was taking such things and I should never take them."

"Marcial, what that man was doing with you was very wrong. You can't take a 13 year old! It's a minor!!"

"I liked to be with him and go to his house after I finished my chores. We never did anything wrong."

"If you're over 50, it's wrong to be with someone as young as you were!! You should have been in school, playing videogames, football or using the mobile phone! Not working and going to bed with a man your father's age!"

"You start to speak like Bibiana, the social worker." Marcial replied sounding terribly upset.

"She was right!"

"You also double my age and you seem pretty cool to be with me." Marcial retorted heatedly.

"But you're 22! Old enough to know what you're doing! You know what? You're right. I'm too old for you and you're too crazy for me! No matter how good you're in bed, it's not worthy. I can't. Coming here was a huge mistake." Carsten shouted back before his brain could stop his tongue.

"Good bye. It was nice meeting you." The boy slowly replied, fighting to keep his tears at bay, his voice partly covered by the roaring cars and turning around to walk towards Calle de Alcalá.

"Where are you going? It's in the other direction!" Carsten shouted exasperated more at himself than at the boy.

"If I take Calle de Alcalá straight, I'll get to Sol and there I can take the subway home."

"You can do the same from here! Make a combination! God, how dumb can you be?" He yelled back, frustrated to no end.

"I know the way from Sol, not from here. Pelayo is not here to help me." He whispered. "No matter what you're thinking now, I'm not faking it and I don't do it on purpose to upset you. I can't avoid it."

"It's a kilometre away, Marcial and it's very cold! Come here. I'm sorry for what I've said. I was shocked from what you've told me and spoke without thinking. Can you forgive me?"

"Why?"

"Look, I understand there's something wrong with you and I should have never said something like I did. It was hurtful and unconsiderate. You should see again a doctor and perhaps things would improve. It's not really your fault."

"What did you say?" Marcial asked wide opening his blue eyes.

"Nothing, forget it. Let's go for the pizza." Carsten mumbled dejectedly, sighing as he took the boy by the waist, only to remember that he was in the middle of the most busy streets of Madrid. "Sorry." he whispered and Marcial only smiled softly as a reply.

\* \* \*

Back at the hotel's entrance door, Carsten had to fight again to prevent his little elf from disappearing again. "I can't stay for the night." Marcial announced with a decided voice.

"Why?? I'll do nothing to you and it's very late to drive you home. It's on the other side of the town. It's

not like we haven't shared a bed before." Carsten protested.

"I didn't bring my pajama along. I can't stay to sleep here. I have to go back."

Carsten did his best to suppress the long sigh he needed to exhale. "Don't worry, I can lend you one of mine. I have two." He suggested, finally deciding to treat Marcial as if he were a small child, 'which isn't so far away from the truth' the man thought.

The boy's eyes lit with a delighted light. "Would you do that for me? Then I could stay."

"Of course." Carsten replied, still wondering if he would have to order some warm milk and cookies for the boy.

But it wasn't necessary as Marcial obediently got into the proffered pajamas, brushed his teeth with the complimentary tooth brush and got into bed, after neatly folding his clothes on the chair.

'At least, he doesn't throw things around like many I know.' Carsten thought as he repeated the same ritual, "Do you mind if I check something in my laptop?" He asked to the cuddled form in the bed.

"No, of course not."

After retrieving his laptop in the living room, he came back to the bedroom to find the boy soundly asleep on the right side of the bed, curled in a small ball, almost like a child. Carsten also slid under the thick covers and switched his computer on.

After a brief check on his e-mails, he fought the urge to look in Google if he could find something about amnesias, but he decided against it as probably it would be a waste of time. The best would be that a specialist would take a look at Marcial. Probably the boy wasn't faking it, but was he ready to start a relationship with someone like him? He had only lasted two months with that hot looking top model because the lad would cut his steak in 38 small pieces before eating half of it. 'Or was it 39?' He was not bad in bed, but finding his oddly smelling smoothies in the refrigerator, his tendency to make almost a national drama at every piece of solid food, his hundreds of beauty products, provoked that, on the tenth week of their relationship, Carsten found himself renting a new flat for Patrizio and broke up two weeks later as he had enough of him. He wasn't made for the family life. Carsten needed his space and the small elf was much crazier than the model.

But he wasn't obtrusive or telling him what to do like the other loved to do. In fact, Marcial had been one of the most delightful dates he had ever had, once he had decided to treat him like a small child, and he didn't look offended at all. He had been listening to his office stories very carefully, making the appropriate questions in the right place and smiling when he was supposed to do. Marcial had told him

about his small town, accurately describing the people there and telling him about the legends there, like this strange thing, the Trasgu, something like the Kabouter<sup>1</sup>, but with a strange mania for house cleaning, very useful to have around, except for his tendency to move things during the night or break them inadvertently; the Nuberu or the lord of Thunder, like Wotan; the Xanas, akin to undines, but gentler and the Meigas or witches. He spoke about them as if they were alive, and even if his mathematical and logical mind couldn't accept them, he felt strangely compelled to hear more about these creatures.

Yes, the boy had something magical around him, exactly like he had thought the first time he had seen him, packing dreams.

Carsten smiled to himself. 'Living with a platypus can't be that bad. The Australians do it.' He bent over the small form and kissed him on the forehead, spooning his body behind the boy.

Before falling asleep he thought to complain in the morning about the heating. The room was freezing and it was supposed to be a 5 stars hotel!. He drew the duvet around him and the boy, protecting him from the cold.

## Chapter 7

Carsten woke up late and for once, the boy was still sleeping in the bed. This time, he had told him to sleep with him and had given him a pajama while the other time they had just fell over the bed. Perhaps, that was what went wrong that night. Marcial seemed to obey every order without questioning. Last night, after the pizza, the boy wanted to go home and he only said "eat your desert before we go" and he had done it. Maybe it was a matter of understanding his idiosyncrasy and drift along with the river. Nothing new for him. One of his best developpers for C++ was coming for work dressed like Spiderman on Friday's. The Head of Rich Internet Applications had like 78 pokemons' in her office and she knew all their names better than her colleagues.... and said colleagues had hung one of those creatures from the ceiling in revenge because she forced them to redo a full project from the start. Carsten shruddered at the memory of her nervous breakdown.

The J2EE team was not speaking with the FLEX team because the first were Star Trek fans and the others from Star Wars and the galaxy didn't seem to be big enough for both of them. He had had to buy an Enterprise replica and part of the "trash" left over from those films at a crazy auction at Bonham's, along with a 6 feet Darth Vader and a pod racer for the rec room, to "enhance and tune the company's team spirit", as Personnel had justified the purchase. He knew that many of them had the "Imperial March" established as his identifying ringtone.

He was perfectly aware that he was the CEO of a "circus of freaks". He had a permanent staff of 200

people plus other 3.000 collaborators all over the world.

Carsten decided to let Marcial sleep longer as he called room service for their breakfast. He left the bed and put on a wrapper before going to the living room to make the call.

"Send apple instead of orange juice," was his request before hanging up. He sat in the couch in front of the TV, switched it on, flipping through the channels. He noticed that the chocolates box was almost empty. "For someone who doesn't like them, you certainly can eat them, Marcial," he said outloud. "I must be sleeping deeper than before. I never realised you left the bed."

A soft knock in the door announced the butler bringing a trolley with their breakfast. "Leave everything on the table" He ordered after opening it and going back to the bedroom.

Once more he was taken by the beauty of his companion. Asleep, he looked even younger, innocent and vulnerable, arising in him the need to protect the youth from everything and everybody. He bent over the bed and started to stroke gently the silky hair.

For a brief moment Marcial looked at him surprised, but his face relaxed as he remembered who Carsten was. "Hi," he greeted the man shyly.

"This time I have apple juice for you. Come with me and we will have breakfast together. Later we can go around," Carsten said softly, thinking already to fix or at least improve his little elf's wardrobe.

"Just one minute. I'll wash myself and get dressed." Marcial answered, jumping out of the bed, picking up his clothes pile and going to the bathroom.

'He's organized. We won't have a problem in that sense.' Carsten also went to the closet to get a fresh shirt, underwear, grey trousers and a light blue jersey. He was still tidying up his laces, when Marcial emerged from the bathroom cleaned, dressed and with the hair combed, losing his childish air.

"I hope you're hungry after all the chocolates you ate last night." Carsten chuckled as he rose from the bed and softly kissed Marcial on the cheek.

"I didn't eat the chocolates." He said puzzled. "I slept the whole night long."

"Perhaps you did and forgot it. Don't worry. I'll get you more as you don't seem to be affected by them."

"No, too many chocolates can't be healthy. If you buy more, he will eat them. Only a box every two weeks." Marcial said very seriously.

"All right. One box every 15 days, my little elf." Carsten laughed.

"I'm human, not an elf! My ears are normal size!"

"It was just a metaphore. Of course, your ears are well proportioned." He answered, laughing even louder and kissing Marcial on the forehead. 'Perhaps it's only a matter of understanding him, but he will not save the visit to the neurologist.'

The youth was happy with the breakfast and ate heartedly, much to Carsten admiration.

"I think we could walk around once you have finished. Today everything is open and I wanted to pass by the Archeology Museum."

"All right. I have to go home now."

"No, no. I didn't mean to send you away. Come with me. We can even pass through el Retiro park and I think you like trees, don't you miss them?"

"Every day, but Pelayo must be worried about me."

"Call him and tell him I'll drive you later, tomorrow, so you can pack your things."

"Tomorrow? I have to go home today."

"You have a toothbrush and a pajama here, what else do you need?"

"I want to change and I have to clean the flat. I can't stay here for ever."

"All right, I can drive you around five so you pick up some of your things and then you come here to sleep with me again. Didn't you like it?"

"I liked, but they will charge you extra. Besides, this is too fine for me. I want to go home."

"I would like that you stay with me some more time, Marcial. I enjoy your company very much. I wanted to go around with you, look at the city, have lunch, go to the Museum, have you ever been to a Museum, Marcial?"

"Never. What would I do in there?"

"It will be fun. If you don't like it, we go away. There are many beautiful things inside."

"It would be a waste of money. I will forget everything the minute I'm out."

"I'll get you a catalog and you can read it at home."

"Pelayo says I should read and study more, that I don't do it because I don't like it, not because I can't. If someone explains the things to me and makes me do them at the same time, then I don't forget them, like Maths exercises, but if I read something I forget it."

"The Museum will be perfect for you, you can watch the things and later read the book. Come on, it will be fun."

"OK. I'll call Pelayo."

"Good boy." Carsten praised, secretly glad that Marcial had not given him too many troubles.

\* \* \*

After walking along the park, Carsten decided to go directly to Loewe. The boy needed some clothes and a decent coat, not that jacket, and perhaps going to this shopping mall in Serrano street.

"Marcial, I was thinking that I didn't give you anything for Christmas."

"You didn't have to."

"I would like to get you a warmer coat. What you're wearing is too thin for London."

"I live in Madrid." Marcial happily answered.

"At the moment, but in two days you will be coming with me to London and it's cold there."

"I'm not going to London. Where did you get that idea? I have no money to pay for a ticket there. Besides, I start to work next Friday in the same store we met."

"Marcial you told me yesterday that you and your platypus would come to live with me in London. You were thrilled about it."

"I can't. I have paid my flat till the end of the month and have a new job. Pelayo will not like to move. He misses Asturias a lot and the forests. Too many buildings around here."

"Marcial, don't worry about the ticket, it's on me. I'll buy you a return ticket if you want. For the flat, I can help you to pay it for the next six months so you don't lose it, and for a job, you can work in my company. Not all of the employees are computer programmers."

"I don't remember it. Anyway, I can't go away. I don't know you and what would Pelayo do alone? No."

"You agreed to leave that punk here!! I'm not taking him along. It's you, some clothes, books and the platypus. Nothing else!" Carsten roared furious that the boy was trying to play him into bringing the other one along.

"If I take the platypus, he comes along! I'm not going anywhere without it! I go home now. I had enough of you. You criticise me and secretly laugh at me because you're so intelligent and I'm only a good looking crazy country boy."

"I admit you throw me out of my senses in more than one way, but I don't think you're an idiot. Yesterday you said you would come!"

"No, never. Tell me where's the subway. I go home now." He answered nervously.

"You don't know the way. So, calm down, we will have a coffee and we will talk things all over again."

"I don't want to go with you." Marcial said, clearly desperate now. He turned around to walk away, but Carsten caught him from the elbow with a strong grip.

"It's fine to come with me. We will take your platypus with us and I promise to keep your flat for you. You are nervous because you don't know anything about me. Come, let's have a coffee and I'll tell you more." Carsten explained using a soft voice, similar to the one employed with frightened little children. "Did you ever try a latte machiatto with caramel?" He finished, eyeing a saviour Starbucks at the distance and thinking that a muffin would support his cause too.

Carsten had almost to drag Marcial to the coffee shop, and sat him without much ceremony at one of the tables with a "wait here", that didn't leave too much room for discussion. He ordered the promised latte macchiato, wondering if the boy would like it, and a double espresso for him. He took a look at the muffins and the minute he was going to ask for a chocolate one, he remembered that the boy had said that he disliked the taste, and ordered a blueberry one.

He completely hated that the employees in this particular place used to call people by their first names. Sighing, he took the tray from the employee's hands went to sit in front of Marcial, seemingly busy looking at the pedestrians through the glass. He settle the huge cup and the muffin in front of him, under the boy's surprised stare.

"Blueberry muffin. You don't like chocolate. Try it." He ordered and Marcial started to peel the cover off, not fighting or complaining. "Good. That's much better. Now we can discuss what we are going to do, together in a civilized way, in a warm place and not shouting in the middle of the street."

"I'm not going to London."

"All right, don't come to London, but the least you can do, is listen to me."

"I want home."

"After I'm done speaking and you have finished your coffee and muffin." He firmly stated, thinking that the boy, in his own way, was a though negotiator.

"I was born in a small town near Amsterdam, Noordwijk. My father was an aerospace engineer and worked for the ESA there. My mother was a schoolteacher. In a way, I was a disappointment for her because I was always more bent to boys than girls and we fought like crazy all over my adolescence. I went to the University in Leyden, just to keep distance from her, and studied systems engineering. I graduated on top of my class when I was 22 and moved to London because I couldn't stand her any longer. My father didn't like it also, but he supported my decision and even gave me some money to start a business there. My mother nearly divorced him for that."

"In London, I was living in a pension, sharing the room with other students and workers, near Victoria Station, saving all the money I could to start a business of my own. My first jobs were as the typical "software boy" -the one who fixes your Wordstar or helps to set the Quattro for the bookkeeping- in the City. I started to develop solutions for the brokers I was working for and that's how I made my first money. I started also my Ph. D. in Logic and Theory of Computing at the King's College and that was real hard. By 1994, I got my doctorate and could establish my first real business near St. Paul's. I had many contacts in the banking system and I continued to provide solutions for them, specializing in trading platforms as the internet was on its infancy. I used to work like 15 hours a day, but it was very rewarding. By 1997, I had saved enough money as to buy four stores in the new at Heron Quays, near Canary Wharf, thanks to a new language I developed for online banking. I started with 10 employees and now I was employing near 50, focusing on communications and online sales, creating new languages. From that moment onwards, we did our big jump. We provided solutions for many companies around the world, even cooperated with other software developers.

“By 2000, I had made very nice figures, but I wanted more. I expanded the capital and my earnings multiplied by seven. Nowadays, we work for several other companies. Although, I'm not big like a Bill Gates, a Steve Jobs or a Zuckerberg, I'm on their club. I took me a lot of work and stress to be where I'm. I still work like 12 hours a day, travel a lot, achieving contracts and visiting our offices in Frankfurt and Mombay. Z3 Solutions has a good reputation, we have no significant debts and I control the 57% of the company. “

“My personal life has not been so successful. My mother tolerates me now as she has given up the idea that one day I will wake up straight, marry and give her five grandchildren. My father passed away seven years ago, but I think he was proud of me. My sister still makes my life miserable exactly like when we were children and I hate her husband, but adore my nieces. My longest relationship lasted 6 months and that was because he was clever enough as not to intrude in my work. I tried to live with a young boy a few years ago, but after 8 weeks, I threw him out. I live alone in a loft near my work, in front of the Thames River. I can't stand disorder or people shouting. I will be 41 in June. I have two cleaning ladies, but they don't stay for the night, a butler, a driver, several bodyguards around, two nasty PA, five secretaries, one financial adviser and several accountants.”

“I want to live with you and I want our relationship to work. Since I saw you, I can't stop thinking about you. I like you very much, not only in the bed, but when you speak with me, like yesterday evening. I know that you're sick and I believe that it's criminal that you are not visiting a doctor anymore. The minute you're in London, I will take you to a specialist and I don't care if you want it or not. You have to see one and know what's wrong with your memory. Do you want to spend the rest of your life in those miserable jobs?”

“I'm not crazy and I'm not going to London with you!”

“I never said you were crazy, just sick, as if you were an epileptic or something like that! You were in a serious car accident, a month in coma if I understood correctly. I can't promise we will work together, but I'm willing to try it.”

“I'm not going to London.”

“What is your problem with London? Yesterday you were happy about it! Are you afraid that I will dump you?”

“I'm not going to London.” Marcial said firmly.

“Look, I will speak with you landlord and pay six months or even a year rent for your flat. I'll buy you a

return ticket with an open date. If you want, I'll make a deposit with the exact amount of how much you would get working in that place so you have some cash if you return here. The only thing I demand is, that you visit the doctor. Nothing else. I'll cover those expenses too."

"I'm not going to London."

"Yes, you said that several times. I understood it already the first time. You don't have to repeat yourself five times. Don't you like me at least? Why have you changed your mind? Did I say something? Did I do something wrong to you?"

"No, you are the nicest person I've ever met. I like you very much."

"Then why?"

"George lives there. I realised yesterday night when you made me remember what happened. I don't want to meet him again. I love him, but he will hurt me again the minute he sees us. It's my fault they put him in prison."

"Marcial, you will be living with me. I swear to protect you from him. I'll get a bodyguard for you if you want. You will be working in my office and he's in prison. The British Authorities were looking for him long before the incident with you. He will never be near you again. I'm a jealous person too and honestly if I ever see him, I'll kick him in the ass. Come, Marcial, don't be afraid. Finish your muffin and let's go to get you a new coat, you must be freezing with what you're wearing and your jersey could also consider retirement."

"Do you promise it?"

"Yes, I do. Come, live with me and make me a happy man. I think I'm falling for you." He confessed, embarrassed like he had never been before.

"No, you're sitting. Are you dizzy?" Marcial replied, puzzled, making Carsten laugh like a lion.

"You're priceless. Never change." The Dutchman said, trying to control his laughter under the stern gazes of the other patrons.

\* \* \*

Marcial paled the minute he saw the big store; so much that he couldn't even think on protesting when Carsten decidedly ordered him to try several things, only asking if he liked them or not. He was marvelled

by the softness of the wool and fabrics and he nearly jumped when a man measured his trousers.

"We will only take a blue jersey and the black parka with us. Send the rest to the hotel." Carsten ordered the salesman

"Carsten, this is too much. I can't wear those things where I live."

"But you will be living with me from now onwards. And add a pair of pajamas too."

"I'm afraid we don't have such kind of clothes here, Sir. Please accept our apologies."

"All right, we'll have to wait for London."

"Carsten..." Tried again Marcial, pulling from the man's jacket.

"Do you want a bag for your platypus? That rucksack you carry seems to be on its last days." He asked under the astonished regard from the salesman.

"I'm not sure if he will like to be moved." Marcial replied very softly.

"Sir, we don't have bags for animals."

"We'll try at the animal shop. Is there any around here?"

"Pelayo will not like to be changed. He likes his old one."

"Let it try a new one and ask it later. These ones are fully made in Spain. That satchel in black letter is perfect for it. The platypus can pop its head out by the sides."

"Sir, I'm afraid that this product has not been designed for carrying an animal. I'm not certain of your pet's weight and the leather could be ruined."

"Never mind. It's a polite platypus." Carsten answered. "Send it also to the Ritz." He affirmed, ending the discussion.

"You're spoiling it and have no millet around you. Pelayo can be very naughty when he's unrestrained. You have no idea." Marcial sighed, thinking that he should have a word with Carsten later.

"We go to the Museum and then for lunch. I'll take you home at five and you can pick up your platypus."

\* \* \*

Marcial was fascinated by the Museum, looking at everything in awe and surprising Carsten when he recognised the story of Hades in one of the Amphoras, stading in the second floor.

"Pelayo would have liked to see this visigotic crown. He always speaks so high about these kings. He was named like the king Pelayo, who was Recesvinto's grandchild. King Pelayo ran away from King Witiza because his father has troubles with him and came back to Gijón, and from there he and his warriors started to fight against the Muslims. His court was in Cangas de Onís, near the mountains, where I came from. Pity, Christian warriors didn't respect the shrine from the older gods, like Diana, fighting inside and killing Muslims. Also, turning her sanctuary into a hermit for our Lady, upset her to no end. That's why she turned them into trasgus, forcing them to serve her by taking care of the of the forests and to work in the houses, like women as punishment. Many of them live with the same family for decades till the family moves away or sends the trasgu away, but it's very difficult to get rid of them, once they enter in your home."

"Who? The Visigoths, the Muslims or the Spaniards?"

"The trasgus. They love to clean and order things during the night, but sometimes accidents happen and they destroy something, like dishes or make a mess of the pots. It's not really their fault; their left hand is pierced and partly useless. People complains that they frighten chickens and cows too. We never had troubles with them, but the neighbours did. Pelayo, still likes to clean with the bucket at 2 AM."

"You Asturians are funnier than Irishmen." Carsten laughed.

"Do they also clean? Trasgus love order and clean things. They can cook too."

"Sounds ideal to have one around."

"Not always. It's a well known fact, that when the trasgu doesn't like you, he makes your life a living hell. Many families had to move away and do it in the shortest lapse, during daytime, when he's sleeping, only to find the trasgu running after the wagon with something they had forgotten and moving also with them. You can also give them an impossible task, like bleaching a dark goat's skin or pick up millet - which they can't because of the hole in the hand- or tell them to bring water in a basket. As they can't do it, their warriors' pride is hurt and they hide in shame."

"If they could programm too, I would hire them in no time." Carsten said very amused at Marcial's story.

"I don't know. You can't see them; only children and drunk people. Pelayo told me that some like to study a lot whereas others prefer to drink cider the whole night and are real rowdy pranksters. Do you know he was in Ravena before going to Toledo and later came to Cangas?"

"I thought he was a childhood friend of yours." Carsten said very shocked. Was the punk much older or were his parents in a travelling circus?

"I don't know." Marcial answered the silent question.

"How old does he look now?"

"Hard to say. Perhaps in his late 30s." Marcial shrugged.

"I thought you knew him since you were ten..."

"Yes, he helped me a lot after the accident and defended me many times. He's very loyal and a good friend. He agreed to move here with me." The boy softly said, a deep frown of concern marrying his delicate features.

"Look Marcial, don't worry about him. He's old enough as to fend for himself. When we get home, call your landlord and tell him to come by your flat tomorrow and I'll give him a year's rent. He can stay there." Carsten offered, thinking that after all, the old punk, had saved his little elf from that man.

\* \* \*

The taxi left them in front of Marcial's building and for the fourth time, Carsten thought that the Architect responsible for such a monstrosity should be hang or stoned. The hanging clothes from the windows were not pintoresque like in Southern Italy. Once more, Marcial ran to speak with two young men, dressed with joggings and big jackets, surrounded by beer bottles and smoking. Carsten closed his eyes in resignation and crossed the street to at least protect his boy from those obviously looking like young petty thieves. Time to refresh his Spanish lessons, he darkly thought, coming to the boys.

"They're Paco and Lucho. They're my friends since I was working in the bar, but now it's closed." Marcial explained, pointing with his finger in direction to a very abandoned and dirty store, its shopfront covered with glued papers and windows partly destroyed. In the Dutchman's opinion, the place looked like the perfect tavern, full of noisy drunkards, in its best days.

"Pleased to meet you." He answered, not offering his hand to them as the boys were not doing it.

"Well, see you later guys. I'll check if Pelayo is upstairs."

"Do it. He might be upset you were out last night." Paco chortled, while Lucho barely contained his

giggles. "Man, you have it good."

"Yes, he's a good friend." Marcial answered

"At least this one can speak and has hands!!"

"Don't make jokes about his handicap. He won't like it and could be very nasty to you."

"Marcial, if you're only looking for your platypus, why don't you go upstairs and I wait for you here?" Carsten interfered, secretly hoping that these two rascals could provide more information about the mysterious Pelayo. Both looked like the type who would sell their mothers for 100 euros. The boy only nodded and quickly dashed to cross the street and entered his building.

"Do you want to make business, my friends?"

"We're no friends, not even fellows. Marcial is a friend." Lucho fired back and took a deep sip from his beer bottle, terribly satisfied at his own answer.

'Perhaps even cheaper than 50 Euros', evaluated Carsten. "Yes, sorry. Is this Pelayo a friend of yours?"

"Pelayo? No way. We are into grass, not China white."

"Chasing the dragon is not our stuff."

Carsten felt lost, if he understood correctly those two were not into heroin... did that mean that the punk was some sort of local dealer? That would have explained the painter taking magic mushrooms from another man, "not his usual provider". He needed to know what he was facing to.

"Does Marcial like that stuff?" He asked fearfully, but remembering he had not seen a single bruise in his alabaster skin.

"No, he doesn't need it. He's high the whoooooole day. Must be the cider, dude. Why do you want to know? Are you a cop or from Social Services?"

"No!!! I'm.... a friend of him."

"He has no friends besides us." Lucho firmly said, as Paco gave him a strong slap in the head.

"Don't you get it? That dude is Marcial's boyfriend! Why would he buy him a coat if he's not shaking him

on the bed? My mother told me he fucked him very noisely yesterday in the afternoon. The whole block knows about it!"

"Marcial is gay? He never told me." Lucho said totally dumbfounded. "Are you gay too?" He asked Carsten.

"Dude, of course he's! Didn't you realise how many men were after him the last two years? Old guys, like this one. Even Slobodan offered to work for him... He could make hundreds in a night with Marcial."

"Ahhhh. I thought the job was as waiter in one of his clubs... He told me Pelayo forbid him to speak with the man again."

"For once, the thing was useful for something." Paco huffed. "Look dude, he's our best best friend, so piss off. We don't want you around. He could be your son!"

"I also don't like to be here. Just a little information and I'll be out of your lives. Can I buy you a beer?"

"Information means money. More than that." Lucho retorted.

"All right, gentlemen. Five euros."

"No way. We wouldn't sell our friend for such an amount!" Paco roared.

"Ten."

"Forty and we have a deal."

"Agreed." Carsten said, pulling the notes out of his wallet and showing it, but quickly pulling them away from Lucho's hands when he tried to grab the money. "Who is this Pelayo? I haven't seen him so far."

"Good for you. You're still on this side of the world. Be concerned when you see him."

"I saw him once.... All right, I checked the next morning to the detox clinic." Lucho trailed, shuddering at the memory. "He's truly ugly."

"Was a bad trip with an Atom Bomb. I never saw him, no matter what you say." Paco shouted back at his friend.

"Why is everybody nervous to speak about him?" Carsten asked shocked.

"He's not from here!" Paco roared, becoming hysterical. "Not from here, man. Stay away from him!"

"Look, if you want to know what Marcial likes, where he works, what he eats, if he had lovers, ask us. About Pelayo, we don't answer questions. No 40 euros are worth it." Lucho explained.

"Is he some kind of a drugs dealer?"

"No. You just don't want to meet him." Lucho said very seriously. "People who hears him don't want to do it ever again. After all, it's just a platypus. The worst that can happen if it attacks you is, that you'll have to throw him to the trash." Paco said firmly, but with a nervous edge to his voice. "Now, piss off and keep your money. We don't want troubles with Pelayo."

"So, this Pelayo is the platypus?"

"In a way..." Lucho said, but abruptly shut up when he saw Marcial crossing the street with his old backpack, slouched over his shoulder, the stuffed platypus poking its head out.

"Hi. I'm ready. Pelayo says it's OK by him to move." He said to Carsten.

"Are you going to take him with you? My mother would be very happy." Lucho asked.

"Yes, Carsten even bought a new bag for him. He will be very comfortable in there. Before, he always liked to travel a lot." The boy answered cheerfully, showing the platypus to the others, slightly recoiling when they saw the toy.

"Good for you. Do you have 20 Euros?"

"No, I left my money to Pelayo. He wants to buy some food for Maria. I only have my bus pass with me. He's upstairs. You can ask him. He was speaking about you just now, and said that he would pay a visit to you later." Marcial said, smiling as the boys' faces showed a look of pure terror.

"Leave it Marcial, we don't need the money. Enjoy yourself." Lucho said, rising from the bench and taking his bottle with him.

"Yeah, don't bother him about us. Glad your platypus has a new home."

"OK, bye."

Carsten was more than shocked. Were those two afraid of a stuffed animal? Since when Marihuana had such effects? When he was a student, it was only a source of recreation. Things had changed a lot in the last years. But Marcial had always spoken of Pelayo as if he were a person.

"Marcial, I hope you understand we are only taking the platypus along. I will not allow another man to live with me. Only you."

"It's going to be you and me only. No other humans. We take the platypus with us. I will not go without it. Pelayo will like his new satchel, don't worry."

"Your friends are very afraid of this Pelayo, your roommate. They say I should keep distance from him and they suggested that he's some kind of a criminal."

"Pelayo can cause a ruckus, that's true. He doesn't like immigrants, police officers or Moors; in fact, he hates them, but he would never hurt a soul. He always took care of me and did his best to help me with the school. I don't know why Paco and Lucho told you he's a criminal, because they both have seen him. Paco's mother always complains because she lives one floor below us, and he cleans with his bucket during her naptime. She was telling everybody that he was a fag, living with me and since that day, he doesn't like her."

"Marcial, I'm going to be firm on this. Your friend can't come along. I'm the jealous type of person. I don't believe in free love. If we are together, it's only us, no one else. If I see any other man than myself near you, I'll beat the guy to a bloody pulp. I'm a peaceful bloke, but you're mine. I accept your past with that man, but you will never repeat something like that ever again."

"Pelayo says it's good that I move with you, that this place is dangerous for me and has nothing good, that it's living with you or become Mr. Slobodan's special friend, but I don't like his business at all. He says that you're a decent chap, not like George."

"Marcial, do you even like me a bit?" Carsten asked desperately.

"I'm very happy with you. You treat me very well."

"That's not an answer."

"I don't know what else to say. I was very sad when you were not around. Where were you?"

"In my house, working. I would have stayed, but you left in the morning, without saying a thing!"

"You didn't want me there, why would you? We had sex and that was enough for you."

"I never saw anybody as beautiful as you're." Carsten said slowly. "You're difficult to follow, but I think you're a good boy. I want to try to live with you."

"I also do." Marcial said with a very small, quivering voice, making Carsten's heart melt.

## Chapter 8

On the next day, by noon, Carsten felt exhausted, only hoping that his plane would take off duly on time. He felt himself spaced in another dimension and Marcial had nothing to do with it.

It was impossible to survive here without being a lunatic.

In the morning, Carsten had woken up to the marvellous feeling of a receiving an incredible blow job from a very eager Marcial, more than willing to go one step further with him, and they had had sex like two animals in heat, almost falling from the bed.

Carsten felt as if all his hormones had returned from holidays and couldn't keep his hands away from Marcial as they both showered together and tried to get dressed. Finally, Marcial had given up and let the older man dress him, chuckling at the man's eagerness.

But the boy's cheerfulness broke up when he saw the orange juice jar over the table. Carsten had to run to remove the glass jar and pour the content over the bathroom sink, hitting his knee against the toilet in his rush. Softly cursing the butler, the hotel staff and himself for not checking in advance, he went back to the living room to find his elf petting the platypus, strangely affected.

"Hey, Marcial, sorry. It didn't mean anything. Normally all breakfasts are served with orange juice. I swear that when we are at home, I will never buy that stuff. I don't like it also."

"It's OK." He said, still clutching to the animal.

"Let's eat the rest of the things, darling. The croissants look good."

"OK." Marcial answered mechanically, not leaving the animal or rising from the couch. Carsten sighed, closing his eyes, already tired.

"Why don't you like the orange juice? Are you allergic or something?"

"The nurses forced me to drink it all the time. I can't stand it." He whispered.

"Not again, Marcial, you hated it before the accident." Pelayo whined from his corner, raising his eyes towards the ceiling. "I want to be near the bread and tomatoes. Make one for me and use less olive oil this time."

"Yes, you're right, I'm making a drama out of nothing." Marcial replied him, rising from the couch and going to the table to place the platypus in one of the chairs.

"It's something. It's called a trauma. I understand you don't like to have it around." Carsten answered, still pondering how a dam about to overflow was now sitting at the table, spreading tomato purée over a bread and pouring olive oil over it. 'At least, I solved a mystery. Why they were putting pressed tomatoes and olive oil in the tray'. Carsten sighed and sat next to the boy, a little shocked that Marcial had placed the piece of bread in a dish in front of the stuffed animal.

"Get rid of him. I'm hungry." Pelagic said, looking at the Dutch, taking his place next to his friend.

"You'll get fatter than a suckling pig." Marcial told the platypus as a matter of fact.

For a minute Carsten was shocked. Had the boy just called him a pig? But he had nothing on his dish and he was looking at the damned platypus!

"I try to keep a diet at home." He growled, resented that now his looks were on trial.

"You do? Why? Is it not boring?" Marcial asked Carsten, looking at him in the eyes.

"You've just called me a suckling pig."

"Not you, the platypus! It always wants to eat! He's bleeding me! You should be careful or it will eat all your food." He answered very seriously as Pelayo shouted his indignation.

"Little prick! I take care of you since forever and now you make a fuss because of a stupid chocolates box!!! It's not like I'm going to get fat or something. Get rid of him. I want to eat!"

"Does your platypus eat?" Carsten asked, using his soft and sweetest voice.

"Sometimes. If he likes the food. Cured ham and beer are what he loves best."

"Sounds like it has a good life, indeed." Carsten chuckled, finding the situation absurd and adorable a the

same time. "Do we have to go to Harrod's for cured ham or will he settle with everyday ham?" He asked trying to control his laughter under Marcial's frown.

"YES!!! Cured and from the good one!" Pelayo shouted. "I told you this one was good for you, Marcial!"

"Don't spoil it. Once he's out of control, he'll be in your office and in your house. I hope you don't have many porcelain figures around." He said very seriously, ignoring the trasgu the best as he could.

Carsten's mobile phone started to ring furiously and the man stood up to pick it up from its usual place over the small desk, where he had left it last night to recharge the battery. This time the phone charger was there, but his iphone was missing. Vanished like the first time. "Marcial, have you seen my phone?" He shouted looking frantically for it. "It could be from work."

"I doubt it," the boy sighed, glaring at Pelayo. Way to start a relationship; the trasgu was already misbehaving and casting Carsten out of his own room. "It's on your night table." He said as the Dutch ran to look for it, stopping midway when it ceased ringing.

The phone rang again and Carsten rushed like a madman to answer, closing the bedroom door.

"Do you think this is nice? Are you going to do it every time? He has just invited you to live in his house!"

"I want to eat too. You know perfectly well, that if the tomato is for too long on the bread, it loses its crispness and tastes like gum." Pelayo defended himself as he finished the bread with three bites. "Can you make me another? More oil this time and a bit of salt. This is the good one."

"You'll get fatter than a pig!" Marcial protested feebler than before, preparing the second bread and living it on the dish.

"Wrong number. Why people can't look before they press the send button? There's also something called speed dialling." Carsten growled sitting again next to Marcial. "Did you miss me, love?" He asked, taking Marcial's chin with his right hand and kissing him on the lips very softly. Pelayo took advantage of their momentary distraction to swallow the bread and steal a croissant before the men finished kissing. Soundlessly, he left the room. No matter what the boy would think, he knew when he was not welcome. You didn't reach the status of royal advisor in the Visigoth Court on your hot looks.

Carsten reluctantly pulled his lips away from Marcial's. For the tenth time he thought that the blond's kisses were addictive and he always wanted more, but he should better learn to control himself or he would never go to work in the mornings if the boy could kiss him like that. "Your platypus can really eat.

That bloke finished two breads in less than a minute, and a croissant too." He joked, still surprised that the boy could eat so fast and then fidget with an apple like he was precisely doing now.

"Pelayo can eat a lot." Marcial answered, realising that the trasgu had disappeared. He rose from his chair and put the platypus inside of the new satchel, partly closing it.

"Close it well before it attacks the Restaurant!! My finances will not survive it!!" Carsten laughed.

"It's unnecessary, he's out, but it's a very good idea." He answered completely zipping the bag up.

\* \* \*

Convincing the taxi driver standing in front of the Ritz to drive them to Villaverde Sur was a complicate matter as the man was sure that the two "guiris" were crazy. Marcial tried to speak with him, but the driver would have nothing of it. Carsten finally lost his patience and took his mobile and barked his own driver to pick them up.

Marcial gaped when 10 minutes later a big black Mercedes stopped in front of the hotel's entrance and a chauffeur ran to open the door for Carsten, who nudged him to enter in the car.

"Is it yours? We can't go in this. It's bigger than the one from Mr. Slobodan."

"Get inside. I had enough of this city's witty taxi drivers." He dryly said. "To his house. Now." He ordered the chauffeur, standing with the open door.

Inside the car, Marcial was looking everything with big eyes. "It's a bad idea, he might think you want his place."

"Who?" Carsten asked mind absently, busy with his iphone, checking his e-mails.

"Mr. Slobodan. He's a very important man. He owns several restaurants and clubs. His friends are always around and you don't mess with them. He's disappointed with me because I didn't want to work in one of his clubs. I only lasted one night. The lights were blinking too much for me and I couldn't stand it. Pelayo also doesn't let me speak with him."

"For once, he's right. Do I get to meet him today?"

"Mr. Slobodan is a busy man. He used to tell me he was coming to the bar I used to work just to see me, that he was wasting his time there."

"What? Not him!!! Your friend, Pelayo."

"It's up to him." Marcial shrugged.

"Just a second. Did you just imply me that you had an affair with some kind of a criminal?"

"I was never in bed with him!! Pelayo totally forbid me to speak with him! He used to pass by and send me chocolates. He offered me money and a new flat if I worked for him exclusively. Yes, that's what he told me. But I never liked him because he said several times that I was a total idiot for not accepting him and the most beautiful animal he had ever seen. I'm a person even if I'm not clever."

"Yes, Marcial, you are." Carsten answered, starting to wish to be already back in London.

When they arrived to Marcial's flat, the Dutch send his driver away and told him to be ready in case he would call him. The several shouting he received from the lazybones, sitting in the bench in front of his elf's house, were enough for Carsten, and he decided to go inside, dragging Marcial behind him. All his life he had cultivated a low profile, avoiding parties and the press and now, in less than two minutes, five drunkards yelled on top of their lungs obscenities at him, offering their sexual services for a coat like the one his elf was presently wearing.

Carsten felt literally his heart break when he saw the utterly sad expression in Marcial's face. He possessively took the boy by the waist and crossed the street after throwing the boisterous men a contemptuous look.

"Dear, don't worry, they're just a bunch of cretins." Carsten said trying to alleviate the obvious pain emanating from his love. "Tomorrow we will go away from here, and you will never see them again. You will like London. It's fun and people are more open minded."

"But you will exchange me for one of them." Marcial replied with the big and saddest eyes Carsten had seen in his life. "They offered better than I."

Carsten sighed and stopped in the middle of the stairs, taking Marcial by the hand and pulling him against his chest. "Don't be silly. You know I like you. How could I look at any other human being when you're around? You're very beautiful and it's impossible not to love you. Give me a kiss."

"Here?"

"Where else? Give something to your neighbour ladies to speak about before you go."

After throwing a quick glance around, Marcial rose on his tiptoes to kiss shyly the Dutch.

"Shit!! Fuck!!" The cry of a young woman took them out from their own private bliss. Carsten looked very annoyed to a middle aged skinny woman looking at them in horror from the stairs. 'By your looks, you don't seem to be a stranger to sexual preferences', he thought eyeing contemptuously the cheap, revealing and jazzy clothes.

"What are you doing here Marcial? Slobodan will kill you and your boyfriend!! Get the fuck out!! He's furious, looking around for you!! Those assholes of Paco and Lucho told him in exchange for their fix!"

"Hi, Elena. This is..." Marcial politely greeted her with a huge smile.

"The less I know, the better for me!! How can you be such an idiot?? You have an affair and bring it here??" She shouted back, hysterical from the bottom of the stairs.

"I don't have an affair. He's my boyfriend. I'm moving out with him." Marcial explained in a gentle voice, but Carsten knew better than letting his little elf to roam free.

"Who's looking for him?"

"You must be not from the hood'. Slobodan. He's Marcial's boyfriend. He'll put a bullet between your eyes."

"He's not my boyfriend! Pelayo told me not to speak with him! He was only coming every night to have a shot at the bar. I haven't seen him in the last three months!"

"He closed that fucking bar to leave you jobless and force you to accept his offer!!! He even bought your flat from that witch!! Look, mister, go away as soon as you can. Take a taxi and flee for your life! Yesterday, Slobodan clubbed three of the girls for not bringing enough money! They will not work for a week at least!" She cried.

"I have to pack and pay the rent to Ms. Estébanez."

"Forget it. He must know you're here with him. Get the fuck out!"

"I have my family's photos!"

"No time, give me your key. I'll look for them and send them wherever you want. Go now!!" Elena

roared pushing Marcial towards the exit. Carsten decided that the woman was right and went after then. He was more than surprised when she started to run, pulling Marcial along with her towards the corner. She nearly jumped in front of a taxi to stop it.

"Hey, not interested. Got a missus at home!!" Shouted the driver back. She only gave him the finger as she opened the passenger's door and pushed Marcial inside.

"Take him away! This is no place for him! Fuck, the Gypsy. Make room for me!" She said, now jumping inside of the car.

Carsten sighed and opened the passenger's door, sitting next to the taxi driver. "Louvre. No, sorry. El Prado." He said, again feeling that odd sense of strangeness, that was becoming more and more usual.

"Do you have money?" The taxi driver shouted. "No way I'm driving a tramp!"

Carsten had enough and pulled two 50 Euros notes from his wallet, tossing them to the man. "Drive and be quiet."

"One of them and I'll make you a happy man." Elena suggested to Carsten's mix of contempt and horror. He turned around very quickly to check on Marcial, but the boy seemed deeply entertained looking by the window as the car was entering the highway.

"Not my game. Thank you."

"You wouldn't notice the difference. I can do it better than him."

"If you need money, answer some questions and I'll give you 200."

"Either you have a lot of money or you want to ask difficult questions."

"Neither."

"Money first, darling. This is how I make business."

Carsten gave her 100 Euros, still not believing that Marcial was deeply absorbed looking at the traffic. "Half in advance. If I'm satisfied, you'll get the rest. Be glad, it's more than what you normally get for your services."

"Ass hole. Whatcha wanna know?" She slurred, putting some chewing gum in her mouth.

"Who is this Slobodan and why does he think he's Marcial's boyfriend?"

"Slobodan is my boss. He's the big man here. I work for him, but he's more into the chemical industry, moving products from the North to the South Coast. He came with his men ten years ago from Georgia, and swept the locals in no time, or that's what they told me. He's very rich and has a huge house in Marbella. His organization paid my trip to from Romania."

"What's his relation to Marcial?"

"I don't know. He says that Marcial belongs to him, that nobody can touch him. It's all this little prick's fault! He should have let him die!" She said, her voice full of resentment.

"Explain yourself better if you want the rest of the money."

"About a year ago, some guys from a Latin American gang, stabbed Slobodan at the bar in front of Marcial's house and left the motherfucker for dead. However, this little prick had no better idea than to stop the bleeding with his own hands, call 112 and stay with that piece of shit till the paramedics arrived. Asshole!" She shouted hitting Marcial not so gently on the head.

"Ouch! I didn't do anything!" Marcial protested, rubbing his head.

"Noooo. You just let a scumbag live. He was supposed to bleed like a pig in there! Don't you know you should mind your own business?" She shouted again.

"He was seriously hurt, the doctor told me. He was dying. Luckily, Pelayo told me what to do."

"You should have stolen his wallet, his phone and be done! He was supposed to die! My debts would have been cancelled! Do you have any idea what happened to those boys who attacked him?"

"I saw nobody. I only found him when I was taking the trash out, like I told the police."

"It's useless." She sighed, deciding to return his attention to the foreigner. "Back home we called them innocents. Impossible to argue with them, like children. Anyway, since that night, Slobodan decided that Marcial was to be his official lover. He has many, boys and girls and if you reach that status, you get money and a flat. Very good deal and you only work twice per week. Slobodan calls him "his guardian angel" because he saved the fucker's life and stayed with him, holding his hand. All the girls in the club know it; the boss is in love with this idiot. How can he get the richest guys? He forced me to bring presents for Marcial many times, but the little idiot does not take them! Those were really good things!"

Expensive watches, jewellery, flowers, but this dummy only tells him that his platypus doesn't like him!! He asked him many times to move with him, but nothing. He closed down the bar where he was working to make him starve and then accept him, but he got that packing job and now, you came by."

"Do you know I'm going to work in the toys' department?" Marcial asked her, truly happy to change the subject as the increasing tension was making him feel more and more suffocated inside of the small taxi.

"Marcial, you're coming with me." Carsten said firmly as the woman lifted her eyes towards the car's roof.

"If Mr. Slobodan has my flat now, I should pay rent to him now. Do you know where he's, so I can ask him for his account number to deposit the money every month, Elena?"

"Incredible... The worst part is that Slobodan thinks that he's not a total idiot. According to the boss, he's an angel in human form, this is why he doesn't understand our world. His innocence and kindness drive him mad and he wants to have him, exclusively, if you understand me. The job of his lifetime. It's not as if this one was never in bed with a man."

"Tell me more about this man."

"He's from Georgia, we only call him Slobodan, nobody knows his real last name. He's ruthless and bloodthirsty. He has five clubs in Madrid, some restaurants, takes bets, runs some drugs and gets money from immigrants and small thieves. He rules with an iron fist."

"Slobodan Filipp Majardze. His mother was from Yugoslavia. He comes from a village near where Stalin was born. He even taught me some words like "gamardshoba" which means "hello" and you have to answer "gaguimardshos". "Madlob" means "thanks" and "gtjov" "please"." Marcial told them, very glad that he could be useful.

"You see what kind of idiot he's?" Elena asked Carsten. "People would pay a lot of money for that bit of information. He can speak with the man!"

"If he ruined your chances, why did you help him back there?" Carsten asked, surprising her.

"Once Slobodan tried to hit me, but Marcial interfered on my behalf." She answered quickly.

"Either you are new in this job or your professionalism leaves a lot to be desired. The impersonation of the sassy tramp is neatly done, but everything in you screams "bobby". Are your superiors aware that you were planning to use a mental patient to trap this man, Madam?"

"I'm no cop you fucking twit!"

"At which police station should I leave you?"

"Stop here!"

The car halted on one side of the street.

"Madam, if I were you, I would consider to ask for a transfer. You are not good at this. Parking tickets would be more your expertise field. Do it, before you get a bullet in the head. We also stop here, too. Marcial, come."

"Where should I send your photos, Marcial?" She fired back.

"Pathetic try, Madam." Carsten spoke before the youth could answer, effectively silencing him with a hand gesture. "I will not tell you where I'm taking the boy in case this Slobodan decides to go after him. You wouldn't last long in an interrogation. Somebody from my office will contact you."

The last to leave the car was Marcial, only to see his boyfriend and Elena glaring at each other, standing on the pavement.

"And here I was thinking you were just a pervert with money. What gave me away?"

"Several things. First, that you were concerned about his security. Second, how tirelessly you mentioned the money issue, when a professional won't do it. Third, you despised the opportunity to make a few Euros by selling the boy to this character. Fourth, you wasted your time with me; a real professional knows the market better. Fifth, although you insulted Marcial several times, he never reacted to your belittling remarks. I'm aware that he runs away at the slightest sign of troubles or discomfort. Sixth, you're dressed like a cheap whore, but your nails, have good polishing and you used the word "clubbed". Seventh, your remark about those young Latin American boys' fate. Eight, the mention of a retribution. Should I continue, Madam?"

"Which business are you in?"

"A legal one, don't worry. I pay my taxes in another country."

"Slobodan will not relinquish "his little lamb", as he calls him. Everybody knows he's crazy about him. Once, he said to one of his girlfriends that the biggest treasures are guarded by the biggest dragons. I

don't know why he hasn't taken Marcial so far. It would have been very easy."

"Pelayo doesn't want him around. He says he's like George, and I don't want to argue with him." Marcial explained.

"Great! The infinite wisdom of a platypus!! You belong in an institution boy. Lunacy and idiocy together." She huffed.

"I will see that he gets medical treatment. You should listen more carefully to your Nemesis, Madam. He has realised Marcial is not "stupid", but he has a medical impairment. His mid-term memory mechanisms don't seem to be working properly, but he's not mentally challenged. I would love to see which one of you can solve a mathematical equation first. Add childhood abuse, two near death experiences and neglect and you will have what's wrong with him. Good day, officer."

"Carsten, Nemesis was the goddess for restorative Justice, Revenge and Fortune. He can't mean that to her. Lack of moderation is her sin too." Marcial said shocked that Carsten had made such an error in his speech. The man was always very accurate with his words. "A sign of real good education, Marcial," had Pelayo told him last night.

"Do you see, Madam? Are those the words of a simpleton?" Carsten fired back at her, but changed his tone when he addressed the boy again: "No, you're right Marcial. He's more like the Pan God for her, but I doubt she will understand this comparison. Come, it's getting colder and you need a coffee. Go in that restaurant over there and order one for me too."

Marcial gave him a flashing smile and said goodbye to Elena, doing exactly as he was told and glad to be away as for some reason Carsten and Elena were arguing over him.

"Take him out of here as soon as you can. Your people should ask for Inspector Juarez at the National Police Headquarters. I will inform him."

"I will, thank you Madam. Good luck."

"Treat him well. He's crazy, but a good kid."

## Chapter 9

The dense haze caused by the cigarettes smoke hurt Carsten's eyes the minute he entered the bar, but he was able to distinguish Marcial sitting in the backside, with two steaming cups in front of him.

"Hi again." Carsten said, taking his place.

"Hi, I didn't know what you wanted and I ordered you a black one, like you pictured in your mind. The waiter says he can pour some milk in, if it's too strong."

"No, it's OK. If you don't mind, I have to make some phone calls." Carsten replied taking a sip from his coffee. "Shit!"

"I'll call the waiter right away."

"No, no. It's not the coffee. I completely forgot it. We need your papers Marcial. Do you even have a valid passport?"

"Yes, it's in the platypus' old backpack, with all my important papers. Pelayo forced me take them with me yesterday. He also said I shouldn't be concerned about clothes and books."

"That punk is cleverer than I thought." Carsten mumbled to himself. "Why does he not work?"

"He has a problem in the left hand, but he works around the house. He's very clever and knows where to find money if he needs some."

"Marcial, dear, is there something else you would like to tell me?" Carsten asked, his eyes piercing Marcial's face.

"No," the boy replied looking lost again.

"In the last two days I found out that you have a neurological condition, were almost killed by the man who was your lover, that a Georgian gangster has romantic intentions towards you because you saved his life, that you dislike chocolates and hate orange juice. Is there something more that I should be aware of?"

"No."

"Where is your father? You mentioned your mother and grand mother. Where is he?" Carsten asked suddenly, almost expecting that the man would be serial killer or a Nobel prize winner.

"I don't know. He was never around. My mother met him, but he went away before I was born. His name was Juan Carlos Martínez de la O. It's on her family book. My mother never spoke about him and my granny said that he was a bastard for leaving my mother pregnant and ruining her life with a child."

"Is he alive or dead?"

"I don't know. He should be around your age or five years older. He didn't come when was the first accident and the Social Services could never locate him. He doesn't care about me and why should he do it? He never saw me in his life."

"I understand, dear. Don't worry. We'll go away today. Finish your coffee and I'll call Fernando to pick us up."

For a minute, Carsten thought in calling Mountbatten, his PA, but decided against it. He would ask too many questions and make a fuss out of everything. Fred Jansen would be more suitable and he was also Dutch.

"Good morning, Carsten." Jansen answered the phone.

"Hello. I need you to do some things for me. Discreetly." Carsten said in Netherlander. "First, cancel my tickets for tomorrow. I want to take the company's plane tonight from Bordeaux."

"OK, but I will have to hire a plane for you. The Airbus is busy as tomorrow it has to fly some people to Bombay."

"No. My own plane and my own crew. Hire a charter for tomorrow or send them in a normal flight. They will not die."

"But it's more efficient if you take...."

"Don't contradict me." He growled. "Do as you are told. Second, call Jelle and tell him that I will have a guest living with me. He should make things ready at home. We will arrive tonight very late or tomorrow morning. Third, schedule a meeting with Southwood in the afternoon. I want you to be there also, but leave Peter out of it."

"Understood, something else?"

"Call my driver in Madrid and tell him to pick me up at Reina Sofía Museum in 50 minutes. Tell the security people to change the Mercedes for a Range Rover and I want the car ready at two. I'll drive to Bordeaux. Good bye." Carsten hung up the phone not bothering to wait for his private secretary to acknowledge his last orders.

"What was that? It sounded very funny." Marcial said looking at him.

"Netherlander. I was speaking with my secretary. Peter Jansen. He's also from the Netherlands, but from the south. You will like him."

"I thought secretaries were women."

"Not always. He has a law degree and another in Political Science. The other you will have to deal with is Peter Alexander Mountbatten Berkshire, but he's my Personal Assistant, not secretary. A real pain in the ass, but efficient and excellent for evaluating projects. He was here when I met you."

"I don't remember him. Sorry."

Carsten laughed. "You never met him. He's in London now, preparing himself to travel tomorrow to India to check some development projects. Come, we will walk down towards the Reina Sofia and my car will pick up us there. I would like to pass by the museum shop to buy some books."

"I've never been to so many museums in my life."

"Unfortunately today we can't stay long, just the shop. There are many in London we can visit, don't worry. At two we drive for Bordeaux, we will take the plane there."

"I thought you wanted to fly tomorrow..."

"The best is to keep distance from that man, Slobodan Majardze. I should be also furious if somebody would rob me of someone like you. We drive to Bordeaux and tonight or tomorrow morning we take a flight to Luton Airport. Let's go now, shall we?"

\* \* \*

When the driver finally left them at the hotel, Carsten went directly to the reception to settle his bill and while he was waiting for the clerk to do it, he handed his card key to Marcial and sent him to the room.

"Gather your things and wait for me. We will have lunch here and then we will drive."

"All right. See you." Marcial answered happy to go to see Pelayo. Carsten was glad that the lad was obedient, gentle and pliant. He took out his phone from the pocket and called Jones, his bodyguard. The man had been loafing the whole time since he arrived to Madrid.

"Tell the driver to change into informal clothes and we will drive at 2 PM to Bordeaux. Do you have the

car?"

"Yes, Dr. de Vries."

"You will be coming along, too and return with us to London."

"As you wish, Dr."

\* \* \*

Marcial was happy to find Pelayo sitting in one of the chairs, reading the catalogue from yesterday's museum.

"We drive now to Bordeaux. Do you know where it's?"

"France. We have to cross by the northern passage, through Basque lands. Fierce people. I remember them. Why the sudden change of plans?"

"I don't know. Elena, just came by and shouted that Mr. Slobodan wanted to kill me because I have a boyfriend. He doesn't want me to go away. She came with us in a taxi and then Carsten and her were arguing about me. He didn't want to tell her where we were going and decided we drive at 2. We will have lunch before we go. Do you want to go in the satchel or in the rucksack?"

"I was expecting something like that. Men like him don't give up easily. Put the platypus in the satchel, no way I'm returning to that smelly place once I've tried the other. Finally somebody appreciates my value. No more travelling like the serfs."

"He's pampering you and that's bad for you!"

"Who are you speaking with, my love?" Carsten asked as he entered the room.

"The platypus. It wants to go in the satchel. It doesn't want the rucksack any more!" Marcial complained.

"Sensible fellow. I also would not like to be trapped in there. It can stay in the satchel dear, that's for. Let me see your papers."

"Here you are." Marcial said after he rummaged his old rucksack.

"Put your things together, don't forget anything. The butler will take the bags to the car in 30 minutes."

Carsten ordered as he started to look what the boy had brought along. His Passport, Identity Card, his bank account papers, his school documents, the deed for some land back in Asturias, his rent contract, his Social Security forms, his birth certificate and some very old photos. 'Had he not left them in his flat?' pondered the man.

"Marcial, there are some photos in here! Mother of God, what is this??" Carsten shouted when he found a heavy package wrapped in a cloth. He untied the leather straps and found a heavy strange looking flat bird in bronze, ornamented inlaid with glass paste in red and green colours, and a carved lapis lazuli for eye. Along with it, there was a blackened iron cross of a square shape whose points were, in turn, divide into halves, engraved with for circles in each point, and with a red polished stone in the centre, resembling a circle more than a Christian cross. Both objects were very old looking, but very well preserved as they had been used all the time. For a "Lord of the Rings" replica, they were excellent in their quality.

"Really? Let me see." Marcial asked, running from the bedroom and checking all the photos. "Look this is one is my mum and me, and also this one. This one is from my baptise and that other from my first communion. Those two are me and my granny. This one is from my school class just before the accident. Pelayo must have put them together." He explained, showing the old photos to Carsten. "That is Pelayo's fibula. It's an Eagle, his family's symbol and it belonged to a grand grand grandfather of his. The other is his battle cross. He asked me to carry them for him."

"Is there a photo of him and you?"

"No, he doesn't like photos."

"Come, I'll help you to put the things together. We will have to share the bag, but it's big enough for both."

"I can put your things together if you want."

"That would be nice. I could check a few things in my laptop. Can you do it, dear?" He asked, a bit concerned about his jackets, the mental image of his shoes over his shirts, rushing through his mind, but clothes could be washed and ironed again. Nothing would be really lost.

While Marcial was making things ready in the bedroom, Carsten opened his laptop and started to review a problematic project. He literally plunged into the files as he read them. A very cold draft put him out of his rapt and he looked up from the screen to find the boy looking at him.

"Where you standing long there?"

"No, only ten minutes." Marcial smiled. "I finished. Would you like to check?"

"Sorry. We all do it. You have to shake me so I realise you're there. Some of my employees don't even hear the phone, and I have to use the MSM so they pay attention to me. It's cold in here."

"Yes, sometimes." Marcial trailed, making a discreet sign to Pelayo to back off from the laptop he was very interested inspecting. The trasgu had no manners at all and when there was something new around, it was a hard task to keep him away. Carsten turned it off and closed it, nearly catching the goblin's fingers.

"Idiot!" He shouted back at the man.

"Serves you right!" Marcial said to Pelayo, looking completely furious from the corner he was perched.

"I'll try to be more attentive next time. I'll look at the bags now." Carsten replied a bit upset at Marcial's outburst.

"Not you, the platypus. It just fell from the satchel. It should keep its paws to itself."

"No, I think I drop it while I was putting out some of your papers. It must be quite crowded in there." Carsten answered, picking the animal from the floor and stuffing it back, unceremoniously, in the new bag, only to remember to leave the head out.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you. Perhaps we can leave it here while we have lunch."

"Little prick!" Pelayo shouted back.

"No, don't worry, it's better if you carry your satchel along with you. It contains all your papers and those things. They could be valuable if they're old. I'll be carrying my laptop's bag. Don't trust enough the hotels' staff. They always lose the important things."

"That's speaking! Order some good cured ham for me. Who knows when I'll get another chance to eat it, Marcial."

"All right." Marcial sighed. "We'll take the platypus, but it's not necessary for you to buy lunch for it, only some ham."

"He's quite Spanish in his tastes... Does he want also some olives?" Carsten joked.

"No, just the ham and a small serving. Since he met you, Pelayo eats the whole day. Before he was happy to dine only." Marcial said with his sternest face as Carsten laughed and went to check the luggage.

"You eat this modern rubbish and you will also prefer fasting. Not a single decent piece of meat since we left Asturias." Pelayo huffed. "The greens and fruits are tasteless, but perhaps we will eat well with this guy."

"Shhh. Be quiet or I'll pack you in the bag."

"No way, boy." Pelayo smirked as he disappeared, exactly in the way Marcial hated so much.

Carsten returned from the bedroom, looking very pleased. "Incredible, everything is exactly as I would place it. Are you a gypsy by any chance, my love?"

"No, I'm Catholic and Astur."

"No, you're a young wizard, bewitching your way to my heart." Carsten whispered as his large hands took the boy's head and his lips reverently kissed him. "I can't believe that you're going to be mine. You're so beautiful." He softly whispered into Marcial's ear, concentrating his kisses on the neck and lightly pecking his earlobe.

"You make me feel incredible things, Carsten." Marcial moaned.

"We have to stop right now or we will never go away, my little one." Carsten affirmed, coming back to reality. "I want to have lunch and then we should immediately drive away. It's an 8 hours trip from here to Bordeaux. Perhaps we will have to fly tomorrow morning after all. It depends when we are allowed to take off."

Marcial was overwhelmed by the luxurious restaurant while Carsten didn't notice his surroundings at all. Everything seemed to be natural to him as he sat in a table near a window overlooking the garden. He took the menu from the Maitre, not even giving a second glance at the man. Marcial shyly took his one, muttering a hardly audible "thank you" and read it. Everything was written in French.

"Do you need help?"

"The platypus wants some cured ham, nothing else." He said, feeling very bad as this would probably cost as much as a week of his salary.

"All right, I think they can manage to serve it for starters. And you?"

"No, I'll share with Pelayo, thanks."

"Nonsense, we have to drive for a long time. Do you like lamb or do you prefer some meat?"

"The same as you're taking." Marcial slurred, making Carsten realise the problem. It was a big jump from the Mc. Donald's to the Ritz and his little elf was overwhelmed and afraid to spend his money. In a way, that was refreshing from the many he had to rub his wealth at their faces for nothing, but sad because Marcial believed he was not worthy of it.

"No, tell me what you like best, please."

"I like fish."

"Salmon or trout? I'd say trout as it must be from around Madrid."

"OK. Could we have a side dish for the platypus?"

"Yes, of course." Carsten replied, throwing a glance at the satchel lying in the chair between them. 'this chap has good life indeed,' he briefly thought before ordering the food to the maître.

"Carsten, how do you know which fork you should use?" The boy asked, completely confused at the incredible amount of silverware lying in front of him.

"Don't worry, it's the waiter's problem. He will remove what you don't need; just start from the outside to the inside. For dessert, they will bring you a special set. Relax, you would do nothing wrong, dear."

"I don't want to make you look like a fool."

"You won't." He kindly answered, making his mental note number 10; 'protocol lessons for him'.

As announced the two waiters removed everything that was not needed, much to Marcial's relief and left the starters consisting in a big plater of the different types of Spanish hams, sausages and cheese.

"Assorted please," said Pelayo, "but hold the Cabrales cheese. Too strong for my taste and will ruin the sweetness of a real Iberian ham, look how well the fat is infiltrated. Like marble. Perfect." Marcial served some pieces, laying on the ham in the separated dish and placed it in front of the platypus.

Carsten decided to say nothing at all. His little angel was strange indeed. Next time, they should leave the stuffed thing at home. Just when he was going to start with his own selection, his mobile rang and he

hastily answered it, but it was impossible to hear a thing.

"Excuse me dear, I have to go outside. It's Fred Jansen. Start without me." He said, rising from his chair and leaving the room.

"Finally, I can eat." Pelayo commented as he attacked his dish. "Next time, ask for some cutlery for me too. I can use silverware; I'm not a bloody werewolf nor a peasant."

"You're impossible Pelayo. Do you have any idea of the price?"

"You also don't. He's more than happy to pay for it."

"We are abusing him."

"No, we aren't. Now be quiet and eat your food, you're very skinny. Believe me when I tell you that he considers himself very fortunate to have found you and he has a lot of gold."

"Still, it doesn't give you the right to behave as you're doing in the moment. Be nice or I'll zip your bag for the rest of the journey!"

Carsten returned with a happy expression dangling from his face. "Good news. We can take off at 23:15 and we will be in London at 2AM. My chauffeur will be waiting for us at the airport." He announced as he took his place and resumed his lunch.

"I'm out, so the two love-birds can be alone. I'm going to check the kitchen." Pelayo said and Marcial was grateful to have some time alone with Carsten, enthusiastically attacking his dish.

"I can understand why you ordered it. It's very good. Whenever I'm here, I go to Lhardy. I wonder if they have filloas for desert."

"Those are from Galicia, not Asturias. You should try a cider cake."

"If it's like your cookies, I will love it."

"I'll bake one for you." Marcial promised, hoping that on this particular day, Pelayo would find something else to do, preferably outside the house. "Where do you live?" He asked as the waiter served the second dish.

"In London, Canary Wharf, in front of the Thames, near my work. I walk everyday there. I still don't

know why I have the cars. It's a penthouse in a building one mile away from Heron Quays, where my office is. It's not a very tall building, as we are in 13th and 14th floors, but it has the most marvellous view over the river. I love open spaces and watching them, helps me to relax."

"I love forests and streams. I miss them a lot. I used to go with the train to Cercedilla, that's a town 40 kilometres from Madrid, just to walk in the forest. It's almost on the mountains. It's nice to spend the day there in the fall or the springtime. I was going always on my free days."

"Why don't you tell me all about this in the car? We are running out of time and we have to hurry as it's a long journey."

"Why are you in a hurry to leave Madrid?"

"Because I want to put as much distance as possible between you and that crazy Georgian. He might be dangerous, as that police woman said. Once we are away from here, I will be at ease. I'll order dessert now."

"He's not crazy; he knows exactly what he does and he likes to be violent. Pelayo told me that his own commander was like him. Men who would stop at nothing to achieve what they want. There are rules, even in wartime, but he never minded about them. Mr. Slobodan does whatever he pleases and his own men are afraid of him. Elena told me he's nasty with the girls working for him."

"Was he ever mean to you? Did he ever hit you or something?"

"No, never. In fact, he was always nice to me and never laughed at me because I forget things, just like you do. After his accident, he used to come every night to the bar I worked to have a drink. He would sit always at the same table, with two or three of his men. The Gypsy was always there and he was nasty because I would forget what he ordered because he never let me took my notes. Finally, Mr. Slobodan realised the problem and the Gypsy left me alone. After doing his business with his men, he would stay till the closing time, watching me work or sometimes speaking with me. Once, he took out one drunk customer who was becoming violent. He offered me to work in one of his clubs after the bar was foreclosed, but Pelayo never let me do it. He was grateful that I had stayed the night he was attacked and was bringing me presents or sending them through Elena, but he should have never done it. The doctor saved his life, not I."

"Didn't you feel attracted to him?"

"Why should I be? He's not bad looking, not as tall as you and not so old. I'd say he's no more than 35 years old. Very muscular, well, he gets into fights more frequently that you can imagine. I don't know

what I felt around him.”

Carsten was more than incensed at the mention of his age and he only grunted an “indeed” while Marcial continued to evoke the man, “but he's not kind like you are. I liked you the minute you left those two old people take your place. That was a very nice gesture.”

“Well, that's me.” Carsten said, deciding to collect his points. “I'll treat you as well as I can, Marcial.” He added without thinking when he saw the luminous smile directed at him, his reverie interrupted by a thunderous clatter of broken dishes coming from the kitchen. “Hurry up, before they change the prices and we have to pay for what they have destroyed in there. That sounded like an army of gremlins on a Saturday Night Jamboree.” He joked as Marcial blanched at hearing the noise.

“No, just one.” He answered, making the older man laugh louder. ‘I hope he doesn't have a big china collection and finds it also funny when Pelayo cooks or cleans’.

After paying, Carsten rose, picked up his laptop and Marcial did the same with satchel, hoping that the trasgu would be clever enough as to follow him. No, the best would be that he would go inside the platypus and stayed put, as if that could be ever possible. He was always pestering Mr. Slobodan's men whenever they were around.

The car, an olive green Land Rover was waiting for them at the entrance, with two men. One was the driver from the morning and the other, almost as tall as Carsten, but with a dangerous aura around him, driving Marcial nervous as the man seemed to be some kind of policeman.

“Everything ready, Jones?”

“Yes, Dr. de Vries.”

“We drive then. I think we can change drivers in Burgos. Jump in Marcial.” He ordered mildly as the boy seemed to hesitate, looking around for his trasgu. Marcial sighed relieved to no end when he saw Pelayo already sitting inside and disappearing the minute he placed the satchel against the opposite door. Maybe the trasgu would sleep now, after the ruckus he had obviously caused in the kitchen. He sat there and almost plastered against the window to leave some space for Carsten, who sat next to him and delicately took his hand as he felt the boy was becoming restless and perhaps frightened.

“Don't worry, you will like London. It's a lively place.”

Unable to answer as the pitch he felt in his stomach had travelled up to his throat, Marcial only nodded, clutching the satchel stronger than before and looking through the window the passing buildings as the

car speedily ran towards the highway. Carsten understood that his beloved needed some time alone to say good bye to his home. He didn't said a word when the boy put the platypus head out of the bag and let it also look at the landscape.

They drove in complete silence for three long hours as the light was diminishing and darkness surrounded them. Carsten had put out his laptop and was deeply immersed in his files. The men sitting in the front said nothing at all and Marcial started to feel very tired as the effort he was exerting on his eyes to look for the last time the deserted plains.

When the car reached Burgos, the driver stopped in a gas station to refuel.

"Come Marcial, let's walk a bit around while the men change places. Do you want a coffee?"

"No, thank you, I'm fine." He replied, looking with big open eyes as another Land Rover parked next to them and another police looking hulk descended from the car along with another smaller man, who went to take Carsten's driver's place. "Do they also come with us?" He whispered.

"Yes, they're the support team. Jones always likes to have one around. He's responsible for my security when I'm abroad. In London you will have to deal with Southwood."

"Why do you need them?"

"To avoid problems. Some people could try to kidnap me for my money, one of those anti technology fanatics or a simple burglar go against me. It's good to have them. The Unabomber harmed several of us. But this is nothing if you compare my security arrangements with others tycoons. I'm not famous like Bill Gates, so I can indulge myself a lot of freedom."

"Bill who?"

"Microsoft. The one from Windows?"

"It always crashes down and starts to download things without asking you. I don't like it."

"Good, I'm a GNU/ Linux man myself. Although he's bad for business, I adore Richard Stallman as he's a genius, but I like to get some money for my efforts. Proprietary and semi free software are here to stay. Probably he would shoot me if he sees me in one of his talks."

"I'm sorry your relationship with him finished so badly."

"What??? No, no, Marcial. He's a programmer, like myself, but he doesn't believe in charging for the use of software. We were never in a relationship!!! From where did you get such an idea?"

"You said you adored him and he wants to shoot you. What did you do to him to make him hate you so much?"

Carsten laughed like never before. He and Stallman?? Gracious Lord! Stallman would have a heart attack if he would hear it. "It was just a way of speaking. I adore his work. Besides, he's not my type. I like my boyfriends exactly as you are." He looked towards the standing cars and noticed that his men were ready for departure. "Let's go. Next stop, the border, Irun."

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived to Irun, but Marcial was deeply asleep over Carsten's shoulder and he decided to let him sleep and continue to Bordeaux as they were only no more than three hours away. He quietly ordered Jones to get a blanket for the boy, not awaken at all with their talk or when Carsten repositioned him over his lap, removing the satchel from his hands.

Arriving to the Merignac Airport was easy and the cars went directly to the private jets area, parking in front of an Airbus A318 Elite, bought 4 years ago for the company. Carsten gently shook Marcial awake "we're at the Airport. Come, we will dine in the plane before we depart in 45 minutes."

"Did I sleep on top of you? Sorry." Marcial answered still half asleep and completely lost of his whereabouts. "Where are we?"

"Bordeaux. That's the company's plane. I had to fight to get it. Perhaps, I will recover it some day," he chuckled softly "Or my employees will strike till they get the new A380, with an inside casino. Give your passport to Jones, he will take care of the paperwork."

Marcial handed the document to the stern man -still looking at him with a mixture of distrust, suspicion and surprise- and muttered a thank you.

The young man never felt so much like the poor country boy he was as when he climbed the narrow stairs up and passed the door, flanked by a professionally smiling stewardess, and saw the dark wooden panels, a set of four seats and a table, set for dinner, with a large sofa in front on the opposite side and a small living room set for seven people with a flat TV screen and some folded tables. There was also one guest bathroom before going to the private office, with a double bed and a private bathroom.

"Is this yours?"

"Only 57% of it. Officially, it belongs to the company. Jane, how did they manage for tomorrow?"

"Mr. Jansen delayed the departure time to 11:15 and they will have another crew, Dr. de Vries."

"So you will not be here to defend my office and bed from the Hooligans?"

"I'm afraid not, sir." She smiled. "Before I took my leave in London, I will close it and hide the key, sir."

"That's a good idea. It's rabid programmers what we're speaking about."

"I'll leave a good provision of Kit Keats, Dr. de Vries." She said very seriously, making Carsten choke with laughter.

"When I buy my own plane, I'll take you with me, Jane. This is Marcial and his platypus Pelayo. We are both hungry. Ravenous. Could you serve us something?"

"Right away, sir." She answered after dedicating a small smile to Marcial. A stuffed platypus was not the worst she had seen so far in 20 years of flight attendant for private jets. Cleaning the jet of a superstar, that was hard in her opinion.

A few minutes later, Jones joined the men in the plane, taking a seat in front of Marcial, and studying the boy in a unabashed way, as he slouched in his seat. Jane returned from the kitchen and served them a small dinner consisting of a shrimp cocktail and red meat with greens and some ice cream with cake for desert.

"That was the best available?" Carsten complained to the stewardess.

"With such short notice, I'm afraid so, Dr. de Vries." She replied sweetly as she opened the red bottle wine. "Does the young man drink, sir?"

"Not now, he's too tired and he should be able to walk to his bed. Give him a cola or apple juice." Carsten answered, starting to eat. Marcial did the same, only to stop when the plane started its engines and with the pre-check.

"Is that noise normal?" He asked when he heard the plane's flaps moving.

"Yes, it's. Don't worry. The landing is always more problematic than the take off." Carsten shrugged.

"Death is instant if we crash. You'll feel nothing." Jones added, knowing that his boss was deeply immersed in his thinking, not caring at all about him or the frightened boy. The bodyguard was still assessing this new fling his boss had taken from a God forsaken village, good-looking, but clueless of all the mess he had caused in less than two hours as he had been forced to change a whole security plan

within less than three hours.

"Dr. de Vries, may I ask you something?"

"No salaries' discussions after June, Jones." He answered mind absently.

"No, why do we take off from France? It' would have been easier from Madrid."

"I don't want any register from our flight so that hot brains policewoman can track us down. It would be very easy for her to get the information in Spain. In France, she needs an international court order against a person who has no records at all and is a law abiding citizen. The minute she sticks her nose here, a French judge will call her superiors. I don't trust her at all. You should have seen the little tart, believing she could frighten me and give Marcial to her favourite drugs dealer, so she can spy on him better."

"I'm glad my talks over the MI 6 methods were of some use to you, boss." Jones smirked, stuffing a big piece of the meat into his mouth.

"Thank you. I learned from the best. Update Southwood at your convenience and run a full check on this Slobodan Majardze. Either she's a complete imbecile or he's better than I think if he can hide his last name so well. I don't think he lied to Marcial." Carsten finished the conversation, concentrating again in his dinner.

After finishing his food, Marcial felt terribly tired and fidgeted a little on his seat, fighting the sleep the best as he could. "Why don't you lie on the couch? We still have to fly for one hour more and then it's half an hour more driving to London." Jones suggested him, deciding that the lad was just that: a simple boy.

"He's very young." Jones asked switching back to Netherlander.

"Only 22, but you will see he behaves like a polite child. He will cause no problems to you or anybody. You and Southwood should start a full check on his father. The man, if he's alive, never cared about him, but things change when you're around someone with money. I want also that you crack the files over his period under the Social Services' care. It seems that he was repetitively abused by a British painter living in his village since he was 13. The man nearly killed him, but he's serving time in U.K for paedophilia. Find out everything you can about him."

"Jesus, one paedophile plus a mobster as acquaintances? The countryside is not so safe as I thought."

"Don't forget the pimp granny and never taking his medications because she thought they were bad for him." Carsten added acidly.

"If I were him, I would also have a platypus as friend. He doesn't look very clever nor has an attitude."

"At least, I got rid of this Pelayo character. He's not exactly stupid, he has some troubles with his memory. He needs more time than the rest of us to process things. Tell Mountbatten to look for a good neurologist at St. Luke's and make an appointment in a week or so."

"Yes, sir."

"His security arrangements will be the same as mine for the time being. It should not pose an issue as Personnel should find him something to do at the company."

'That's more serious than I thought. Carsten has it bad for the boy. His flings never last more than five dates. The only one who moved with him survived 6 weeks because the boss was away for two. He can be a real prick with his moods and control mania.' Jones thought to himself, but decided to keep quiet and wear his most professional face.

\* \* \*

Marcial was awoken by Carsten gently shaking his shoulder. "We've just landed. The car is waiting outside. You can sleep more there and at home." Still dazed, the youth, half sleepily picked up his satchel and mumbled a good bye to Jane.

His sleepiness went away the minute he saw the big car, parked at the foot of the stairs. Black, big and elegant. The chauffeur was waiting at one side, ready to open the door for Carsten.

"Marcial, this is Richard Connelly, my driver in London. He lives in one of the flats at 12th floor. If you need to go anywhere, ask him. He knows the city well."

"How do you do, sir?" The driver politely asked, as he bowed his head, quickly giving a brief, but thorough inspection at the boss' new boyfriend. Connelly was well aware of the onslaught waiting for him at home in the form of a Dutch butler, dying to know what had the boss brought from Spain and still upset to be left out of the game for the night.

"Hello." The boy said very timidly, extending his hand. 'Well, this one will not be a bugger like the Italian supermodel. Was that a platypus head coming out of his bag? It certainly didn't look like a duck,' the driver evaluated as he took a step towards the blond.

"Go inside, it's starting to rain." Carsten interfered before Connelly could shake hands with him. 'Boss is already showing his possessive nature.' Connelly thought as he closed the door behind him. One quick

glance to the back and he saw that the porter had put only one suitcase and some bags inside of the trunk. Strange, the boy was bringing nothing.

Connelly strained his ears more than what was acceptable for his position, while he started the engine.

"This car is noiseless." The boy said in awe, making Connelly crack a small smile. 'No, this one will not give us problems. Hope he can stand the boss.'

"It's a Rolls Royce Phantom. They're supposed to be silent cars." Carsten answered in a sweet voice. "Sleep a little longer if you want." He added pulling the boy towards his chest and softly petting his head.

Connelly could have died from the shock. The boss being nice and sweet to somebody? A stupid remark like that one would have earned the perpetrator a horribly and ironic scold. Everybody was perfectly well aware that Carsten's jovial and cheerful attitude was a pretence. He had a short temper, kicking out all his boyfriends, demanding results from his employees and a very sharp tongue. If he threatened you with firing you, then you should better start to look for another job because that was your two weeks notice. Mountbatten was already doing it, only because of a single remark, made at the wrong time.

One last and brief look over the rear-view mirror, showed him the boy totally asleep, sprawled all over his employer and said man looking at him disapprovingly. Connelly decided to concentrate on the driving.

Carsten nearly had to drag his little elf across the foyer and into the elevator. "Marcial, we're almost there." He mumbled as he entered in his own flat. Marcial opened his eyes for a brief moment and his brain barely registered that he was in a huge living-dinning room sparsely furnished. He felt Carsten's tugging him towards the left to a small corridor and he climbed the stairs up.

"Where's the platypus?" Marcial asked as Carsten removed his coat and jersey.

"Downstairs, in the living room. I left it there. No one will touch it. Come, take another set of my pyjamas and get in the bed." He ordered mildly as Marcial took the clothes from his hand and carefully undid his own buttons and removed his own clothing, placing it carefully over a chair, under Carsten's approval gaze. He went to the bathroom and then to the bed, still walking on autopilot.

"Don't you come also?"

"In a minute. I'll leave a note for Jelle, that's the butler. He's partly Dutch." He answered, but the boy didn't hear him as he was fast and soundly asleep.

## Chapter 10

"Did you take a good look at him? Is your curiosity satisfied, Jelle?" An upset Carsten slow but venomously whispered to his butler standing in front of his bed, carefully checking at his little elf in a very obtrusive way.

"Good morning, Dr. de Vries." The middle aged man said, with all the imperturbability a partly Dutch-English butler could muster. "I wonder if you would like to have breakfast now... and what your young companion will take."

"Jelle, you have been working for me for the last five years, and in all that time, I should have considered myself lucky if I could find some half burned scrambled eggs in the kitchen. Why the sudden change?"

"There's a platypus sitting on your Van der Roe sofa, sir." Jelle decided to counter-attack.

"So, you have met Pelayo, too. It belongs to Marcial, the boy sleeping over there. Now, make yourself scarce as I plan to have some hot sex with him and he's a little shy." He smirked as the butler only rose an eyebrow, silently going towards the door.

"Will 'the master' prefer the brown or grey jacket this morning?" Jelle asked, feigning the most naïve voice he could.

"Piss off." Carsten growled in a menacingly tone.

Jelle Maarstens went the stairs down towards the spacious kitchen to prepare the breakfast for his boss and his new fling. This one was not his usual type -he preferred them a little bit older as this boy was not looking one day over 18- brunette and he was totally blonde, with a very light skin and with very delicate features. He was slender, bordering on skinny and at least a head smaller than Carsten.

Connelly had not said much yesterday. Only that de Vries was absolutely crazy about the lad, behaving like a proprietary twerp, touching him almost on a permanent basis, and according to Jones, the boy was very quiet, sleeping most of the trip; had some troubles with seedy characters and carried a stuffed platypus around.

At least, this one, if he was so stupid as the men said, would not pose a problem to cast out when de Vries would grow tired of him. Getting rid of the Italian, that had been a problem, in his view. He started to cut

the apples for the juice, still wondering why he had to do it. De Vries always preferred oranges in the morning, he mused. The chopping knife halted in mid air as Jelle heard the clearly erotic groans from his employer doing what he had already told him. 'He never bluffs. The boy is truly earning his keep,' he thought as he finished with the apples and placed the assorted coffee capsules dispenser near the machine. Considering the noise Carsten was making upstairs, they should be finished in 10 minutes, enough time for chopping the onions and champions for the omelette, he calculated.

When the butler heard Carsten's final groan -'Boss should be relaxed and not cause me many problems. Can't believe he's already jealous of me and noisily stating his property over the boy, as if I would jump into a clearly under-age child'- he started to fry the onions. "Dickhead," he mumbled.

Some 15 minutes later, Carsten entered the kitchen, showered and dressed, giving the older man a cold stare.

"Your guest has no clothes and is wearing one of your pyjamas, sir."

"He must have a clean set in my bag. Give it to him. He's showering."

"I'm relieved to hear it, sir. I'm unaware of any paediatrician in the area if he catches a cold, sir."

"You have a German's sense of humour." Carsten retorted a little irked with the man. "I'm touched by your concern. Don't worry, he's 22 years old and knows perfectly well what he's doing."

"Did you check his papers, sir? He doesn't look even 18." Jelle said as he served a dish with the eggs and toasts to Carsten.

"Yes, of course I did. Your services as my official boyfriends' dismissing officer will not be required any time soon."

"Glad to know, sir." Jelle replied dryly as this was the part he most hated of his job.

"Are you going to be difficult, Maartens?"

"Not at all, sir."

"Good, because as you will soon find out, Marcial is very sensitive and I don't want any troubles between us. He is not the usual type of tramps you're used to deal with. Not a single remark out of place or a double meaning phrase to him. He's a peaceful and sweet child, not whimsical or tyrannical like the many we know. He's willing to be helpful. You have already seen his stuffed animal. Let him be with it,

and if he asks you something for his platypus, then you give it to him. Your job depends on it."

"I'll see to the young master, sir." Jelle coldly replied, decided to leave the kitchen as Carsten took a cup and started to prepare an espresso for himself.

"Hello. Do we know each other, sir? Somehow you look familiar." Marcial asked Jelle when he entered the kitchen, already showered and dressed like yesterday, carrying the platypus as if it were an overweighted cat.

"Sort of," chuckled Carsten, going to grab Marcial by the waist and tenderly kissing him on the forehead, a completely unusual gesture in him. "This is Jelle Maartens, my butler for the past five years. His father was Dutch and his mother English. He criticizes everything I do. Don't pay attention to him."

"Pleased to meet you, young sir." The butler answered, undisturbed at Carsten's words, but transfixed, looking at the animal comfortably nested in the boy's arms. For a minute, Jelle was glad for his share of British phlegm- responsible for his countrymen survival in wars and absurd situations.

"Hello." The boy replied softly and smiling.

"Eat your breakfast and we'll go around later. I have a business meeting at five, but you can come and see the office, dear."

"May I have a dish for the platypus?"

Jelle could only gape very unprofessionally at the boy. He had had his share of decadent and eccentric millionaires, but none of them were carrying such beasts inside the house and much less feeding them. Fortunately, his common sense kicked in -mostly because Carsten was throwing him a warning glare- and he was able to utter: "Certainly, sir," as he looked for one in the cupboards.

"Thank you," Marcial replied taking the medium size white squared porcelain dish and placing it over the table, in front of the high chair where the platypus was sitting. He poured half of his portion and started to drink his coffee, leaving his own omelette untouched.

"Marcial, next time, tell Jelle in advance that Pelayo wants to have breakfast and he will prepare some more for it." Carsten said absently, as he sat to check his own mobile phone.

"No, no. It's OK this way. It was too much food for me." The boy answered sweetly to Carsten.

The butler had to turn around and pretend to be busy, sorting out the cups and preparing another round

of toasts. He was shocked that his employer didn't seem fazed at all, treating the boy as if asking for food for a stuffed toy were the most sensible thing to do. 'If he feeds the animal, I'll quit tonight.' The butler strained his ears to check what this obviously lunatic boy was going to do else, but he was entertained looking at a springs catalogue from Harvey Nichols. Jelle took several deep breaths to calm himself down and turned around when the toasts were ready.

The older man nearly jumped out of his shoes when he saw that the platypus dish was clean and the boy was still focused on the magazine, his eggs untouched, while his boss typed something on his Iphone. He nearly dropped the plate and gaped at the furry thing as he felt a cold draft touching his back.

The boy seemed to sense something as he rose his eyes from the page he was reading to look at the butler. "Sorry, he has no manners. Several centuries didn't help him much. He devours food, specially if it's as good as this one." He simply explained, watching as Pelayo placed himself near the man, causing him to unwillingly shudder.

"Next time, he should add a little bit more pepper and it would be perfect. Tell him, Marcial." Pelayo asked.

"Would it be possible to put some more pepper on the eggs tomorrow?" Marcial requested timidly.

"Yes, that's a good idea... Normally you put some more. I prefer them that way." Carsten added.

"Marcial, if you're finished, get your coat, we'll go out."

The butler looked astonished as the boy happily left the kitchen to comply with Carsten's order.

"But he didn't try the eggs in his dish!" Was the only thing he could mumble.

"Don't be touchy, he ate the other half. Let him be, Jelle." Carsten said mind absently.

"He did no eat it. He only drank his coffee, the apple juice and munched part of a toast!"

"And who ate the eggs? The platypus? Please."

"There's something very wrong with him!!"

"I like him exactly as he is. He has a problem with his mid-term memory and that makes him insecure. He led a very hard life, so keep your remarks to yourself!"

"What do I do with the sword? The one in your bag. Should I polish it or call Scotland Yard?" The butler

asked ironically.

"Which sword? He has nothing of the sort!!"

"It's old, shiny, and a 1,10 metre long, with some cheap stones and filigree on the handle. It looks like a sword to me, Sir." The butler retorted. "It's still sharp, but the blade looks as if a mouse would have been biting it."

"Marcial!!" Carsten shouted, standing up and going to the living room, where the boy was looking through the windows over the river, the coat hanging from his arm. "Jelle says you have a sword! Is it true?" He asked before he saw the thing lying on top of his new Van der Roe couch, still on its sheath, only its pommel visible; a short rectangle for guard, with two dark red round agates on its sides, a very simply carved hilt in a diamond pattern and a conical pommel with a delicate filigree work.

"It's not mine, it belongs to Pelayo. He asked me to carry it. He said Breton are wild people and there's no civilization outside Londinium. I don't know how to use it, but he can't carry it around."

"It's a very convincing replica" Carsten said, lifting it and carefully examining the doubled edged cutting sword, one metre long steel blade, no more than 5 cm., wide, ending on a sharp point. "Things they do nowadays. It even weights like a real one, not like those sold in comics stores made of tin. Those central marks, feigning the damascene, are very well achieved. It looks as if a real blacksmith would have gone through the trouble of making the steel out of iron. There's some rust on the pommel even."

"It's not a replica, you brute!!! Put it back in its sheath before I shed your blood!! And it's not rusted! It works perfectly well!!" Pelayo howled out of himself, enraged that a simple villain had touched his beloved weapon.

"Please Carsten, put it back in its sheath. You should never draw it unless you plan to use it. It's bad for the sword." Marcial asked, hoping to calm down the trasgu, before he would take the matter into his hands as his green eyes were glowing unearthly.

"It's a very nice work. He must love "Lord of the Rings" to have such things. Did he give them to you?" Carsten commented, putting the weapon back in its sheath.

"Yes, I should carry them, but he's more into Visigothic traditions. He's not planning to use it in a long time." Marcial said, disapprovingly looking at the infuriated trasgu.

"Cretin! Compare our lineage with a sorcerer's game made for Moors and Indians!!"

"I also like 'Lord of the Rings'." Marcial said.

"We can watch it tonight if you want. Jelle take away that thing and put it in the storage room." Carsten ordered, without returning it to its black leather case.

"For Christ, our Lord, I'm going to kill him!!"

"No, please Carsten. That's no place for it. Allow me to put it in a closet, in one of the bedrooms. You can lock it. Nobody is going to use it, but to place it with the old things is humiliating." Marcial added quickly, before Pelayo would fulfil his oath. He hoped to establish soon some sort of compromise between man and trasgu, before the later would start to make the human's life miserable.

"You're right. It's a beautiful work and it would be a shame to put it in a closet. I don't remember seeing this type of sword in the film. It almost looks authentic. Very beautiful work, indeed."

"Pelayo told me this model was made in the VIII century. It's a Visigothic design, taking some elements from the Lombards', that's why the blade is 15 cm. longer than the Viking model so common at that time. Widely used at the royal court in Toledo and then in Asturias, when the King Pelayo started to recover the land from the Moors. He was named like that King, you know. Pelayo is a name widely used in his family. Typically Astur." Marcial explained, secretly happy that Carsten had realised the sword's importance for the trasgu. He was also very sensitive about his lineage.

"Still it's a good copy. They even took care to make the blade as if it would have been hammered, and the edges are truly sharp, specially from the middle towards the point."

"It's for slashing down the idiots like you from the horse!" Pelayo howled, again out of his self, driving Marcial more and more nervous. "It's iron hammered many times. It took six full months to be created and many priests praying to get the right hammering tempo!! It's hard and flexible at the same time. It does not break when it touches the bones, specially if you're beheading a headstrong twerp like you!!"

"There's something written along the guard: 'PELAGIUS MEPORTE,'" Carsten read as he continued to examine the sword.

"Exactly!!!! Get your filthy paws off my sword!!!!"

"It means 'Pelayo carries me' It belongs to him and he doesn't like people touching it." Marcial said in a firm voice, praying that it would appease the goblin. "Put it back in the sheath, please."

"All right. It's a beautiful piece. Southwood collects old swords, perhaps he could tell me where to buy a

proper support for this one. Certainly it should not be in a closet. Perhaps we could put it together with the bird and that strange cross. They all look similar in style."

"It's strange looking for a brute like you!!" Pelayo shouted, not as loud as before, somewhat appeased by the fact that Carsten had appreciated his sword.

"It was very difficult and expensive to make it, Carsten. You had to take eight long, thin iron bars, heat them to a cadent point, roll them immediately into carbon, lace them all together, and hammer till they make a single piece. Then, you cool it with water and heat it again to cut it into eight pieces again and repeat the process many times -like 33, our Saviour's age- never faltering. Saying a prayer, helps a lot to keep the hammering rhythm. The edges are added later and they're made in a single piece as they need to be hard while the core should be flexible to resist the knocks. It has to be sharpened and polished many, many times, each time employing a more delicate polisher. Pelayo told me that the final polishing was made using only ashes. You can still see and feel the damascene markings on the centre." Marcial explained to the man, delicately removing the weapon from his hands and placing it back in its leather sheath. He was more than relieved to see the trasgu, hearing his tale and nodding with his head at several of the things he had just told.

"It's a very beautiful work. I'm surprised that someone has taken the effort to repeat the original process. If they did, then this sword must cost like a real katana. Southwood bought one for himself, from the XVI century and he told me it was around 10.000 pounds."

"NO WAY!!! Mine is better!!! All those dead Saracens can testify it! Pity Lugan made a mistake, and used that old shrine to trap and massacre some of them. Who would have thought that there was still a vengeful bitch-goddess living there?"

"I couldn't tell, Carsten. They're different in structure, intended use and time. This one can be swung from a horse in battle and in melee combat." Marcial said, hoping that Pelayo would not start again to evoke his glorious days in the Astur Army, fighting against Muslims, under King Pelayo and Alfonso, Duke of Cantabria -who knew very well the Saracens tactics as he had been a captive in Fez for many years.

"All right, we will look for a special holder and a place for it."

"Perhaps it could go to the room you have next to the kitchen." Marcial suggested, thinking that the living room was too much and certainly it wouldn't go in the bedroom!

"That's my office. I have no problems at all with the sword and I think it could be placed over the short cabinet filer. Normally, I don't have much of a decoration around. I live mostly inside of my computers."

Carsten shrugged.

"But it's very nice. I like it a lot." Marcial said, watching the half appeased goblin, going away, towards the kitchen, probably to inspect where his beloved sword would be placed.

The living room of the duplex penthouse, was spacious, modern and tastefully decorated, making a continuum with the dinning room. The room's main feature was the large windows that stretched from the floor to the ceiling, overlooking the Thames, forming a perfect "L" to allow an unchallenged view of the river's bend and the futurist tall buildings on both sides competing with the remaining old wharfs. The furniture were scarce, all custom made, like the dinning table for 12 services, in dark wood and steel, complemented only with a modern new crystal chandelier and a centrepiece. On the other side of the room, there was only a huge leather couch for five people, reminding of a Roman banquet chair, facing a home theatre. In the only wall's room, there was a Jeff Koons painting of a monkey with an axe, hacking a computer, bought four years ago -and the main reason for his mother to swear never to return to his flat any more. Three more dark brown leather seats were placed around the big crystal aluminium coffee table. The walls were painted in an ivory tone with the lateral columns in a deep red tone.

The adjoining kitchen had also wood floors and one wall of windows and a door to the balcony, as the other three walls were used for cabinets, made in white and a huge marble counter top, with built in appliances, and a small office for breakfast. Carsten had not much use for this room in the house as he was always eating out although there was a chef coming four times per week to cook and leave the food ready for heating later. The most he could do in a kitchen, was to switch on the espresso machine and carry a dirty dish from the table to the counter top -if he remembered-

Next to the kitchen was an old bedroom with private bathroom that had been transformed into his studio, all the walls covered with libraries with glass doors and a huge collection of books, mostly versed in systems engineering, robotics and physics. There were some unread novels -presents from friends in their futile attempts "to humanize him." A huge desk with a leather chair and some courtesy chairs against the window, a low filing cabinet and a built in TV set on top of it, were the other pieces of furniture.

There was also a service entrance and a small laundry. The main handicap of the penthouse was the lack of a service area, so Carsten had fixed the problem by buying the 12th floor and subdivided in two flats for his chauffeur and butler, keeping one room for storage. The stairwell led to a small mezzanine where he kept his music collection and a comfortable couch to lay down, relax and think.

The upper floor contained the main bedroom, a very large stance, only furnished with a very big bed at one side of the windows, looking exactly as the ones from the living room, but without the adjoining balcony, with leather headboard placed against one of the two big windows, two bedside tables, facing a

huge flat screen. There was also a small desk with a chair and a laptop. The bedroom was painted in a burgundy shade. A huge dressing room and a full marble bathroom with jacuzzi, completed the quarters.

The floor contained also two full bedrooms more with private bathrooms, designed to accommodate guests; friends or his mother when she used to come for an inspection visit twice a year.

Everything was painfully cleaned and in meticulous order: from the cans in the pantry towards his jerseys and jackets organised by colour, season and use. As he liked to tell everybody: he was a mathematical mind and chaos repelled him more than anything. He didn't believe in the "creative mess" many of his employees loved to have at their offices. He couldn't stand it. He had even catalogued all his books and assigned a rack in his studio. This qualities -obsessive compulsive behaviour according to his friends; freak for all his former boyfriends- had not been very appreciated during his teenage years. Carsten had been something like a lone wolf, only interested in informatics and nothing else. He rejected every girl that came to him, but he never said that he was gay, until he reached college and had summer adventure during his summer holidays back in 1987, with the member of an unknown "Gothic rock" band, looking like a version of Siouxsie and the Banshees or The Cure. They shared a flat for the month Carsten's English course lasted in Oxford, and it had been a good time, but Carsten never returned the boy's calls or his letters upon his return to the Netherlands. For him, it had been just an experience, as he couldn't stand that the musician used to leave his shoes lying at the entrance and never picked up his clothes.

Upon his return from London, Carsten informed his parents that he decided that he preferred the "love that dares not to say its name" type before marrying a nice Calvinist girl from the parish, against his mother's wishes. His father thought that he was suffering from a late rebel phase against his stern mother and carried on with his work. His mother shouted with him for a whole week, calling the priest in, to "change his sinful ways," but after colliding several times with Carsten's wall of impassivity, she refused to speak with his son any longer. His sister cried, saying that it was disgrace that his brother was a pervert and that all her girlfriends will never speak with her again; that she will never marry a good man because she had a "queer brother" and Carsten only answered: "No cunt is worth your hysterics, Nienke. Go to a doctor and get some pills for it." Her sister didn't speak with him ever again till 1994, when he was already a rich businessman. Her boyfriend -later turned husband- made permanent jokes on his sexuality and even offered to turn him "into the locker room's pet".

He moved to Leyden and only returned home for the Christmas holidays twice. When he graduated in record time -paying most of his studies with the part time jobs he was getting thanks to his father's friends in the technology sector- he packed all his things and went to live in a pension located at Ebury St. He only returned to the Netherlands for his father's funeral in 2002, and only stayed for the ceremony, loudly informing his sister that his plane was waiting for him at the Schiphol Airport to take him back to London.

Carsten missed his father every day since his passing as the man had never judged him too harshly, only asking if this was what he really wanted to do with his life. He had only answered "yes" and since that day, the older man had helped him in every way he could, even risking his 35 years marriage. He rejected to have shares of Carsten's companies even if he was the main capitalist in the beginning. "If I die, your sister will ruin you and your company. Just give me the money back plus the interests you will have to pay to a bank. She's still jealous of you." They visited each other several times, and as a sort of "millennium miracle", the old man convinced his wife to speak again with her son. After his death, she decided to inspect Carsten's lifestyle twice per year and forced him to visit her on Christmas and drag him to the services almost on a daily basis during his staying. Carsten bought a flat in an expensive area in Amsterdam, just to avoid to sleep under her roof ever again and to keep some of his sanity after a full day with her. Rubbing a Maybach Zeppelin in his brother's in law face provided him with a deep satisfaction.

The rapt cry of happiness heard from the ironing room, told Marcial that the trasgu had just found the brooms closet and was more than glad with what was inside it.

"Marcial, he has the vacuum cleaner from the TV!!! The one who never loses its sucking power!!!" He shouted completely excited at the discovery. "You should see that closet!! Everything is ordered by name, all the bottles together!!! Nothing like the rubbish I had to use for several centuries!!! The straw broom days are over, boy!!!" He shouted, running from the kitchen, passing through the butler still standing there, waiting for instructions about the sword. "Tell the slave to put my sword in the scriptorium, as he was told. What is he waiting for? A good flog?"

"He's a butler and it's called office." Marcial explained, softly whispering to the trasgu.

"Is there anything more the young sir will require?" Jelle asked looking at the obviously lunatic boy speaking to his fat platypus, his employer has decided to bring home, as the man was now studying Pelayo's eagle shaped fibula.

"Do servants speak to you nowadays? Good Lord, how things have changed and not for good!" Pelayo mumbled.

"No, thank you. Could you please take the sword to Dr. de Vries' studio?" Marcial asked, deciding to ignore Pelayo. "Carsten, do you think it would be a problem if the platypus stays here with Mr. Maarstens?"

"With who?" Carsten asked, still engulfed in his examination of the fibula... "Ah, Maarstens. Call him just Jelle, Marcial. Yes, your platypus can stay and clean also. Perhaps, things will look better, my dear."

"I doubt it." Sighed Marcial, getting a puzzled look from the butler. "I mean, Jelle makes an excellent job and Pelayo is not so keen on cleaning. He does it because he's forced to do it. It's part of his atonement, Carsten."

The butler was shocked at the boy's prattle, but nothing prepared him for his boss' next question: "Does he need to have one of the guest rooms?"

"I don't think so, it can sleep everywhere, but our bedroom. I don't like an audience when I'm with you." Marcial answered, hoping that this will keep the goblin in his place. After all, last night, he had slept in the big leather récamier and was happy about it. Perhaps a blanket would be good for him."

"All right, then it's settled. You can leave your platypus everywhere but the bedroom. Jelle, do you think we should order one of this dogs' baskets? It's too big and fat to put it in a cats' basket." Carsten pondered, half pulling his butler's legs.

"I wouldn't know, sir. Platypus are not my speciality, sir." The butler partly stuttered, trying to hide his shock.

"Yes, we do need a basket and a blanket for it. We don't want to step over it, do we? Marcial, you need some more clothes for work and we could get some equipment for your animal too. Jelle, tell Connelly to ready the Bentley. We go to Harrod's. It's not necessary that the boys will tag along today. I'll go to the office around 5 PM." He ordered back to his business persona.

"It can sleep anywhere, really. A cover in winter is all what it needs. It hates to be cold."

"Who doesn't?" Carsten answered, already away with his thinking- his mind focused on today's meeting at 5 with Southwood and Jones. They should check the boy's father's records as well those of his deceased mother. "I think Burberry's has some nice blankets for dogs and such animals."

"That would be very nice, but I'm afraid you're spoiling him. He already doesn't want to go back in the old backpack and wants eggs in the morning. We also don't need clothes for me. I have my own ones." Marcial sweetly replied as he looked at Pelayo disappearing towards the kitchen, most probably to inspect the cleaning closet's contents as he has already gotten permission to work. For a minute, Marcial wished Carsten had not given it, but what was done, was done.

The butler couldn't help to wonder why the platypus had changed its gender. Two minutes ago, it was called "it" and now it was a "he"? Perhaps the boy was not speaking English very accurately.

"I don't doubt that you have your own clothes, but all of them are in Madrid, don't you remember, dear?"

"Why are they there? Did I forget to pack?" Marcial said truly puzzled. If the fibula, the sword and Pelayo's cross were here, then his things should also be. Jelle couldn't believe his ears any longer. Was the lad so stupid as to forget that a mobster was after him and that he had nothing but what he was wearing?

"Darling, we decided to leave Madrid in a hurry. We drove to France and took the plane there. Your friend Elena said that this bad man was after you because he didn't want you to be with me. This Majardze character." Carsten said very soft and seriously, suppressing a sigh, as Marcial seemed to have one of his "bad days." 'Finally the stress of the moving is catching up with him,' the Dutch thought.

Jelle pondered if his boss had been abducted by Spanish Speaking Aliens and transformed him into something else... scarier. Normally he would have shouted and fired the idiot who had dared to ask twice about an order or an explanation, but there he was, nicely telling the boy what he had been doing yesterday. This new and kind version of Carsten de Vries was terrifying in its own way; there was no possible way he would remain nice for such a long time, he would explode in some way... or would direct his anger and frustration towards somebody else, but to the boy, totally unaware of the ruckus he was causing just with his presence. Mountbatten was already looking for another position, after having worked for de Vries for the last five or six years.

"Slobodan is not that bad. Elena doesn't like him because she can't meet his expectations and her debts are still very big. The other girls say that she doesn't work or if she does, she always has the same customers. She never brings more than 400 per week when the girls make 2.000 or even 3.000. Slobodan told me he wanted to fire her, but I thought, where would she get another job if she's illegal? Cleaning houses doesn't bring more than 250 per week."

"Fire her? Those were his words, Marcial?"

"No, get rid of her, to fire her. He paid for her bus ticket from Romania to Madrid. She's from Bucharest, but he doesn't like her. He told me he tolerates to have her around because it serves his purposes, and she doesn't like him, because he hit her once or twice."

"Marcial, if he has prostitutes working for him, then he's not a good man. A man does not do that."

"But many of the girls like to work for him. Nadia told me he protects them and only wants half of the money they make and that's a very good arrangement. Normally the managers take two thirds of what they make."

"Prostitution is bad, period, Marcial. It's something you don't do." Carsten decided to keep his

explanation to the simplest. The boy wouldn't understand more than that. "Come, we'll go shopping, have lunch and I'll show you the city. I have a meeting later at the office, and you can see it and stay with the people in Personnel as they look for a place for you. Bring your pet along, if you want."

\* \* \*

The city was huge in Marcial's eyes. The buildings and the store -as big as his own "Corte Inglés" - made him feel small and more provincial than ever. He tried to argue about buying more clothes for him, but Carsten only said drily "be quiet and try this," not hearing what he wanted to tell and handed him over an uptight British salesman, who seemed to be familiar with the rich man's tastes, easily selecting what might please him. The employee didn't also care about Marcial's opinions on the matter and only allowed him to tell if he liked blue, green or brown for some jerseys as Carsten was busy checking his mobile phone.

"Only some casual clothes for the office and a jacket or two."

"Some evening attires, perhaps?"

Carsten pondered for a full minute. Evening attire meant he should take the boy out, to a club, disco or restaurant, where he would probably meet his own "hunting pack" of friends, lone wolves like himself, always looking for a good party and some fun: Marcial would be an easy and highly sought prey as the boy was simply stunning and good-trusting everybody. "No, nothing of that sort for the moment." Carsten announced, deciding to keep his little elf under a close surveillance till a doctor would check what was wrong with him or he would have clearly told George, Adam and Freddie to keep their hands off his property.

Lunch wasn't a problem, but the boy ate very little and only drank some cola light, refusing to have dessert saying that the platypus wasn't there, so he didn't need to order one. After eating they walked around, choosing a basket for the animal with a nice deep green and beige tartan, along with a blanket with a lynx pattern at Carsten's insistence and Marcial's whining of "you're spoiling him!!"

Late in the afternoon, Carsten decided to go to his office to speak with the Human Resources people. Marcial was very impressed with the large array of glass and aluminium buildings standing beside the river. Carsten went directly to the 15th floor where his office was and asked his elderly secretary, Gloria, to "call some jerk from Personnel". He sent Marcial to help Gloria as she had to fold more than 300 letters as he expected a confrontation with them.

Lindsay Merrington never expected that Carsten would simply order her to look for a position for this obviously uneducated, untrained and half witted boy, not hearing her concerns at all, brushing them

aside with a more than impolite: "Is your section not called Human Resources? Well re-allocate some Human Resources, like for example that student from Edinburgh who brings me the post every morning. I don't like him. Feed him to the people in J2EE. They're always whining about manpower lack."

"But Carsten, this boy has almost no CV to be here!! He's not even a college student!!! We're proud to have the best in their fields!!"

"Are you not supposed to make the impossible become possible? How many qualifications do you need for an office boy's job? He's in. Pay him the minimum and fix his papers with the Social Security and the Immigration Office. For contact details use my private address and I don't want any of your British sarcasm around him. I'm making you personally responsible for his stay in this company."

"I will not recommend his incorporation to Z3 Solutions. He's below our quality standards."

"And your section is well below mine. My patience with all of you is wearing thinner and thinner." Carsten barked deciding to finally put them in their places. "With the rising unemployment in the U.K., perhaps all of you could find a position at the Employment Office, filling out forms for the jobless. It would be a great service to the community if these people could benefit from your broad expertise and knowledge."

"I will present a complaint to the Board about your manners! This is harassment!"

"Be my guest and consider this your two weeks notice." He said not rising his voice, one of his worse signs according to all his employees. His cold fury was legendary.

"Perhaps I could use some help at my desk, Dr. de Vries, so I could focus more in your agenda issues." Gloria intervened before Lindsay would certainly lose her job and his boss would have a fit, making all of them suffer his bad mood for a whole week. "The lad has been a great help so far. He can stay with me. I could certainly have a junior secretary and 814 pounds is not much to pay for one. For a company of our size, they are asking more than 20.000 pounds per year."

"Alright Gloria, he's yours. Lindsay, make yourself useful and arrange his papers. If they're not properly done you will be immediately fired. Dismissed." Carsten barked very low, but visibly appeased with the old lady's intervention. Lindsay stormed out of the room, almost slamming the door behind her.

"See what happens if you let a stupid woman in a power position? I hate this gender laws." Carsten said.

"Well, this one has just saved you chauvinist hide, Dr. de Vries. Do you want to spend weeks in the Courts explaining why you fired a woman who was just doing her work?"

"Only you Gloria. If there's a living Mrs. Miniver left in this country, that would be you."

"Thank you, Dr. de Vries. I'll take care of the lad. He'll be fine with me and I can certainly use some more help around." She answered, pleased to no end at the rare pleasantry she had received from him. She was very surprised when he had hired her in the first place, 11 years ago, when she was more than 45 years old, divorced and with three children, overlooking all the bimbos waiting in line for the interview. "You have 3 children. If you can manage them, you can manage 10 programmers and me. You're hired."

Carsten looked at her retreating form and sighed. That woman was truly clever and discreet. She had said nothing or make any face when the boy had asked her twice about the letters' intended use. She only explained him the task and let him use a side desk at her office, isolating him from the hungry wolves looking at him. Probably she had already understood what the boy meant to him and decided to avoid further problems. She was priceless. He only had time to check some of his e-mails before his agenda reminded him of his meeting at 5 with Southwood, Jones and Jansen, who would have probably heard the whole story from Lindsay's side.

Carsten took his usual place at the head of the meeting table, letting Southwood take his right and Jansen and Jones take the left. He didn't waste his precious time with greetings or any kind of niceties with his employees as they quickly opened their laptops and folders.

"Report." Carsten said indistinctly to all of them.

"We were doing a further check on his backgrounds. The files of his time with the Child Protection Services were never computerized and if you want to see them, we will have to send somebody to check them in situ. However, we were able to find several of the press articles concerning the case." Jansen quickly admitted the problem and provided an alternative solution as his boss was never happy. He paused for a minute, expecting to get any kind of reaction from him, but none came. "More or less, the story is, according to the local newspapers, that this man, George Althorpe was a well known paedophile from the Surrey area -a loaded businessman with wife and children- who was accused in 2000 of molesting several boys in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Before he could have been apprehended, he fled the country and the Authorities imagine he went to that small place in Asturias, living from his savings and posing as an artist.

"On November 20th, 2005, some neighbours in that village called the police as this Althorpe had stabbed four times a boy and thrown his body out of a window. When the ambulance arrived, the boy, Marcial Martínez Fernández, was nearly dead. The doctors were able to stabilize him and take him to a hospital. The police believed that he had been molested by this man since he was around 13 years old and arrived to the place. The boy was taken away from his grandmother's care, as she had proven to be unfit to do it.

According to the Child Protection Services, he was undernourished, unschooled and unattended, even though many doctors had informed her that he was in need of permanent medical care."

"Why?"

This part of information, Jones would have preferred to keep it to himself as the boy was not looking problematic at all, but he spoke nevertheless. "He was involved in a car accident, a few years before the murder attempt. He was in a deep coma for 3 weeks and presented severe neurological damage after it, having seizures almost daily. The doctors didn't want to release him from the hospital's care, but the grandmother took him away. He was supposed to be under medication for his seizures and even got a State's pension as he's considered to have a 30% handicap. He never returned to school till the Services took him away."

"What kind of handicap?"

"He suffers from anterograde amnesia. According to a doctor I consulted this morning, he could be able to understand the meaning of words, but he's unable to process the concepts and forgets them after a few minutes. He can work in something that it's repetitive, but he can't truly relate abstract concepts. There was the case of a man called Henry M., in the States. A doctor performed a experimental surgery back in the 50's on him to reduce his epileptic seizures when he was a teenager. The doctor inadvertently damaged the frontal lobe, where the memory resides, and he started to have troubles to remember whatever he had done during the day. I mean, he could remember all his friends from school; speak perfectly well; all the things he had learned before the surgery, but he couldn't remember what he had had for lunch or who was sitting next to him if the person was a new face. He excelled in Maths and could play chess like a Master, but he couldn't tell you what he had read 10 minutes ago in the newspaper or where he was. He had a nice and kind nature when before he had been a feisty kid. Once they took him to Yale for a conference, and his doctor asked if he knew where he was. "At Yale, of course." He answered. "How do you know? We never told you." "I saw many students wearing Yale T-Shirts when we were passing down the corridors and all of you are very nervous to be here." This boy could have it in lighter form and he's not exactly stupid, but he won't be able to remember anything after some hours." Jones explained doing his best to soften the news.

"He can remember only if he has put the knowledge into practice. If I understood him correctly, he should be able to solve a mathematical problem if you put him to work on in immediately after the explanation. He can remember a book if he speaks about it with somebody. He can take the bus if you explain him how and where. He can cook well, but forgets what he did yesterday. He's permanently observing you and can read even the most imperceptible gestures you make, like this man. That would explain many things."

"That's not all with the Althorpe bloke." Southwood said, deciding to spill it once and for all. "He used Marcial's as his model for some websites for perverts. The Spanish Authorities wanted to accuse him and the grandmother of children pornography along with abuse, rape and many other things, but the boy was too crazy, saying that it wasn't the pervert's fault what had happened and that he had been very afraid of seeing some sort of a demon with him, according to the tabloids. Althorpe was only formally accused of assault and got it lightly because he was under the effects of Hallucinogens, and the boy declared every time that he had fallen out of the window. The authorities couldn't do a thing against the old hag, so they took the boy away."

"Where was the father in all that?"

"We don't know, sir. Juan Carlos Martínez de la O is a wealthy Spanish constructor. He built many vacationities in Murcia and Alicante over the last 25 years. He's 63 and he recognized the child, but never supported him. He didn't ask for the boy's custody after his mother passed away or with the Althorpe incident."

"If it was such a scandal, why didn't he contact his own son after the incident?"

"The boy's name was never published. We deduced it from the details you told us and from the dates we could find."

"Where is he now?"

"Living in Brazil. Sold almost everything he had in 2006 and moved there to start a new company. He never married or had any other children."

"Do you have a report on the injuries he received?"

"Not the official one, but some gory descriptions from the local press." Jones trailed, hoping that this tiny bit of information would satisfy Carsten.

"Go on."

"They were two stabs in his midsection, forcing the doctors to remove his splinter, one in a thigh and another on the shoulder. Several broken ribs and the right leg broken in several parts, splintered right arm too. He was sent to a reformatory as there was nothing else available."

"Good work." Carsten praised them, hearing the collective sigh of relief not so well repressed from his staff. "Now, what about Majardze?" He asked, already knowing that they would have not much on him as they had chosen to start with the boy and not with the mobster.

"There's not much about him in the MI 6. He works in Spain mostly. We only know that he's 36 years old, was born in Gori, Georgia and allegedly traffics drugs from the north of Spain to the south coast. He owns around 15 clubs and 24 restaurants distributed all over Spain. No police record at all and good connections with the local authorities." Southwood said.

"Is that all?" Carsten asked with a dangerous edge in his voice, not bothering to hide his contempt at his employees results.

"With such a short notice, yes sir. I will need to pull some old contacts around. Intelligence on such people is hard to get, needless to say it's expensive and not my line of work. We are speaking of more than 5 figures presents, Dr." Southwood defended himself and his team, already feeling that De Vries was looking for a fight and someone to behead. He trusted that the mention of a huge amount of money would calm down the Dutch as his reluctance to spend more than necessary was well known.

"I see. Continue to investigate him, but slowly. The boy will work here and I want that one of your men looks after him when his out on his own. Discreetly if possible."

"On the company's account?" Asked Jansen.

"Of course not! On mine! Since when do I mix my private life with Z3 Solutions?" He roared. "Send me the bill!" He roared, leaving the room and slamming the door.

The three men remained sitting at the table, as a heavy silence fell upon them. Southwood, a huge man reaching his 50s, sighed and decided to look over the window, doing his best to ignore Jansen, in the brink of an explosion. He was well aware that the Dutch was disturbed by this new development in their employer's life, but he thought that it was something that eventually would land in their lives. His main concern now was to decide if he would put Carl Smithers or John Awers to take care of the boy.

"Never mix the company with his own messes? That's a new one!" Jansen snorted.

"In a way, he's the company. Without him, none of us would have a fantastic paying job and several millions in the bank." Southwood said in a haughty tone, arching his eyebrows at the Dutch.

"There are many programmers in this world. He could be replaced." Jansen suggested.

"Pity he owns 57% of it, so save us the Glorious Revolution moment. Besides, none of the geniuses down there can make a decent business plan or convince a CEO to buy our products." Southwood.

"What about the boy we have in the Arts section? One single night and he has a job with us! And now he

wants to inflict a half idiot upon us!!!”

“He passed a selection process and he's certainly good, according to his Creative Director, and this boy will not cost more than 800 pounds per month, much less than your bimbo.” Southwood fired back.

“And?? She can speak French and English very well and looks great at the reception.”

“The boy speaks accurately Spanish and English and he also would look fine serving the coffee or distributing the post. It's a matter of tastes.” Jones interfered deciding to take his immediate boss side.

“Excellent approach gentlemen... do you say that you two were in the MI6 and come from the Army? Your country is in great danger if it relies on people like you for its defence.”

“At least, we don't run to other countries for help whenever we are invaded.” Jones heatedly retorted.

“Enough! This is a company, not the European Union Parliament! What's exactly the cause of your bitterness against the boy?

“What will happen when the new fling meets the older flings working here? Let me remind you; we have one in the Arts Department, another two in different programming departments and one more sitting in accounting.

“That's old history. You are perfectly aware that the boss has no contact with any of them once they're in. All are good professionals.” Southwood retorted, visibly upset at the fact of having overlooked that particular challenge ahead. “Jones affirms that this one will not pose a problem at all. He's half witted, for Christ sake!”

“I don't care about a country boy! I'm concerned about the other four when they see that one moron took over their places!! Do you realise that this one will have a permanent residence at Carsten's place, security around him and most probably he would not been able to keep his hands off the boy? Gay people can be very jealous and vindictive!!”

“No more than straight people do. The same problem we had when you put that hot looking brunette and the bimbo to work together. You spoke with them and we transferred one to the 14th floor and the other to the 11th. No further issues.” Jones said with renewed rancour at Jansen for his bigotry.

“If I were you Jansen, I would be more concerned that Carsten would decide to sell everything, like he did a few years ago, and retire or fund another company and leave us, all dancing on one foot. He's getting tired of the constant mess he has to face everyday and if he didn't do it before, it was because he

had nothing better to do. His share is now worth around 2.3 billions and he has more than 700 millions cash. What if he decides to quit and plant Tulips in the Caribbean? He's over 40 now." Southwood pointed out. "Look how he exploded at Mountbatten because he made a stupid joke about the boy. He obviously cares a lot about him and keep in mind that HE went after the boy, not even a month after the affair, and brought him here, already knowing that he's mentally challenged. Why do you think he's pressing us to find information about the "possible competition", the father and the low scum mobster? He is showing the same jealousy symptoms as he did when the Italian boy moved to his flat."

"I think Carsten is in love with him. You should have seen him in the plane, taking great care that the lad would be comfortable. He nearly punched Connolly when he wanted to shake hands with the boy. This Dutch has a terrible temper when it comes to his things." Jones added softly.

"Carsten in love?" Jansen let a dry and humourless laugh out. "He only loves himself, his work and his bank accounts. Since I know him, back in 1997, he only cares about making money, screwing people around and fighting with his family. That man has no feelings at all. He's more a machine than a human. If he communicates with the rest of mankind is because he wants something from us. How many stable relationships do you know he had? Two or three at most. The Italian model -dismissed after a month for anorexia- and that lawyer for five months -and Carsten was out of the country for three months in the meantime. He's demanding, jealous, nasty, impolite, egoistic, unable to share anything and uses all the intelligence God has given him to make your life a living hell in order to keep you doing what he wants. Love means good sex for him. Do you really think that someone with a little brain would stand him, if he's not very well paid for his services? Pity he's a stingy bastard who doesn't want to spend more than a dinner or a champagne bottle in a lover."

"Perhaps this boy is exactly what he needs. Good sex and he forgets whatever Carsten says. I imagine this Marcial couldn't hold a grudge for more than an hour. He's good looking, quiet, loving, obedient and nice. A mindless doll, if you ask me, but some men need them and pay gladly for a good one. Carsten won the lotto the minute he got the boy. It's normal that Carsten is so infatuated by him." Jones said.

"So, for all our sakes, the best would be if we can keep the competence away, the doll distributing letters and Carsten away from our necks, gentlemen. As he said to Mountbatten, keep the boss happy and your shares will rise." Southwood decided to finish the discussion. "Jansen, tell Carsten that I have decided to put Marcial under Carl Smithers' protection. He has a lot of patience and is very discreet."

"Something else, oh mighty lord?" Jansen asked ironically, clearly upset that Southwood believed that he was still a colonel in the MI6, ordering people around.

"Call the maintenance people. The temperature here drops and raises permanently! They should fix it!"

Pelayo sighed once more at the humans stupidity. In more than a thousand years, they hadn't change a bit; greedy to the point of idiocy. At least the one who look like he could hold his ground on a battlefield was on Marcial's side. Carl was also a good Germanic name and this Carsten truly cared for his charge. And why were those other two speaking about "feelings" in a man? Good Lord, they were men, not silly little girls washing clothes by the river!! Men were supposed to keep them to themselves and their confessors. "Res non verba" So far, all what they have described as "faults" in the man's character were the signs of a good warrior.

\* \* \*

Carsten was more than furious with his incompetent staff when he entered his office. Didn't they already know that he was never mixing pleasure and business? He had just told the idiots down in Human Resources to keep their mouths shut and deduce the boy's salary from his own monthly 37.000 pounds as CEO. Anyway, the 800 the lad would be earning, equalled one or two nights going out with the boys for fishing and he had already the big dolphin in his bed. In a way, he was saving money.

He was astonished to find the boy sitting by the big window, with all the letters Gloria had given him for folding and tagging done, neatly piled up. His fury melted away when he got one of his luminous smiles, true happiness written in his face at seeing him. A kind of smile as Carsten had not even received from his own mother, perhaps from his father when he was a young child.

"Everything ready? I'm surprised." He softly said, brushing his lips against Marcial's silky forehead.

"It's very quiet in here. No people around. Your secretary told me to stay here till she finds a place for me. It was easy to do." Marcial answered, happy that the trasgu was away, inspecting the workplaces.

"Good, Gloria can be a pain sometimes, but she's nice. She will be like a mother to you. I already saw her motherly instincts taking over when she saw you with me. She will defend you from the big bad monster she has for a boss." Carsten chuckled

"You are not a bad monster. A werewolf can be really aggressive. You only demand people to do their jobs and despise laziness but you work harder than them to set the example. Bad bosses are those who drink coffee the whole day, while you work like a donkey and shout with you because you can't run faster." Marcial seriously said.

"I'll open my own press centre and make you write articles about me for my staff." Carsten laughed, secretly pleased that the boy had understood him better than many of his own people. 'Those 800 are indeed a good investment.'

"How about if tonight we dine at home and then look a film together? It's cold to go outside and its good

to cuddle to keep the warm." Carsten suggested, deciding to drop the Thursday Evening Hunt at The Laughing Buddha and go for the romantic evening option.

"I can cook something, if you want."

"It's unnecessary. There's already a cooked dinner. We only have to make it warm and open a bottle of wine."

"I can't drink. My granny didn't let me do it. She said I was already seeing things without the alcohol, but you can have it."

"All right, more for me. You'll get a cocoa."

## **Chapter 11**

For the past two weeks, Carsten had never been so happy in his whole life. Marcial had proved to be the ideal companion for him, always willing to have sex, well organized, not throwing his things around and respecting his silences and need to be left alone at some point. Marcial loved to cuddle and was always looking at him admiringly with his big blue eyes that made his self esteem feel great. At work, he was serious and worked hard -although Gloria had to explain him the new tasks several times, but that didn't seem to upset the secretary. She was very pleased that Marcial always seemed to know what she needed before she would ask him to go for it.

In the domestic front some strange events had taken place, like two full chocolates boxes vanishing in two different afternoons when Marcial and him were at the office or several beer bottles. Carsten decided to ignore the butler's protests about "something lurking around, moving the furniture when no one was around," and blamed it on the cleaning ladies' clumsiness. When he found a bottle of Mr. Clean spread over the kitchen floor, he picked it up and took it back to the ironing room only to find the mess cleaned when he returned to do it; he was surprised, but he assumed that Jelle or Marcial had done it. Certainly the platypus -sleeping in its basket, covered with the faux lynx blanket- wasn't responsible for it. 'Lord, I'm starting to think like that crazy butler!'

Jelle was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. No one could convince him that there was nothing wrong with the angelic looking boy. True, he had done nothing inadequate and was good for his employer's nerves, but so many strange events have been perspiring since he had arrived to the house. The platypus, for instance. One morning, he was sure that he had left it -with basket and everything in the library as the cleaning ladies were busy with the living room, while he was organizing the dresser to make room for the boy's new clothes- but the wretched thing was on top of the bed when he left the dressing room to

answer the phone.

Sometimes he would find some cleaning items, specially the mini vacuum cleaner or the broomstick out of their places. Many small things seemed to be misplaced almost daily and he nearly had a heart attack when he found a strange looking stew on the burner, when the chef had left everything in the refrigerator as usual.

Marcial was very happy with Carsten as the man was tender and considerate to him, treating him respectfully and never laughing at him when he had his lapses. He was doing his best to convince Pelayo to leave the butler alone as the man obviously was afraid of his presence. "Why? He never saw me or will ever do. He lacks the fire."

"Please, clean when he's not around. He told Carsten several times that there's a restless spirit in this house and says that I brought it along!! You're going to get me into troubles with Carsten!! I like him very much to repeat the George story with him!!"

"Carsten will never do something like that. Although he's harsh, his soul is good. Besides, I'm no spirit. I'm a trasgu, a domestic demon and that's different. I can affect the material world while spirits can't. I have to take care of you."

"I'm not a child any more I'm 22!!"

"Marcial, you can't be left alone to fend for yourself. Your nature attracts the evil doers. I will not go away till I'm certain that someone else can protect you as well as I do. If your grandmother would have not prevented me to interfere with her sorcery, this George Althorpe would have never come closer to you!! The only good thing about this curse is that we have to protect the children and the true innocents."

"How could he ever prove to be a good protector if you terrify his servants? He will sent me back."

"He won't. He loves you and you should also do it. Liking him is not enough."

"I don't know if I could love him. I loved George and look how it ended. I liked Slobodan a lot, but you prevented me to go with him. He was very kind to me and would have never hurt me, but you said he was a bad man. I don't want the same happens with me and Carsten. Everyone I like turns out bad."

"When I was young, love was not important to marry. Love would come after many years of living together as brothers, sharing the many trials this life has."

"I still liked Slobodan a lot and I think he would have really changed as he promised me he would."

"Marcial, I will not risk you ever again. Any man who deals with his brothers' misery can't be good. The Lord will punish him in the next life and I will keep him away from you in this one. End of discussion."

"You still don't understand what I felt when I had his life in my hands. I felt myself connected to him and that's a feeling I couldn't forget even if I wanted to. My heart raced every time I saw him coming to the pub or when he spoke with me."

"So? Being in love is not necessary good or wise. That man is not good for you!!"

"I'm sure he was able to see you. You told me only the persons with a children's heart could do it. He knows about you as he described you as the dragon taking care of the treasure. You told me many times how violent and bloodthirsty you were in your fight against the Saracens, but you always were an honourable man. Why can't Slobodan not be thus?"

"I caused misery on other humans, but never on my brothers and that's a huge difference. I killed many heathens, but never murdered or abused our own kind. I would have never hit one of my women, for example!!"

"Didn't you tell me that the longest end of the sword is meant for the enemies and the shortest for the wife and children?"

"Yes, but that's a punishment and certainly deserved if they're disobedient!! All troubles start when the wife and children don't obey!"

"Which is the difference between your punishment methods and Slobodan's?"

"My teacher Rabanus would have loved you. You're a natural born lawyer! I will not debate with pubescent like yourself!" Pelayo snorted, furious to be caught in his own game.

"I'm old enough to take care of myself!"

"Remember I still have the sword, boy. Now, be quiet and go to work and be nice to Carsten! He deserves your respect and obedience!!" The trasgu growled.

"I respect him and obey him!! I like him."

"Good, because he takes great care to keep you well, so forget those crazy ideas still hovering your brain. Romance is not as important as people like to believe nowadays. Romance is only for the animals in heat.

Once the desires are sated, there's nothing left. True love comes from living together and respecting each other, once two people reach steadiness and permanence, but you are still too young to understand. This is why you need someone to show you your place."

"You always make it sound like a contract!"

"Marriage is a contract. I'm looking for a good husband for you and this one is the best candidate so far. Perhaps some more education would be good, but we can't have everything in this life, Marcial. He fulfills the minimum requirements."

"But I don't love him as I think I love Slobodan!"

"So? You like him in bed, think highly about him and you are happy around him. I daresay that's much more than many couples start with. Stop being a whinny little nymph and behave like a sensible lad. Go to work now, boy!"

"Leave the butler alone and don't mess around or you'll find more millet in your bed than you have ever seen in your life!" Marcial rose his voice.

"Three words for you, little boy: Hand-held vacuum cleaner. Finally, someone invented something truly useful for us, and there also bleachers to turn the black goatskins' white and water can be frozen to be transported in a basket. So, sit down and think in something else because that won't work any longer on me!" Pelayo announced with a triumphal smile all plastered over his face.

"All this is Carsten's fault!! He has totally spoiled you!"

"Sensible man. If he would send you back to school, I would give you to him without giving any more thought to it."

\* \* \*

For the first time in his life, Carsten felt like his house was turning into a home. He longed to return to it after working -when before he would have been planning how to organize a safari to the London discos. He simply adored to come home everyday at eight and wait for Marcial to warm some food while he was checking on his projects on his laptop. Before he would have locked himself in his desk, but now he preferred to stay in the living room, looking out the corner of his eye how Marcial set the table or brought the food from the kitchen. Carsten was amazed how someone so small like his elf could achieve so many things in such small periods. He loved to see his small hands precisely setting the cutlery and dishes, never wasting his movements.

More than once, Marcial found Carsten looking at him when he was setting the table and that drove him nervous. He was as careful as possible with the expensive porcelain and had forbidden Pelayo to come near the exclusive china set.

"It will be ready in a few minutes, Carsten."

"Yes, sorry. I was staring again. I still can't believe how beautiful you're." He would reply, making Marcial deeply blush at his words. Perhaps the trasgu was right and the older man was truly in love of him, but he couldn't decide if he liked the Dutch better than the Georgian. He used to find himself thinking on Slobodan more than once per day, specially when Gloria would give him a boring task like photocopying or putting together brochures for a presentation.

"I'm quite normal." He would mumble, more embarrassed than before at the adoring look he was getting from Carsten. In a way, he felt very bad at the older man's attentions because he knew his mind was not truthful to him.

"No, you're not. You look like an angel and you're like one for me."

\* \* \*

Jelle was less than enthralled by the boy's arrival to the house. Before his life had been easy, only tolerating the belittling remarks from his boss -compensated with a generous salary- but doing very little. Since the youth was in the house, his employer had changed completely and demanded that everything was perfect to the last detail: getting fresh flowers and plants as the boy loved to have natural things around or going to another dry cleaner, five miles away, as the lad couldn't stand the soap from the one around the corner. He knew that his boss was pondering to buy a horribly loud dog to replace the platypus and give it as a birthday's present. A dog, he most probably would have to walk every morning as the other two would go to work, or -he shuddered at the idea- clean after the puppy had done it on the parquet. He would have to cook more, and even set a dish for the little nuisance, barking every morning.

Another thing was the platypus, always in his or the cleaning ladies' way. It was simply unsettling. In the morning, the thing was left in its basket, well covered, but in the afternoon, inexplicably, the animal would appear somewhere else. Fatima and Conchita swore many times that they hadn't touched it, but the animal was keeping appearing on and on. In the middle of the day, the windows would get open by themselves or a bucket full of water would fall over a floor not properly cleaned, forcing the women to do it again till it was shining.

The butler decided to finish his job no later than 1 PM and leave the flat to whatever was lurking there.

He was tired of finding many things displaced. He had told De Vries that there was something very wrong occurring in his own house, but the man had nearly laughed in his face.

The most nerves wrecking thing was to hear in the mid afternoon the sound of scraping metals, as if someone would be sharpening a sword.

Perhaps his friend Peggy could help him. She was some sort of a medium and a good one as she was taking care of the esoteric needs from most of London High Society. If there was something, she would find it and exorcise or cast it away.

\* \* \*

Slobodan Majardze had never been so furious in his life than when he found out that some foreigner had literally stolen his "little angel" in less than a few days under his nose. Nobody knew who he was and the normally talkative Marcial had told nothing to his useless friends, Lucho and Paco. The only information he could get out of the half stunned boys was that the man was a foreigner, speaking well Spanish and with a lot of money because he had offered 50 Euros for some information about Pelayo.

Marcial had taken along with him his platypus and Pelayo was also away, as the horrible thing was nowhere to be seen or heard.

The stupid policewoman had also been useless as she knew nothing and after two rounds under his fist, she was more than willing to talk. She only knew that he was a businessman, with a lot of money, because he had taken the boy to the Ritz.

The Gypsy had complained a lot because he had had to clean after Slobodan had finished her and had to bury the pieces, as all the other men had been too sick to do it. 'Useless Spanish. They can't do anything right! Next time, I'll use my own people, but that was a good lesson for them.' Slobodan thought, for the hundredth time, still enraged that one of them had fainted like a little girl at the sight of blood. His lieutenants Georg or Joseph would have never had so many scruples.

His mood over the last month had been worse than ever. The girls decided to work much harder than before just to avoid to be in direct line of his wrath. One Ecuadorian gang had the poor idea of robbing three of his dealers in the park and that had been a blessing for his nerves, allowing him to vent his frustration on the five boys his own people caught in his territory.

Not even Dimitri was able to get him out of his mood, and everybody knew that he was his best call boy. He was just mad with jealousy, nearly jumping on every middle age man he saw on the street, thinking that they could be the one who had stolen his angel.

He had been so close to convince the boy to come to him!! He could feel that it was harder and harder for Marcial to hide his feelings for him. His only problem had being that spawn lurking around his angel, telling the boy to keep distance from him.

The only thing he had left was the boy's photo album and his clothes, still smelling of him.

As his last resource, he offered a bounty in the neighbourhood for any information about the man.

\* \* \*

Jelle was having a hard morning. 'No, my boss is giving me a hard morning,' he briefly thought as he prepared an extra pair of scrambled eggs, without parsley for the platypus. 'It's not as if the bloody thing is a parrot,' he nearly mumbled as he strongly whisked the eggs.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Jelle. Pelayo hates parsley. I should have told you earlier about it." Marcial said meekly.

"If you don't like it just say it and I will not sprinkle it anywhere." He said, resentful at the extra work.

"I like it exactly as you cook them. It's Pelayo who doesn't." Marcial clarified again, as Carsten was busy with his laptop, totally unaware of the approaching storm.

"Tomorrow you two get a hard boiled egg because I have enough of your craziness."

"All right, we both like it. Thank you."

When Jelle opened his mouth to tell him that he had enough of his soft manners and all the mess he was causing, he felt again one of those horrid cold drafts, as if something had escaped from the grave -there was not other way to describe it; it was the same feeling he had experienced while touching a dead rabbit when he was a child- running through his spine.

"Pelayo, don't!!" Marcial shouted at the furious trasgu, ready to hit the butler on the face. "He didn't mean it. Let him be!"

"I had enough!! Fucking with the boss doesn't give you the right to make my life a living hell! Since you're here, this house is full of spirits, ghosts or whatever you have brought with you!!"

"I'm sorry if Pelayo gives you trouble. I'll take him with me to work if he's misbehaving, but the office is full of expensive computers and he loves them!"

"I will throw the platypus to the fire the minute you're out!" Jelle threatened in a very low voice

"No, you won't!!" Marcial shouted back, making Carsten almost jump from his chair at the noise, just to find his little elf on the brink of tears, tightly holding his stuffed animal.

"What is the problem, now?"

"He wants to burn my platypus down!!" Marcial shouted.

"Why would Jelle want to do something like that? It's just a toy!" Carsten said, not truly understanding the problem, but throwing a killer's look at the man. "Doesn't he cook something for it every morning? Jelle has no problems with Pelayo."

"That's not truth!! He wants to burn it down to get rid of him!!! I'm going away!! I'm going home!" Marcial shouted completely hysterical.

"Don't bother, Marcial. I'll take care of the serf. I had enough of him laughing at your back." Pelayo said, his eyes shinning devilishly.

"Marcial, love, be reasonable," Carsten told him, "Jelle has nothing against your pet. Come, let me hold you and don't be afraid. Nobody is going away. Put your platypus in its basket, cover it well and everything will be fine."

"No!! He will throw it to the fire!!"

"The chimney is off, dear. We have no fire and he's too lazy to clean the oven if he puts it inside."

"No!! The platypus is mine; my mother gave it to me!!" Marcial cried again, clutching it even stronger than before.

"Darling, no one will touch your animal. I know it's important for you. Come here and let me hold you a little."

"No!!" He shouted, pushing Carsten away and running out of the kitchen in direction of the bedroom, with the trasgu after him.

"Well, we can't say any longer that he's a lovely, polite, sweet boy." Jelle commented, secretly happy that Marcial had finally shown that he was exactly as the other had been. Little prima donnas good for the bed

and nothing else. Something that you could buy for a night and replace in the morning when the novelty had worn off.

"I'm sure you had something to do with his outburst. Excellent job, Maarstens. Now, I'll loose a full hour trying to calm him down and probably will have to take that rubbish to the office!!" Carsten growled.

"Sir, I only said that tomorrow he and the platypus will get a hard boiled egg and I will put them on the fire at 7:30 so they will be ready and cold around 8. Perhaps the young man misunderstood me. He seems to be confused at times."

"That's true, which reminds me, he has to go to the doctor next week. Anyway, stay out of his life and keep your hands away from that animal! I would be very displeased if an accident were to happen to his pet. Understand this is the only thing he has left from his mother!"

"I understand, sir, but these mood swings he has are very strange indeed. Two days ago he refused to have dinner because the greens were coming from a "damned place," covered in blood, if I remember correctly."

Carsten felt ashamed as he recalled that Marcial had nearly had a nervous breakdown when he had opened the salad container, shouting that it was cursed and eating it would be very bad. He had cried so much that Maarsten and Connelly had come up to check if everything was in order. "His traditions are different to our ones." Carsten whispered, losing part of his bravado. "Stay away from the platypus. Don't speak to him if necessary!"

"He was just speaking with the thing, telling it not to attack me as I had not bad intentions. Perhaps we should add hallucinations to the list for the doctor, sir."

"Stay out of this!"

"He was shouting that the lettuce was full covered in blood. It took you almost two hours to calm him down. I always buy the greens in the same shop, in Harrod's Market Hall They're bio and come from a well known farm in Surrey. Nothing dammed about the place. I'm sure the chef cleans everything very well, sir."

"Leave the bloody lettuce out! Don't buy it ever again! Buy cucumbers for all what I care!"

"As you wish, sir."

"No, wait. Buy another exactly as the one from there and mix it with another of the same type, but from

another place and ask the cook to make his favourite dressing, the one with dill and milk. He will eat it tonight and I can show him that there was nothing wrong with the lettuce” Carsten said.

“Very well, sir.”

“Keep both receipts too.” Carsten sighed, finishing his coffee and snatching a croissant before going upstairs to convince Marcial that nobody planned to cook his stuffed toy, perhaps one round with the washing machine, as the pet was in need of a good bath.

After using all his diplomacy, Carsten managed to convince the boy to come with him to the office, taking the platypus along and that night, the thing would get a bubbles bath and be put in the dryer, and his basket would be placed in his studio under lock, so nobody would touch it.

\* \* \*

Gloria was gracious enough at saying nothing at the satchel with the platypus. Marcial worked as usual, but Carsten had a hard day as things seemed to fall from places and all systems crashed inexplicably down.

At 8 PM, he had enough and only wanted to come home to have dinner, check the figures for the semester and have some peace and a good tumble with his little elf.

Just when Carsten was planning to lay himself on the couch and check his numbers, he remembered that the boy was going to wash the animal and put it in the dryer so it would be dry and ready to be placed in its basket for sleeping at 10 PM.

Carsten managed the best as he could with the microwave and setting the table. He took the salad container, the lettuce washed and cut, and placed on the bowl, throwing the dressing on top of it and mixing it a bit. For a minute he regretted to do this to Marcial, but his resolution reaffirmed when the young man entered the kitchen, with a towel carefully wrapped around the platypus, looking for some scented soap. 'This can't continue any longer. He needs some anchor to reality. A dog would be the best option. Besides, the idiots at Human Resources are always telling me about buying some pets for the office. In theory, they reduce stress.'

“It will be ready in 10 minutes, dear!” Carsten shouted to the retreating form.

“I'll get it on the dryer and I'll come, Carsten.”

The man was opening a red wine bottle when he heard the loud gasp coming from Marcial as the boy

was terrified looking from the living room's entrance. His blue eyes were fixed on the salad bowl and he was raggedly breathing, not prying them away from the thing.

"What's wrong, dear? I put all the dressing on it. Is it too much?" Carsten asked innocently.

"How can you do this to me??? Everything is full of blood!!!" Marcial whispered, his face pale and his voice quivering.

"Dear, it's just lettuce We bought a new one. It's the type you like so much."

"He killed his wife and children, buried them and planted the lettuce on top to cover the removed earth!!!" Marcial shouted again.

"Marcial, this makes no sense at all!!" Carsten shouted back. "It's crazy what you're saying!! I can tolerate your idiocy, but your lunacy is too much. Control yourself and think, if it's possible, before you speak!"

The boy didn't waste more time as he flew towards the door in the cold February night, yanking it open and running towards the elevator. Carsten wasn't fast enough as to catch him and got the door on his face. 'Shit! He's going to freeze down there! Bloody fool!'

"No, you're the bloody fool!!" Pelayo shouted at Carsten as he ran through the man, after Marcial. "For once, you have among your kind one who can go through the veils of time and space, and you treat him as an idiot!"

Carsten had to run over the deserted and cold streets, along the river, carrying Marcial's coat on one hand as he looked for the boy. Finally he saw him, sitting on a bench looking over the Thames.

"Marcial, it's awfully cold out here. Come home. I'll throw the salad away and we will have some soup. Don't worry dear, the doctor will help you."

"I want my platypus back." The boy answered.

"Yes, of course. Once it's dry, you can have it and put it in its bed."

"I'm going back home. You did it on purpose."

"We're going home now, Marcial." Carsten answered firmly.

"No. I'm going to my own home. In Asturias. This is nothing for me. You think I'm crazy, only because

you're blind. You trust Jansen when he wants to replace you with another programmer. You want to close the deal with the Atomic Corp. people when they plan not to pay you, arguing that you have an insect in the program... no, wait, a bug they said and some legal issues about privacy. You're clever, but blind. You think that I'm crazy, but you can't judge me as you don't see what I see or hear."

"Marcial, I love you even if you need a lot of professional help. You need to see a doctor and he will help you. Don't you want to be able to read books and remember them?"

"You mixed the lettuces trying to teach me a lesson, didn't you? Don't you realise that I will be hearing their cries for a long time? That this I will not be able to forget?" He asked desperately.

"No, dear, I never wanted to hurt you. It was most stupid from me. We should see a professional and he or she will decide what's best." Carsten answered deciding to add hallucinations to the symptoms list.

"How can I get to Spain?"

"By plane, but it's too late to get one. Come home, sleep and tomorrow you will take one with your platypus." Carsten said, deciding to use Marcial's lapses to his advantage.

"I want to go home."

"Yes, dear. We go home now." Carsten shushed the trembling boy as he put the coat over his shoulders.

Very late at night -after nearly forcing him to take some onion soup and finish his dish- Carsten put Marcial in bed, kissing good bye his planned hot night, as the boy seemed to be very afraid about something. When he finally felt asleep, clutching the platypus -'so much for the thing staying out of the bedroom. Tomorrow, I'll throw it out' Carsten thought- the man changed into his night clothes and switched on the TV to relax himself. The midnight news had just started and he slid under the covers, next to his little elf, marvelling at how young he looked now. Carsten kissed him once more on the forehead and leant back over the pillows.

"This morning, the small community of Eastbrook - near Surrey- was shocked with the news of a horrid crime in their neighbourhood. John Elster, a well known farmer, confessed the local police the murder of his wife and two children two months ago, and later burying them in the family's orchard. The police has not informed further details about their assassination."

Carsten was petrified. 'It must be a coincidence' was all what he could think, while he looked at his sleeping companion.

"If I were you, idiot, I would take into account all what he has just told you." Pelayo said, before disappearing into thin air.

"How could he know the place and the details? An orchard is where you plant the bloody lettuce He got right the place, the facts and the modus. To guess one thing is pure luck; two things is a coincidence and three make an universal law." He mumbled more to himself than to the boy. "He made no sense at all, but he was right. What if he's right about Jansen and Atomic Corp?"

There was only one way to know it. To check the preliminary programs all over again, this time by himself and to order a full check on the other company's finances. The deal was too big and he had never trusted much in this website places -as Lycos had thought to many of his own people. Mountbatten himself would have to take a look at the proposal, regardless that Jansen had approved the deal. He had already invested 4.5 millions pounds in the development of the platforms and his greedy board was already breathing on his neck for giving so much credit to a small firm with a project for locating people using a social network.

\* \* \*

The Georgian gangster was still furious. On more month, and nothing had came up about his little angel's whereabouts, even if most of the people were very anxious to lay their hands on the promised money for any leads on Marcial disappearance. His right hand, the Gypsy, had tried with several of the boy's friends, but with the only exception of that policewoman, none of them knew a thing about the man. The stupid neighbour woman could only tell him that the boy had only called him "his friend," was very tall, over 6 feet and certainly looked like a foreigner, wearing good clothes and an air of superiority. According to the junkies always sitting in front of his small flat, the man didn't know about Pelayo and thought that it was the platypus or a seedy character, frightening the neighbourhood.

Slobodan decided to find a way to put the boy out of his mind. He needed to be calm as his new joint venture with some Colombians willing to transport some goods, using his network, from Vigo to the Costa del Sol, was proving to be challenging and problematic. The Colombians were convinced that he should be glad to have a 30% on the revenues and had threatened to force him to accept their terms.

No man, no matter how much money he had, would tell him how to run his business and how much he could charge. It was 40% or the Colombians should buy bags to bring their own ones home.

"Gypsy, tell Rodríguez that is 40% or he should go to France."

"OK, boss." answered the slim man.

"If he tries to shit us, he's dead." Slobodan sentenced.

"Boss, they're from Medellín."

"I'm from Gori. My people will take care of this. They're bored and need some practice. Looking after prostitutes isn't what they're used to do. Medellín people are out since a long time. They think they can live on their past glory."

"Should we not send them a message first? Perhaps they don't understand you well."

"I speak good Spanish. Call Fernández Hutton and ask him if he can see me in four days. I want to check our numbers with him around."

"Yes, boss. Anything else?"

"Dimitri is in charge of the girls now. He's good but getting older. He can guess what a man wants almost immediately. Let him run the clubs for two months and we'll see how he fares. He won't have troubles to count the bottles."

"It's unorthodox. The girls are used to have another woman to run them. They will not want a boy."

"Since when do we care what they want? Do they have a trade union now? Get rid of that old hag and put him in charge of the "57 Club" and the "Paradise". He will make those lazy cows work and certainly will not try to cheat me on the sales. He knows better."

"I almost forgot boss, the Canicas said that one of the Africans wants to speak with you. He says he might know the name of Marcial's boyfriend." The Gypsy informed, immediately regretting his mistake. The cross punch from Slobodan came with lightening speed and sprawled him on the floor.

"Marcial is mine alone!! Do you understand?" He shouted furiously from his standing position. "Mine!!"

"The man says he heard them speaking!!" The Gypsy added as he sat on the floor, rubbing his jaw and spitting some blood on the closed pub's floor. "He doesn't want money. He wants real papers, not fake."

"Bring him to me and he should better have something good because I'm not in the mood for idiots."

\* \* \*

In all his professional years, Carsten had never seen something like this. Unexplainable. It was a small mistake. Not even a full line in the protocol. So tiny that it was impossible to detect until the system

would be fully installed and running under serious pressure. Like a small crack, the size of a hair, in a frozen lake. Imperceptible but deadly. It was impossible that the people at Atomic Corp could have known about it. His own team had overlooked it and never realised of its existence despite the many tests they had run over it.

He had almost not seen it: Only because one of his shelves had misteriously crashed down, scattering all his papers and books around. Once he had piled up everything together again, he had been forced to read again the whole part and found the misplaced bracket.

He took his mobile out and dialled Gloria's number. "Get the incompetent in the charge of the Atomic Corp's project here!!" He shouted, more than ready to make some heads roll.

\* \* \*

In all the years since Didier had crossed the Sahara and the sea from Melilla, he never felt so much fear as he was standing in front of the infamous Mr. Slobodan or "the Georgian" as he was called. He gulped under the scrutinizing glare from the tall man, built like a tank, with "the eyes of a demon," -as his grandmother would have told- their grey colour mixed with yellow spots that gave him an eerie look.

"I have some information for you, Mr. Slobodan. It's about the boy who used to live in my same building."

"Speak before I lose my patience."

"First the price, sir." Didier announced with a clear voice. "I don't want money."

"No money? What then? A donkey?" Slobodan smirked, making the other two men in the room laugh.

"Papers. Real ones; not fakes."

"That could be expensive and perhaps it would be more easy for me to get the information out of you."

"I survived a civil war, sir. I come from Liberia. My whole family was killed when I was six and I crossed the great dessert on foot."

"All right."

"I want a Spanish wife till I get the legal residence. Nothing more."

"That could cost more than 15.000 Euros. It's too much."

"I know who took Marcial. I heard them speak when they were in front of my videogames stall."

"How could you? They only spoke English, according to every-body."

"I can speak English. The UN soldiers taught me. I went to the University in Monrovia. I have a master in Business Administration, sir."

"I see."

"Do I have your word?"

"Depends on what you have. Papers are very difficult to obtain because of the crisis and this kind of marriages are carefully monitored nowadays. The Russians overdid it in the past years."

"His name and company. He's rich."

"All right. I'll give you 7.000 Euros to marry a EU girl from the clubs."

"Make it 10.000. It's the minimum a Spanish would take."

Slobodan chuckled. "The information."

"After the wedding. It should give your contacts some incentive to arrange it fast."

\* \* \*

By the end of the working day there were many people unhappy at Z3 Solutions. First, four programmers had lost their jobs just because of a simple mistake, impossible to find and much less it could affect at all the process. They tried to justify themselves, but de Vries didn't want to hear them. When the Principal Developer had said that in the improbable case that it would give troubles, they could have easily written an update to fix it, Carsten exploded shouting: "we're not the damned Windows!", and the rest of the team was also fired.

Five people at the Human Resources Department were feeling miserable too as they would have to stay long to prepare the final settlement of wages.

Fred Jansen was furious as a perfect blow to Carsten had been so easily discovered.

Carsten de Vries rage knew no limits when the last idiot had informed him that this particular part of the program had been copied from the Atomic Corp. people, as they had specified that they wanted to include this. Immediately, he ordered to cease all negotiations and contacts with the company. From now on, his lawyers will speak with them and force them to pay back up to the last cent he had invested in this. And he will have to squeeze all the other departments if they were so happily coping and pasting from other software companies. His righteous fury made him overlook the small detail that Marcial had told him first about the problem.

"Carsten, it's very late. Do you want to come home with me?" Marcial only said to him, when it was more than 2 AM and the Dutchman's was still in his office, alone, checking other important projects. "You're tired, although you don't realise it. Tomorrow you can continue. You will see better if there's something amiss."

"What can you know about it? You can't even switch on your mobile without Gloria telling you it's the bloody green button!" He barked at the interruption, immediately regretting his action at the hurt look he saw in Marcial's eyes.

"Tired people make more mistakes than refreshed ones. Even an idiot like myself knows it." He answered sadly, "I'll go home now."

"No, wait Marcial. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to shout with you," Carsten quickly apologised as he took the boy by the arm and nearly forced him to sit on his lap. Even if he felt the stiffness in Marcial's back when his hand made a soothing movement, he buried his head in the slender man's shoulder. "This story could cost us more than five million pounds and a lot of headaches for me."

"I'm sorry for you." Marcial softly answered, carefully rubbing circles in the man's skull, soothing and easing the tensions away.

"Those dumb heads at the board will shout like crazy tomorrow and they will be right. I totally hate it. What if there are more of these silly mistakes around?" He asked more to himself than for the boy, revelling on the soft touches.

"Trust Southwood and Peter. He's loyal to you. You should also learn to look more into people's hearts than in their words. Those can be deceitful, as Pelayo told me once."

"Marcial, you're not making any sense at all."

"There are many more things than your reason can justify or understand, Carsten. You just don't know it

yet." The boy dejectedly shrugged.

"You're not saving yourself from that visit to the doctor. In fact, I'll take you myself on Wednesday."

\* \* \*

Didier stood in front of the civil registry, almost regretting to have asked for so little as the gangster had gotten him a Portuguese wife and a date to present his papers in less than a week. It certainly meant that the man was desperate to get the young boy back. Marcial had always been a good friend and according to Ngema, he was a decent fellow. His family's demon should be able to look after him if the Georgian would try to do anything bad to him. He remembered the story his grandmother had told him once about a demon who used to protect the neighbour family and how he had literally tore into pieces the men who had tried to kill one of their women.

Marcial was in good hands as the demon was very protective of him.

It was the gangster's problem to mess around with one, even if the boy had clearly told him about it.

"His name is Carsten de Vries. He owns a company, Z3 Solutions, they made the game "Ghouls Wars" and he lives in London." Didier said, fulfilling his part of the deal, after the Gypsy gave him the money.

"Good. Hope the boss is happy with that because if not, he will make a purse out of your skin. Chocolate seems to be the latest trend."

## Chapter 12

Marcial was doing his best to avoid Carsten at work for the past week as the man had been serious about taking him to the doctor's. By sheer luck, Carsten had to cancel the first date due to an unexpected trouble that forced him to fly to Bombay for a whole week.

Bored and feeling like a fish out of the water without the Dutch, the boy felt very lonely, doing his tasks mechanically and sitting miserably at his desk in Gloria's office for two days. Finally, she had enough of him and decided to send him to distribute some memos for the different departments, hoping he wouldn't get lost in the building or Carl Smithers will retrieve him.

After explaining several times the young boy where he should go and what he should deliver, she crossed her fingers and called the security guard at the entrance to stop the lad, if he, for some reason,

wanted to leave the building.

Nevertheless, Marcial managed to distribute the reports only upsetting the JE22 team when he affirmed that the elf with the blue uniform was too old looking to be one. The only thing that prevented the mob from publicly lynching him was the fact that he was "Darth Vader's boyfriend," according to one skinny, mousy looking programmer. The phrase provoked a thunderous laughter in the room, under the astonished glance from Marcial, completely lost at the joke.

"No, I live with Dr. de Vries. I don't know Mr. Vader." He quickly clarified before the mistake would create him troubles with Carsten, having completely forgotten what he had said before.

"He's more empty headed than a dove," One of the men chuckled.

"Doves are cleverer than you since they don't loose the food from their beaks like you do." Marcial softly replied, pointing a dark spot on the man's gaudy tie.

All laughter ceased and another programmer interfered before they all would get in troubles with the boss' boyfriend. It was already bad that the boy had heard De Vries' nickname and he would probably tell him later. "Leave it, Martin. It's just not worth it." He advised his colleague and then looked at Marcial, "is there anything else you might need?"

"No, thank you. Gloria says you should all read it even if it's written in paper."

"Bye, bye." The programmer dismissed the boy, shaking his fingers in a mock gesture, before a new ruckus would start again.

"Good bye." Marcial replied taking his folders away. Now he only needed to pass by Dr. Lisa Mun's desk at the 13th floor.

\* \* \*

Her office was one of the most colourful Marcial had seen so far at the company. Fully decorated with dolls in mini skirts and pigtails, a relaxing light blue shade on the walls and a huge fern and an orchid at her window overlooking the other skyscrapers. In Marcial's opinion, the plants and the dolls were removing the dull and sterile ambience of the building.

Behind the desk and the huge flat screen, was a young woman in her mid twenties, dressed very informally and totally engulfed in her work. After saying "hello" several times and without getting an answer at all, Marcial chose to leave the memo over the desk's wooden surface.

"Your fern is about to die. You should water it and put it away from the radiator." Marcial said louder.

"What?" She jumped surprised to see someone at her office. She suppressed a sigh as she saw the boy, realising that it was her time to bear with her boss' lover.

"Your fern. It doesn't look healthy." Marcial pressed.

"It doesn't matter. Maintenance people will change it when it's dead."

"I could take care of it and return it when it's looking better." Marcial suggested glad to be helpful.

"Don't bother. I would get another the minute this one is away and then I would have two of them when I dislike them. This one loses leaves permanently."

"That's because it's sick. Why don't you like it?"

The young woman suppressed a sigh as the boy was looking totally decided to start a chat and after all, throwing him out of the office was a bad idea since he had saved Mountbatten's job by telling de Vries that he was "a good and decent man, unlike others you have around" in the middle of a room full of people. De Vries exploded at the boy in his usual charming way with a "mind your own business!!" but Mountbatten was still there, against all odds.

"This plant loses leaves, gathers dust, spills water when you water it and finally I never asked for it; just appeared in my office one day, to replace the other. Finally, I don't like plants or animals."

"You have a nice doll collection here." Marcial commented, looking at the shelf full with more than 12 Sailor Moon figures. "They look like fairies, but modern."

"Those are Sailor Moon action figures, not dolls!!" She corrected immediately. "Look, take the fern and do whatever you want with it."

"But you will have no plant any longer."

"I've just said I don't like plants!" She said exasperated. "And I will get a new one tomorrow whether I like it or not!"

"Sorry. I keep doing it. I'll leave you to your work." Marcial quickly said, a little afraid at her outburst because she was looking like a kind person when he had seen her for the first time.

"Do what?"

"Forgetting what you have said. Sorry. I'll take the fern and return it in a week, if I'm successful."

"Wait, sorry. I should have not shouted with you. I'm Lisa Mun and what was your name?"

"Marcial Fernández Martínez. Are the dolls relatives of yours?"

"Pardon me??"

"Sailor Moon dolls...It's the same last name."

"No, that's M-O-O-N and I'm M-U-N." She spelled very carefully, remembering the lecture her team had got from the Personnel Office on "how to treat those 'special persons' we have around now." "They are not fairies, they are from a manga I like a lot. They are warrior girls. Don't you know them?"

"No, and I'm glad they're not fairies. Those can be real brats."

"No, my ones are from a comic, the Bratz are for little girls."

"We sold many of them last Christmas.... and you have Spanish porcelain dolls too!" Marcial shouted ecstatic when he saw the two large figures, standing in a high shelf.

"Dr. de Vries gave them to me in Christmas. He was happy about my work and thought I would like them. I think he bought them in Madrid."

"We used to sell many of them for the tourists at El Corte Inglés -It's like Harrod's, you know?- All right, you must be busy."

"Don't forget your fern!" She called him back, regretting her poor choice of words... it was like telling a blind 'look this'.

"Thank you. Do you want to have lunch with me? It's the least I can do for you. You just gave me your plant."

"All right, but I'll pick you at your office, not that you forget it and I hate to be stood up by hot looking guys." Her tongue said before she could bite it.

Marcial smiled. "I like also your style and clothes. Very different from all the tailored suits you see around here. My grandmother knew how to make lace and it was a lot of work. Pity nobody was buying it any longer. Is it fashionable now?" He finished his story, obtrusively inspecting her short bell shaped light blue dress, profusely adorned with laces and ribbons, but not so many as the outfit could be placed in the meringue category.

"Thank you, I ordered it from Japan. Here you can find nice things in Portobello, but the best designers are there."

"You look like your dolls. Really nice."

Lisa was shocked. Normally people were not able to fully appreciate her carefully chosen Elegant Lolita Style. She had to moderate it for work, forgoing of hats and bows and lengthening the skirts to avoid the perverts at the office throw pencils every time she had to pass by their desks. First, she thought it was a cruel joke, but the blond was smiling at her earnestly. 'Well, maybe he's an idiot but the boy has taste.'

"Thanks again. I'll pick you up at 13:00."

"OK. See you." He answered, smiling at her while picking up the shabby greyish plant.

\* \* \*

Gloria was more than surprised to see Dr. Mun standing at her door- a well know social hermit- asking Marcial for lunch. The lad seemed to hesitate for a second but the young lady clearly reminded him of his promise of buying lunch for her. 'At least, I know who's responsible for giving the lad that hideous thing.' "Marcial, be back at 2 as you have to finish the copies for Dr. Bankar."

"Yes, Mrs. Lovett." The boy answered dutifully as he took his jacket and went away with the strange looking woman.

The old secretary was determined to avoid problems and since her boss was in Bombay, Marcial was her responsibility. Most of the employees had quickly understood that the young Spaniard was off limits for them, but this woman not. The boy was very good-looking and perhaps she was so fool as to miss the nature of his relationship with their employer.

"Mr. Smithers? Yes, it's Gloria. Could you take a look on Marcial? He's going out with Dr. Mun and I fear he would lose his way back." she spoke over the phone. "Yes, that's right. Dr. de Vries has not approved it. Good bye."

\* \* \*

The sun was showing his face that late March afternoon, glistening on the Thames surface as Marcial and Lisa were eating hot dogs like two teenagers. First, the boy had been shocked when the obviously educated girl-woman decided to buy something at a stall, telling him that "Peter has the best hot dogs around here. The crispy onion is superb." He was half expecting that she would want to go to a restaurant like Carsten always seemed to favour or the Mc. Donald's, but she chose to order lunch from an kind looking old man.

"Your turn, dummy." She laughed after he stared at her when she stood in front of the stall, unmoving and holding her hot dog. "It's on you." She clarified.

After a quick check on his clothes, he asked: "Do I have something on me?"

"The tab is on you! You pay!!" She laughed. "Do you even have money?"

"Sorry, I forgot." Marcial replied embarrassed at his slip. This was why people didn't like to hang around with him. Only Paco and Lucho who couldn't tell morning from night.

"Don't worry. I can help you with the coins. It's a mess here, they always make things complicate no matter if they have the decimal system now.

"Two shillings and six pence, sir." The vendor proudly said, determined to make fun of the American standing in front of him, picking up the queue from the young lady.

"A half crown? Is is not too cheap? You need at least 8 half crowns to make a pound. All right, I will not tell you how to run your business, sir. Here you are. You can keep the change. I don't think I could get any florins here."

"It's 9 pounds and 45 pees!!" The man energetically protested.

"But you just said two shillings and six pence!" Marcial replied.

"Do all idiots come from America?"

"No, I come from Spain and I'm not an idiot. I just paid you the money you wanted. Do you want to call the police? They can sort this mess out."

"Peter, leave it. Here you're. Spanish people have no sense of humour." Lisa intervened before Marcial could call the policewoman standing on the opposite corner. She opened her purse and gave the man a 10 pounds note with a slurred "keep the change."

"Why are you giving him more money?"

"You drop it too. We all made a mistake. OK?" Lisa half shouted.

"All right, but my former boss would have strangled me if I would have made such a mistake with the money, not to mention that he would have deducted the missing money from my salary." Marcial explained, hoping she would understand his point.

"You're not so stupid as everybody says in the office."

"I'm not retarded. I'm slow and forget many things. I need more time than the others to process, but once I get it, I don't make a mistake." Marcial seriously clarified. "You all think you're so clever back in the office that you never look over the small details. You all are so full of self confidence, and that finally kills the mind, because you never stop to check the protocols you operate under."

"OK, don't get so worked up. It was a joke. Brits love to do it. Sorry, It was my fault.

"I reacted too much. Sorry. I know I'm not clever, but sometimes I'm sick of hearing people laughing at me. It's hard, you know?"

"More than you could imagine." She softly answered, remembering her school companions laughing at her because she loved computers and didn't look normal like the other girls, going to parties and having lots of boyfriends around. "Do you want to sit in that bench over there? Looks fine."

"Great."

"I went to the MIT and after my graduation I got a job here, at Z3 Solutions. Carsten is a real genius, even if sometimes he can be very nasty to people. Once, I was totally stuck on a program and my boss at the time couldn't help me at all. I looked for help everywhere and nobody couldn't find the problem. I even phoned one guy from Australia, but it was a waste of time. Carsten saw me working very late, almost to the point of tears and asked me what was the problem. In less than half an hour he found what was wrong and fixed it. He can dominate several languages and is very creative. You could tell that he understands the machines as if they were a living thing."

"He likes a lot computers and wants to get me one, but it's useless. What would I do with it?"

"Perhaps you could play something or read. There are hundreds of things you can do. Open a Facebook account or chat with your friends."

"I don't think Paco and Lucho have a Facebook account and for chatting you should write well and they're more spell challenged than I."

"Do you have any friends here?"

"No; people at the office don't like me much. I'm not like them and I don't get most of the jokes. Plus, I'm the boss' boyfriend and that keeps people away. I try not to rub it, but whenever somebody sees me at the office, the first thing that crosses their mind is that I'm the moron who fucks with the boss. They don't say it, of course, but I'm considered as a "special person." He said bitterly, drawing the quotation marks on the air.

"Look, about what happened at the office...."

"It's all right. I should have never taken this job, but Carsten was so determined to get me in. I should look for something else."

"Don't do it because of the idiots around here. They all laugh at everything. Like children. It's always the same with the new guy. You have to put your best face, till your replacement arrives."

"Who's he?"

"I don't know, the slave auction is not open so far." She chuckled, taking a big bite of her hot dog.

"Were slaves not forbidden?"

"It's how we call the students making an internship. Slaves. They have to cater every whim we may have and satisfy our darkest desires."

"I see."

"Two weeks more and the fresh blood will be in. I get one this year. Some dork from Leicester University."

"Does Carsten get one?"

"The Supreme Lord? No, he hates to have students around."

"Good," Marcial grunted firmly, thinking that he wouldn't like to have to share the bedroom with some clever high tech boy. 'Who knows, maybe he likes my side of the bed too and I'm out in less than two hours.'

"He has enough with me. We don't need to have another one around." He affirmed.

"I'm glad to get one. Will be very helpful. There are many things I want to try, but I need someone to cover my ass with the clients."

"I understand." Marcial told her softly, remembering that Slobodan never let the girls to switch places as it was bad for the clients; they always should get what they wanted, if they could afford it. But what kind of company was this? Getting young people as slaves to satisfy the employees? This was too much for his taste. He should get a job in a decent place as soon as possible, no matter if Carsten would be upset with him.

"We should go back. I have to finish something and Gloria said that you had to be there at 2."

"Yes, of course. Does Gloria also get a student?"

"No, why would she? She's just a secretary. Only software developers."

"That's good to know." Marcial answered Lisa, thinking that at least his office would be a safe place if the software developers were on their mating season. Truly, they looked uglier than a trasgu. Good, Carsten was not one of them.

\* \* \*

Mountbatten was surprised to get an invitation for dinner from de Vries himself. Two thoughts flashed through his mind: New firing method or he wants something from me. The "ask Southwood to come along too," was a real shock

"Yes, thank you Carsten." The middle aged man answered, wondering why his boyfriend was invited too.

Strange, very strange, indeed.

\* \* \*

"I had no idea that you knew how to set a formal table. Carsten commented when he saw his dinning table perfectly organised for the dinner. ? was going to ask Jelle to do it, but you have done well.

"Jelle feels sick tonight. He explained me what to do." Marcial answered, still feeling a little guilty because Pelayo had outdone himself this time with the poor butler, by stealing the broomstick on more than five occasions, as he was upset because Jelle had burnt myrrh on the flat, casting him out with the hideous smell for the whole afternoon. 'I could have caught my death out there! It was so cold!' The trasgu whined and pouted for a full hour.

"Good riddance. I want my peace and you should get changed. Wear that light blue jersey that I like so much in you."

Marcial quickly obeyed, making feel proud of his little elf. After all, he had visited the doctor, under protest, and was doing all the tests they had imposed on him without many complaints. If that woman could fix his memory, everything would be perfect.

The bell rang and there were Southwood and Mountbatten, informally dressed and for the hundredth time, Carsten wondered why those two, living together since seven years never passed the stage of telling that they were sharing the flat. "Room-mates like two poor students."

"Peter, Clive, nice to see you." He greeted them. "Tonight we will have to help ourselves because the service is away."

"I was wondering how long it would take for you to fire somebody. It's been a month and a half." Clive Southwood joked, while Peter blanched at the sentence.

"No, not such luck. The man was feeling under the weather, but Marcial knows what to do. He's much better than I for such things."

"Jones was right. The boy is good to have around if he can save us from eating burned French Cuisine."

"Exactly, but we lost our excuse to drink the whole cellar now, Clive." Carsten almost smiled.

"I'm sure we can come up with another. Hey, boy, there you are!"

"Good afternoon, Colonel Southwood, Mr. Mountbatten.

"My boy, we're not at the office. Call me Clive, please." He laughed as Marcial softly smiled.

"Call me Peter too." Mountbatten blurted out as he shyly opened his mouth for the first time, still afraid to make another mistake.

"Thank you. If you'd excuse me, I'll start with the dinner." Marcial mumbled quickly dashing for the kitchen.

"Is he always so shy?" Clive asked Carsten.

"Most of the time. He's nervous around people. He's afraid to screw it up with these lapses he has. Contrary to my first impression, connecting with people takes some time for him. He never speaks unless he's spoken to. I'm confident the doctor will make it better."

"It's not so bad. It depends on the day. If he's stressed or nervous, it's worse, but when he's relaxed, he's a sensible fellow." Peter said as he took a glass of red wine from Carsten's hands. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you like him better now because he thinks you're totally loyal to the company."

"Carsten, about that time in Madrid, I wasn't thinking straight and I didn't know him...."

"It's all forgotten. It wasn't that bad. I overreacted. A clear case of bad timing." Carsten shrugged. "Let's don't speak about the office or I will think that you're planning to force me to assist to the directory meeting I escaped last week."

"One second, and I'll get my PDA," Peter chuckled, hugely relieved that his boss had decided to let the offence go.

"Don't you dare, Peter. This wine can't be ruined with one of your long and tedious Power Point moments." Clive half seriously warned him.

"I like to leave things clearly explained. I'm not tedious."

"No, tedious is too much. Plumbeous." Carsten laughed. "But it's good to have them. We nearly screw it up big time with Atomic Corp. I don't think it would have happened if you would have checked the project." Both guests were overwhelmed at the compliment.

"Thanks," Peter mumbled. "We said no office."

"That's right. No office."

"I have served the first course." Marcial announced.

"All right, time to charge. Do you want to lead, Clive?"

"No, I'm retired. I leave it to the younger generations."

All the men sat at the table, Marcial and Carsten together on one side as the other two took the opposite side.

"By the way, Clive, do you still collect swords?" Carsten asked.

"Yes, always. My passion."

"Yes, the flat looks like the Royal Armoury." Peter mumbled.

"I wanted to ask you where do you buy a stand for one of them? Marcial brought one from Madrid."

"Really? What kind of sword? I would have never thought you liked them."

"Belongs to my friend Pelayo. He asked me to take care of it."

"It must be one of those fantasy swords. Looks like something from the Lord of the Rings." Carsten clarified while he took a long sip from his red wine.

"Hopeless idiot!!" Pelayo shouted from the door as he had heard his name.

"No, no, Carsten. I've told you it's a Visigoth sword from the VIII century."

"Yes, it's a wonderful replica. Very nicely achieved." Carsten explained to Clive as a matter of fact as the man nodded.

"It's not a replica, Carsten. Replicas can't cut like this one. Pelayo takes great pride on his sword. It took a lot of work to create it and only highly born noblemen could have one like that."

"Marcial, Visigothic swords are almost unknown. There are some examples in Spain, but nothing more. All what we know about them, comes from diggings. I don't know much about them as I prefer Japanese models." Clive said very gently, hoping to get the boy out of his mistake.

"Another idiot, who can't appreciate true quality." Pelayo shrugged.

"But I will be delighted to see it, if you want to show it to me, of course." Clive continued with a gentle voice. Marcial seemed to look at the entrance for a brief second before he gave his answer as the trasgu shrugged.

"Yes, no problem, but you should not touch the blade." Marcial intoned as politely as he could, unwilling to offend the old soldier.

"Of course, it ruins the sword. I only want to check how accurately they have made it."

"At least this one knows a basic rule." Pelayo mumbled

"I was in the Household Cavalry Regiment and we still carry them. It's not all about tanks despite people believe we're a part of Royal Armoured Corps. Don't be concerned, I'll be most careful."

"It will be my pleasure to show it to you."

\* \* \*

"It's truly a wonderful piece. The person who made it took a lot of effort. It's amazingly very well balanced, although I'm surprised of the size. Normally, swords of this period are no longer than 80 cm, but this one is a metre long." Clive said admiring the sword, under the pleased face of the trasgu.

"It's a mix of Visigoth and Lombard design, that's why it's longer, and Pelayo is very tall too. Like Carsten."

"That's the German blood in all Visigoths." Clive chuckled. "It's amazing the sharpness of this blade. I don't know much about them, but I imagine that the originals might have been similar to this one. I remember now that the Victoria and Albert bought many years ago a Viking sword of this time from a private collector and it costed millions. But the originals are quite destroyed and this one looks perfectly new."

"He's Astur. If you take care of it, it shouldn't be ruined. You have to sharpen it every night."

"Yes, in theory. Pity the original owners died and they were buried with them, and if the sword was kept, the later generation would change for another model, more appropriate for their times. Warfare evolves. This type was used for combat with one hand and it has almost no protection."

"Yes, that's true."

"Whoever did it, made an incredible job. Do you say they followed the original process?"

"Yes, the iron was 33 times folded, like our saviour's age."

"That puts it almost on the top of the Katana's top list. Only the great masters could achieve such perfection, but this art is almost forgotten."

"According to Pelayo, the secret lies in the tempo when you hammer it, that's why the prayers help a lot, besides blessing the blade so it can do our Lord's bidding."

"The prayers?"

"Yes, without them, the blacksmith can lose the rhythm and smash too hard and break it, but Pelayo said that the original prayers have been lost over the centuries and it's a pity they don't use Latin any more."

"Are you telling me that a countryman can speak Latin? Please, Marcial." Carsten said in total disbelief.

"I can do it too. He taught me. He said I needed to learn it to force my brain to have more order in my thinking, and it really does."

"Pity we can't check it."

"Peter learned in school." Southwood suggested. "Fancy place."

"And Peter is getting sleepy, Clive. It's almost 12."

"All right, princess, we go home."

"Thank you, oh gentle knight. I drive because you could set a forest on fire with your breath."

"I always wanted to be a dragon." The older man snickered. "See you tomorrow Carsten. Good night Marcial, I'll send you an e-mail with the address."

"Thank you for coming." Carsten intoned accompanying the men to the door. "Connelly can drive you home, if you want."

"No, thank you. I suffice myself to toss his drunken derrière to bed." Peter said. "I have lots of experience on the subject." He added.

"Someone has to boost our country's economy."

"Yes, by visiting every pub on the road home after work."

Carsten accompanied both men to their car and after the final greeting he returned to his building, waving his head to the doorman, surprised to be acknowledged by the tall foreigner who never said anything more than a few words whenever he needed something. A "true boiled egg" according to his butler.

The Dutchman was surprised to find the dinning table cleared from dishes and glasses and Marcial in the kitchen, organizing the dishwasher. He put his arms around his waist and buried his chin on the boy's neck, deeply inhaling his slightly scented apples body.

"Leave that for Jelle. He's quite lazy as he's. You don't have to do his work."

"Better put the expensive china by ourselves away. He can put it back in the cabinets tomorrow." Marcial smiled, thinking that Pelayo would be back soon and willing to wash the dishes and those crystal glasses were very delicate to be trusted to a trasgu. Doing his best to finish the work with Carsten glued to his back, probed to be a challenging task.

"Hey, just one minute more. I'm practically done" He protested feebly.

"I'm being romantic, you know I can't keep my hands off if you wear light blue, and you trade me for a set of dirty dishes."

"You'll thank me tomorrow."

"Let's go to bed, shall we?" Carsten asked with his eyes shinning mischievously.

"Two things more and I'm finished." Marcial said

"That's too long." Carsten pouted as he backed off.

"Finished!" Marcial merrily announced when he placed the last dish inside, when Carsten unexpectedly jumped to him, devouring his mouth with his kisses and nearly tearing his clothes off.

Short of breath, they both landed on the bed as the boy was enthousias-tically responding Carsten's sloppy kisses, his heart filled with joy as the man was truly enjoying the moment. Marcial wanted to hear

him groaning when he would penetrate him and be driven mad of pleasure.

The remaining clothes were quickly discarded and Carsten mounted his love making his back arch with the painful pleasure he was desiring to receive from his lover. Their movements were synchronized and their union felt perfect for both of them as they reached their pleasure in unison.

"I love you so much. Carsten panted, unable to believe how good it had been for him, his eyes lost in Marcial's ones.

"I also like you a lot. You're very kind to me." Marcial mumbled half asleep, so tired he was.

For the first time in his life, that answer wasn't good enough for Carsten.

## **Chapter 13**

In many her many years of practice, Dr. Meredith Blake, never had encountered a case so interesting and challenging as this young man, labelled by the Spanish doctors as a clear case of anterograde amnesia. Nevertheless, his symptoms were not at all of a patient with that condition. A person suffering from it would have been unable to form a memory beyond two minutes after learning or sharing an experience. This boy's memory mechanisms were partially affected, as his episodic memory seemed to be working fine as he clearly could remember what he had done in the previous days or the people he had met. He was listing all his friends and neighbours. There was no evidence of a lexical memory impairment and his poor language skills were more probably the result of a substandard education.

The problem seemed to be only at his semantic memory level when he couldn't remember what he had read or saw in a TV program after two hours. However, some amount of semantic information had actually managed to seep into Marcial's long-term memory, suggesting that his brain might have been struggling to find alternate pathways with a certain degree of success, as he could accurately tell a list of Spanish Kings from the IX and X century, even identifying from which kingdom they were from. His procedural memory also seemed to work well and he could learn a new task very quickly and easily performed it, when one of the nurses showed him how to knit.

After her first interviews with the patient, she was convinced that it was more a case for the psychiatrist or that he was a fraud for the Spanish Welfare System. His lapses could be more the product of a deep traumatic experience than a neurological case. She was convinced that he was a mental patient.

Till she saw his brain's scan results showing a slight hippocampal injury and the electroencephalogram a

dysrhythmia.

Facing the Dutch who was paying the bill was a hard moment every time she had to do it. The man was completely unreasonable as he demanded "results" from her. 'As if one pill could mend what is destroyed beyond repair,' Dr. Blake thought bitterly as she asked her secretary to show the man in.

Carsten entered in her office, still upset because after a two full weeks of extensive and pervasive tests on Marcial, the only answer he was getting from her was "it's a very complex case, Dr. de Vries"

'Typical answer from the incompetent who can't admit they're such! Is she supposed to be an eminence in her field?? I highly doubt it.' Carsten thought, hardly refraining himself from drumming his fingers on the polished table in a sign of impatience.

"My colleagues and I have been discussing Mr. Fernández Mar-tínez case lengthy."

"And your conclusions are...?"

"We have established that he presents some damage to the left hippocampus along with a dysrhythmia. I will medicate the later as the first one is a permanent condition. I agree with the Spanish doctors that he suffers from anterograde amnesia, but in a mild form."

"His memory will not be restored?"

"The neurobiology of the memory is still not fully understood. In the last decades we have made enormous progress and Mr. Fernández is a very interesting case as, although there's a certain damage, his brain has found the way to overcome what hypothetically could be a serious impairment. Neurons are able to learn new ways to transmit the information and perhaps this is why only his semantic memory is partly affected."

"I see."

"I have noticed that Marcial -you don't mind if I call him like that, do you?- has develop on his own many, let's call them, survival strategies. He's permanently observing you. I'm convinced that although he does not fully understand the meaning of some words, he's able to read the many imperceptible gestures we make while speaking and we're unaware of. He always seems to know what the person needs in advance, because his level of attention is surprisingly high. He can interact with the rest of the world much better than any other patient with this condition, that I've ever seen in my career. If you allow the comparison, like a dog understand his master's wishes, not because of the words but because it can read your intentions in your voice and body language. This is why he's unable to understand double

meaning phrases or sarcasm."

"Is there something you can do?"

"If you think I can prescribe a pill so he becomes a normal person, the answer is no. I will medicate him for his dysrhythmia and give him some B12 vitamins in addition, but you must rest assured that we have discarded any type of degenerative disease or tumour. I will also recommend some therapy for him to reinforce his confidence."

"His main mental problem is not his self confidence." Carsten huffed. "I'm more concerned about his hallucinations and the fact that sometimes he acts like a total moron."

"His IQ levels are above those of a normal person. His logic and mathematical thinking is perfect. He's afraid to react or speak because he has no possible way to be sure what is going on as he might forget what was being said. He needs to have a routine, being in familiar places and repeat the new tasks several times before he has enough confidence in himself as to perform them alone. His Spanish friend, Pedro, realised this and helped him."

"The name is Pelayo and this is what I mean by hallucinations, Dr. Blake."

"I would like to speak with him as perhaps he could enlighten me some more about Marcial's past."

"I wish you the best of luck, Madam, when you try to find a ghost."

"I beg you pardon?"

"Perhaps the Australian Embassy could assist you. There have been dramatic advances in the field of Ethology."

"I don't follow you quite well, sir."

"Didn't you notice that this Pelayo had four legs, a beak and a thick skin so it doesn't get cold while swimming? Or is it that in Medical School they don't teach any longer the difference between humans and animals?"

"What?"

"Pelayo is the stuffed platypus Marcial carries around. I can live with his forgetfulness, but I'm sick of sharing my flat with this thing. Yesterday, he bathed and perfumed it, changing its bedclothes too."

"But he always spoke of his childhood friend Pelayo, they were together in this institution and later sharing a flat!!"

"Don't you think that I'm the most interested person in meeting him so he could give me a clue about Marcial's condition? Two different private detectives found out that there was nobody with that name ever living with Marcial. All his neighbours tell that he's an imaginary friend. This is called paranoid schizophrenia in my book!"

"He never said anything like that!"

"Were you not curious about why a 22 year old still carries a toy?"

"He does not carry a toy!"

"Look in the god-damn satchel he has!"

Dr. Blake couldn't believe her ears and she decided to call Marcial to her office. After a tense wait, in which both doctors did not exchange any words, her secretary announced Marcial. The boy sat next to Carsten after politely greeting both of them, flashing a soft smile.

"Marcial, could you be a dear and show me your bag?" She asked as she cleared her throat.

"Of course." Marcial answered, opening the satchel and getting the dark brown pet out under the doctor's astonished look. "I have my Platypus. My mother gave it to me."

"I see, you never told me about it." She said nervously, under Carsten's scornful looks and the derogative smile hanging from his lips. "You always spoke about this friend of yours Pelayo and the talks you had with him. Do you speak with this animal too?"

"This is a toy! You can't speak with them!"

"MARCIAL! You boiled an egg for it last night!" Carsten howled under the doctor's disapproving glance.

"Yes, Pelayo was hungry. Sushi is not his thing."

"If you cook for it, then you also speak with it. I've heard you!"

"Yes, I speak with Pelayo, not with the platypus! I'm not crazy!"

"There's nobody else in our flat beside us! This Pelayo, if he exists, stayed in Madrid!!" Carsten roared.

"No, he came with us! In the car!"

"There's no other human being living in my flat besides you!"

"He's not human. He's a trasgu. I told you about him many times before. He does his best to behave at your house and he's very happy to stay with you. You should not touch his sword so much."

"What??? Do you admit that you speak with another man in my own house? You little whore!"

"Silence, Dr. de Vries! Marcial, this is very important. If he's not human, what is this Pelayo then?"

"A trasgu, I've told you countless times! It's like a demon but a good one... Well, most of the time. He's with me since the car crash. He helps me to live my life."

"Could you tell me something more about him? She asked in a very gentle tone, contrasting with the sharp: "be quiet de Vries!" that came next.

"He was a warrior, a knight, in the King's Rodrigo court and was named Pelayo. I don't know when he was born, but he told me he was advisor at the Visigothic court. He took part of the Spanish Reconquista under Lugan's orders and made the mistake of killing some Moors in an Ancient temple. The goddess, Diana, turned him and all his men, the 40 of them, into trasgus -some kind of demons forced to clean like ladies, take care of the children and the forests- till they would have atoned for their insult to her. She also mutilated their left hands and turned them into dark skinned creatures. Pelayo says that she might have been a goddess but she was a woman as well."

"Why do you carry the toy if it's only that?"

"It's his vessel. Being in the material world is tiresome for him and if he goes into the platypus, he can rest. He eats a lot too since he's here. When I saw him for the first time, he asked me what I liked the most and I said that it was the platypus my mother had given to me, and since that day, he lives there."

"Is he with us now?"

"No, he disappeared after tea time. He will be back for dinner. He rarely misses it." Marcial explained.

"All right, dear. I would like that you meet my friend, Dr. Lucy Carruthers, tomorrow morning and she

will help me with your medication.”

“I will not see a psychiatrist.” Marcial answered sweetly. “I already did when I was in the institution and they filled me with drugs, telling me that they would make Pelayo go away, but never happened. I will not take them and you can't force me.”

“Darling, it's for the best and she's not a psychiatrist. She's a good friend and will help you to improve your memory.”

“I don't want to improve my memory. I can get a job whenever I need one and if there's something I need to learn, Pelayo explains it to me. He did his best in school for me. Carsten wants to change me, but I don't want it. If he would love me as he says, he would accept me as I'm. Pelayo has accepted him just as he's.”

“Marcial, you're very sick even if you don't realise it. Let the doctor help you. It will be painless and you will feel much better.” Carsten sighed, still processing his findings.

“No. Slobodan knew about the trasgu and didn't like him because he was against him, but he never criticized me for having Pelayo around. He was not jealous of him, like you're. I'm not crazy as you think. I forget things, but it doesn't mean I'm a nuts case. Reading a book is not worthy of spending the rest of your life like a zombie under drugs. You had your answer of what was wrong with my brain. I had enough of all this and I'm going home.”

“You will get lost in the tube, boy,” Carsten smirked, already feeling his fury rise at the mention of the other man's name or being compared with him.

“I'm going back to Spain, to Asturias, from where I should have never left. You paid me 3 months salary. Should be enough as to buy a ticket.”

“Train, bus, ship or plane? Do you even know how to get there?” Carsten asked, feigning to be interested.

“I will ask around and Pelayo will help me. Good bye.”

“Right. Do as you like. Have a nice trip.” The Dutch said to the retreating form of Marcial. Contrary to his normal behaviour, he slammed the door when he left the room.

The doctor was more than furious at the arrogant and insensitive man sitting in front of her. “You can't let him go like this!! He's sick for Christ sake! This is criminal! He could get lost!” She finally exploded, letting all her frustration pour.

"Don't worry, Dr. Blake. I live with him since three months. Besides the Pelayo character was not here, as Marcial told us, so he will not come with stories later." Carsten snorted at a very shocked with his answer doctor while he took his mobile out of his breast pocket. "Connelly, when Marcial leaves the building, tell him that you need his advise to buy some apple cake for me. Take him for a ride; 15 minutes would be enough." Carsten ordered nonchalantly, flipping his mobile off. "When my chauffeur asks him to accompany him to the next bakery, he will not be able to resist his desire to be helpful and will comply. Twenty minutes later, he would have forgotten all what we have said today as he quickly dismisses any kind of traumatic experience. Fighting is useless as he's stubborn as an old mule."

"I will schedule a visit with Dr. Carruthers for tomorrow. Her schedule is very tight, but I think she could make an exception for you."

"Don't bother. I have my doubts about this institution's performance if you couldn't realise that you had a schizophrenic patient sitting in front of you for two weeks. At least, I know that there's indeed a real damage that can't be cured; that I have a half demon living in my flat and eating at my expenses; and that he doesn't want to take drugs. It's just a matter of finding a way so we all can live together."

"This man needs treatment!"

"And he will get it, but somewhere else. Not here. Send his medical records to my secretary. She will contact your office tomorrow."

"Dr. de Vries, if something happens to him, I will make you personally responsible for it! Now, he has a kind imaginary friend, but what if he starts to have self destructive feelings?"

"We'll fix it like they did in the Middle Ages; with a good and sound exorcism to cast the demon out." Carsten explained seriously.

## **Chapter 14**

Carsten was unable to about his next course of action. Obviously his little elf needed a doctor and a good one, unlike that idiot who couldn't realise that something was very wrong with him.

'On the bright side, I don't have to worry any more that a Spanish punk will snatch my love away. Imagine, he's a bloody goblin!' The man turned around in the bed to see his love deeply asleep, all the previous discussion forgotten and happy to have had apple cake for dinner. 'Like a little child, but I love

him exactly as he's, minus the platypus. That blasted thing is driving me crazy!' He bent over the small form cuddled like a ball, to caress his blond bangs spread over the pillow. 'He's so beautiful and unique that I can't lose him. If he would only love me just as I do.'

'But, can he love me at all? I don't know any longer. I thought he did when he came here, but now I know that he's only being polite to me. He only likes me and before it would have been fine. I have to get rid of that illusion before it takes him whole and steals him from me. He's only mine.' Carsten thought as he delicately kissed the youth on the forehead.

'After I tell clearly Adam that he belongs to me, he should visit him. He's always bragging about his praxis.'

\* \* \*

The Dutch took a deep breath before dialling Dr. Adam Whitaker's phone number, still pondering if that was a good idea. After all, he had met him during one of his hunting nights and perhaps he would treat Marcial like one of his trophies.

"Dr Whitaker's office, good morning." A secretary's mechanical voice answered the phone.

"Hello, my name is Carsten de Vries and I would like to leave a message for the doctor."

"One moment please, I'll pass you through."

Carsten hated to be put on hold and "Remember the old school days?" was a poor choice of music in his opinion.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Adam's jovial voice resounded on the phone. Fortunately the music was over. "Honeymoon over?"

"How did you know?"

"Easy, you disappear one day, refusing to speak with your old time friends and evade us like crazy, so it can mean only two things. One, you're dying in a hospital, but you would have called just to complain. Or, two, you have something hot at home and don't want to share or you're afraid that our dashing looks will show the world how blunt you're,"

"Nice to hear from you too." Carsten mumbled, starting to be upset at the pretentious upper-class accent. "I need your advice."

"Finally you have decided to face the truth and come for therapy."

"Not for me!! It's for someone else!" Carsten roared incensed.

"All right, tell the doctor what you have done."

"It's for the boy I live with... I would like that you see it for yourself, but without telling him you're a doctor for the nerves."

"Doctor for the nerves??? I think my grandmother was not using that expression any more." He chuckled. "If he has been living with you for more than 2 months, he certainly needs my help or be recommended for sainthood."

"Very funny."

"Bring him to our little gathering. I'll hold the hounds. Do you still remember where it was?"

"No, the lights at the Laughing Buddha could be counterproductive." "No, the lights at the Laughing Buddha could be counterproductive. He has a dysrhythmia and anterograde amnesia. Let's have dinner at The Fat Duck." Carsten suggested.

"Great, I'll tell the others." The doctor answered as he took notes on the future patient condition.

"Leave George and Peter out of this. I don't want those two near him."

"Are you certain you don't want to speak with me, professionally? Your jealousy denotes a huge self-distrust."

Carsten hung up before he would tell Adam his opinion of his ways. 'And the worst part is that he looks like the bloody Ken doll even if he's seven years older than me. I bet the women go to his practice just to drool. If he makes one advance towards Marcial, he's dead.'

A soft knock on his door, took him out of his misery. "Come in," he barked with a sour expression on his face.

"Gloria asked me to give you these papers." Marcial said and quickly added "But I can come back later if you're busy."

His secretary had decided to send Marcial every time he was in a mood, a condition more and more frequent since his last visit to Dr. Meredith Blake. "No, my love. I'm fine. Come over here for a little bit." He said trying to sound sweet. Marcial closed the door and approached the desk while Carsten moved his chair to make room for the boy, clearly indicating that he wanted Marcial on his lap.

"How about if tomorrow night we go out to dine with some old friends of mine?"

"OK. Will it be a fancy place?"

"One of the best in London. Takes weeks to get a place if you're not in the list."

"Ah."

"You sound disappointed. Why?"

"I'm afraid I'd do something wrong in one of those places and the food always look funny and they make very small portions."

"Marcial, you never finish a full dish, so it should be no problem for you." Carsten replied in a dry voice.

"Yeah, I should eat more, now that Pelayo has found a place to eat also. I don't have to give him everything." Marcial said, remembering that the trasgu had also liked Lisa, her doll collection and her flat in the neighbourhood, dropping there to grab a bite now and then.

The sentence was like a bucket of cold water for Carsten and he involuntarily shuddered. Debating with himself for the best course of action, he decided to draw the line once more. "Love, this is the product of your imagination. We spoke about this before. That platypus is just a toy that you're very attached too. There is no one else living with us."

"That he doesn't let you see him, it doesn't mean he doesn't exist!!!" Marcial cried desperately

After he deciphered the many negatives expressions in the sentence, Carsten insisted again. "Darling, this is the product of your imagination. You have been alone most of your life, unloved and unwanted and you filled the void with an imaginary friend. It's time to let it go. I'm here with you."

"He won't go away till he decides it's time to do so. He says that you're the best option for me so far, but you're very uneducated and that you're so narrow minded is a proof of it."

"Excellent, now a crazy crusader from the VIII century -who spent all his natural life slashing people just

because they were Muslims- tells me that I'm a yokel?" Carsten half shouted, feeling his anger rise.

"The Crusades are from the XI century and they were not called like that at the time." Marcial clarified, making Carsten huff. "You only look what matters you and nothing else, but the spiritual world is closer than you think."

"Marcial, save me the New Age moment. I didn't buy Shirley MacLaine's book or intend to do it. There's nothing spiritual in a guy who loves to clean with a bucket and a mop. Are they not supposed to be mystical creatures?"

"What's wrong with a bucket? He does it well. Everything is clean afterwards."

"Don't change the subject, Marcial. The platypus is just a toy, not a vase."

"It's called a vessel." the boy whined.

"Whatever. Tomorrow we meet Adam and some other friends after work. Tell Gloria to come over here." Carsten sighed very frustrated, putting Marcial out of his lap with a none too gently move.

\* \* \*

"The Fat Duck" was an impressive place, with a Bauhaus clashes with Post-modern times style. So impressive that Carsten decided to take the Phantom Rolls Royce along.

"Hello George," he said to the doorman, not really caring if the man's name was that or not.

"Good evening, Dr. de Vries. We are honoured to have you with us tonight." The floor manager greeted them as one young girl took their coats away.

"Has my party arrived?"

"Only Dr. Whitaker. He's at the bar."

"Thank you, We'll join him and you tell us when our table is ready."

Marcial looked at the modern looking place with big eyes, nothing like he had ever been before and the waiters were very good he could see by the way they moved. A light tug on his elbow returned him to the present and he quickly smiled at Carsten before following him to the bar.

One tall, dark haired man with the most striking violet eyes, Marcial had ever seen, rose from his stool to greet Carsten with a light hug.

"Marcial, this is Adam. A good friend of mine."

"Hello. Carsten said that you are brave enough as to live with him on a permanent basis." He said with a melodious voice, taking and shaking Marcial's hand for longer than necessary, almost making Carsten to give him a punch.

"Hello." The boy shyly replied, his gaze cast to the floor.

"IS someone else coming?" Carsten barked, throwing a warning glance at Adam.

"Only George. Freddie had to visit some relatives at the country-side."

"Well, if it's the prodigal son!! I can understand why you abandoned your long time friends. Where did you find him?" A humourless voice said, making Carsten turn around very fast, still furious that George was invited.

The tall fair man took a glance at Marcial like the wolf looks a sheep, almost salivating. The boy had an angelic face and an innocent air around him.

"His name is Marcial and he comes from Spain."

"From Asturias." Marcial clarified.

"That's the North, land of mysteries, leprechauns and fairies. Those forests hide many secrets." George commented, fixing his gaze in Marcial's blue eyes when he lifted them, happy to hear that somebody in this city knew about it.

"Yeah, yeah. Lots of Leprechauns around." Carsten mumbled. "Let's eat before they take all our food."

"Do you believe in magical beings, Marcial?" George asked as he had found the weak point in the boy. He was damned if he was going to heed Adam's warnings. That little lamb was truly exquisite and he could have some meat on the menu.

"NO!" Carsten answered, abruptly cutting the conversation. "We don't have anything of the sort. Come Marcial, I'm sure you will like the pasta here." He said almost pulling from the boy's arm.

George devilishly smiled at his friend's retreating back. With his manners and bad temper, it was just a matter of time to get the boy in his bed.

\* \* \*

Did you enjoy the evening Marcial?" Carsten asked, feigning a sweet voice as they both entered in the bedroom and the boy removed his jersey to fold it automatically.

"Why are you so crossed with me? I didn't mix the cutlery or dropped the food."

"You almost said nothing during the whole time."

"You didn't let me. Every time this man, George, wanted to ask me something you were interfering and shutting me up." Marcial protested.

"Well, you were answering very sweetly to him. There was really no need to go into a extended description of your home town!"

"He said he was an Anthropologist and liked people. I didn't bore him!"

"No, you didn't bore him. In fact, you kept him very entertained all night!" Carsten's jealousy finally poured out of his soul.

"But you've just said I was mute!"

"Your voice was off but you were flirting with your eyes with him!"

"I wasn't!"

"Looking for an adventure like you used to do?"

"I'm not a slut! I'm with you!"

"You might be, but I know you would run after the first cock you see!"

"I won't do that!! I respect you as my companion!"

"Why can't you say the fucking word?? I'm your lover, damn it!!"

"No, you're not. You're my boyfriend." Marcial clarified because he was starting to feel disorientated with so many words and the many emotions the man was emanating. "I respect you and honour you." He recited dutifully.

"What?? Are you going to tell me that you don't love me?"

"I don't love you. I like you. Pelayo says I will love you as time passes, but I'm not so sure. My heart never rushed when I saw you. It was more or, less like when you see a friend you like very much. You deserve that I make you happy, but I don't think I know if I love you."

Carsten sat on the bed, totally defeated and shocked. He had never expected such a brutal answer. He buried his face in his hands and Marcial knelt in front of him. "You are very good to me, but you don't understand me or respect my world. You want to shape me into what you want as if I were made of clay."

"Marcial, the thing is that I love you and I can't live without you." He confessed.

"That's what Pelayo says and I should love you too, but I can't."

For a second, Carsten wanted to shout him that the trasgu was non existent, that all was in his sick mind, but his brain prevented to do it. If the damn thing was on his side, then it meant that Marcial's mind was slowly accepting him and only needed time to adjust to his new life. Perhaps the platypus could provide a final service before it was fired.

"Does Pelayo tells you that I'm good for you?"

"The best and that your love is true, not fake like the one that man was showing me tonight. He says that being in love is not the same as to love somebody. Romance is for the animals, he says. According to him, love is sharing this life burdens and being good friends. All the other things fade away when you grow old."

"Marcial, it's not that I want to change you, well not in the way you think. I want that you're healthy again. You have to admit that bathing a stuffed platypus at 22 is not normal, my love."

"I know, Sometimes I would like that Pelayo would cease to treat me like a child and I could live my life as a normal person." Marcial sadly told Carsten.

"That's good my love. Did you like Adam? He's a good friend of mine and he could help you."

"He was kind."

"He's a doctor and I will like that you speak with him at his office."

"All right, I will, if that makes you happy, but I refuse to take any medications."

"No prescriptions at all, just what the doctor gave you for your dysrhythmia and the B vitamin. Those are good for you. You're not forgetting things so frequently and blinking lights don't bother you so much."

"Yes, that's right." Marcial feebly smiled, renewing Carsten's hopes of a happy ending.

\* \* \*

Visiting Dr. Whitaker wasn't as bad as Marcial had originally believed. The man was kind to him and carefully listened to his full story, taking only a few notes and mostly focusing on discussing about the old Spanish kingdoms. He was even asking to see Pelayo's brooch and cross as taking the sword through out London had been out of the question.

"You don't need any medication, Marcial. You have an over active imagination, but I see nothing that would indicate me to stuff you with pills."

"Really? Carsten says I'm crazy."

"I'm the expert in such matters. I don't tell him how to fix his own computer, so he should let me do my work. We will need to see each other twice per week for some time. My secretary will arrange the dates."

"You don't seem to be lying."

"I'm not. You had several highly traumatic experiences with the added pressure of some brain damage preventing you to form mid term memories. Somehow you have balanced very well all these situations and found a way to survive the daily pressure. I would like to focus on all the things that happened to you and in your present. How do you feel to be working at the office?"

"Overwhelmed. All of them are so intelligent and I'm the village's fool."

"Don't let yourself be impressed by them. People wear masks to hide their fears. Probably they're afraid of you too."

"That's what Lisa tells me."

"Who's Lisa?" Adam asked politely as he wrote something down in his leather bound pad.

"She works there. She's a doctor, like Carsten and she's my friend. We have lunch always together."

"It's good that you have a friend. Carsten has a very absorbing personality. I will suggest that you make an activity outside your work and try to relate with other people. You told me you learned wood turning in school. Why don't you take some more lessons?"

"Nobody needs a wood turner any more."

"Yes, but carvers are good to have around. Do you like wood?"

"I like it a lot and I also like plants."

"Good, I will speak with Carsten about it."

\* \* \*

Slobodan disliked travelling to England. The weather in London was cold, rainy even if it was springtime. He decided to take the train from Paris in order to avoid the many controls that the Airports were imposing on people.

He was more than concerned as the man who had stolen his angel was a respected and rich businessman, always surrounded by bodyguards and that security net extended also to Marcial. According to Georg, the boy was always working in the company or visiting a doctor twice per week. The only times when his security relaxed a bit were when he was having lunch with a Japanese looking girl at the docks. He was never going outside the flat he was living in without de Vries, who, in fact, behaved like a second dragon.

He took a cab from Waterloo Station to his hotel in Belgravia. One didn't survive in this business for so long by taking unnecessary risks. Ostentation was the best way to attract attention from the police or from the competition and this was a private trip.

Sitting alone in his suite at the Royal Arms, he pondered about his options. Marcial would not give him problems as long as the demon was away. His angel had been always more than happy to see him and only his fear of the demon's retaliation had kept him distant. Getting rid of the thing was the most important issue, but he was confident the damned entity wasn't aware of his coming.

'That leaves me only one shot. I have to find a time when he's alone and unprotected. Georg could help me with that.'

## Chapter 15

Dr. Whitaker's interference with Carsten's dreamed lifestyle, annoyed him to no end. First, the man had clearly said that he would keep the same prescriptions that the other witch doctor had given Marcial. To top the insult and prove his incompetence and idiocy -in the Dutchman's view- he had suggested -using the old cliché of "doctor's orders"- that his elf should assist to some useless wood turning lessons on Mondays and Wednesdays, after work, ruining his dinner and night entertainment as Marcial was coming back very tired and not in the mood for romance.

All so "the lad could make some friends besides you. He needs to have some anchor to reality and fight the self isolation ambiance in which he has grown." As if some half witted brutes, unable to finish high school could be considered as "friends' material."

'But if all this mess helps me to get rid of the bloody platypus, I will endure it.'

Jelle was more than pleased that finally all his warnings had been heard. The boy was a clear nuts case as he had an "imaginary friend" and he was more than happy when Carsten told him -very clearly- not to serve the platypus any longer.

Pelayo resented the new treatment and decided to take revenge by making the butler's life harder, ignoring Marcial's pleads and promises that they would return to the old routine of him saving and hiding some food for the trasgu.

Bringing the witch to the flat -medium according to the butler- was too much for Pelayo's patience. He knew at that particular moment that his duty was to draw the line before the serf would continue to do as he pleased. He loudly snorted when the woman said that she was feeling a "strong presence in this house," when she was looking the opposite way where he was standing.

"Marcial's grandmother was a real witch, a meiga vedoirá (1)." He remembered the time she cast him away with a spell, so she could give the boy to that man. "Time to show the mystical presences in this house, my dear." He mumbled as his hand approached her head to pull her hair as it was his original idea.

The woman went hysterical when a cold hand fondled her breasts. She screamed and ran to the door

while Jelle asked her, very alarmed what had perspired.

"I can't do a thing. This is real and very powerful. I'll put you in contact you with one of my colleagues." She sobbed, dashing for the door.

"Really, I don't understand women any longer. The girls at the inn used to love it. Must be losing my touch." Pelayo sighed, his eyes never leaving the cleavage.

"Peggy, you can't go away like this. Do something!"

"I can't. This is too powerful for me. You need someone more experienced."

"Good boobs and some intelligence. Not bad for a woman." Pelayo said out loud.

"Edward will call you tonight. We have to exorcise what you have in here. It's powerful, ancient and evil."

"Powerful and evil, I might be, but I'm not ancient, you stupid cow!!" Pelayo roared, giving the woman a strong smack on her bottom, feeling completely satisfied when she howled in pain.

"We have to get rid of it!!" Jelle yelled, becoming also hysterical.

"You and witch girl?? You wouldn't last 10 minutes in a battle with me." Pelayo snickered as he went for his sword, decided to end the matter for once and all, knocking two chairs on his path, under the terrified look of both humans.

\* \* \*

Marcial never expected to find such a mess upon his return from the wood turning lesson. Jelle was still shouting with Carsten as he presented his resignation telling that "his house was corrupted by a demon." The boy slowly sighed and looked around to see if the trasgu was somewhere to be found, but he had disappeared. Like always.

"If you want to quit, be my guest, but don't come around with lies! I will not pay one cent over what is in your contract! In all my years as businessman, I've never heard that having a ghost around could increase the service salaries'." Marcial heard Carsten's voice shouting in his library."

"We had no problems before. Everything is his fault!" Jelle shouted back. "That thing attacked me today!"

"Really?? And what did it do to you? Did it use its spurs against you? A grown up man, afraid of a small innocent, frail, platypus." Carsten mocked the still terrified man.

"Pelayo can be very nasty when he's set into making someone's life miserable." Marcial defended the butler's as he entered the room. "I'm sorry Jelle if he attacked you."

"That thing belongs in Hell!" Jelle shouted at the boy.

"Not so. He's very protective of me and didn't like that you were not cooking for him any longer. He's nasty when hungry. I always try to keep his dish full."

"It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen. I'm not staying one minute more in this place!!"

"Did you see him?" Marcial asked hopeful that perhaps now Carsten would see reason. There was another witness, and he was a reliable one. "He's not ugly. He's hard to look at." He feebly defended the trasgu's looks.

The look of hope didn't go unnoticed for Carsten and he realised that the less he needed in his house was another person encouraging Marcial's delusions. "Enough! I'll pay you six months compensation and you will be out by tomorrow morning!"

"That bloody thing even left a disgusting stew on the burner!" Jelle roared at the boy, infuriated with his passivity at the fact that he was having a monster around.

"Did he cook 'Fabada'? He really feels sorry for whatever happened, Jelle."

"Excellent, now I have a Chef Ghost in my own house!"

"He's not a ghost, Carsten. How many times do I have to tell you? He's a domestic demon, and a very ancient and powerful one since you allowed him to do whatever he pleases. Be glad he was not using his sword! Jelle has seen him, too!"

"Marcial, just shut up!" Carsten shouted for the first time with the youth, totally enraged that his former crazy butler had just supported the boy's hallucinations

"Even if you have proof of him, you don't believe me!! I can't live with you any longer!"

"Yeah, yeah, go for a walk and come back in an hour. By then, you would have probably forgotten

everything and be back in La La Land.”

Marcial stormed out of the room, slamming the door when he heard Carsten's shout of “take your jacket with you!”

\* \* \*

All his life he had never been so frustrated. First, his New Age butler had resigned without previous notice, giving him the extra hassle of asking Gloria to look for another servant. Second, said lunatic butler had shouted that he had a demon attacking him, reinforcing Marcial's beliefs. Third the boy was out, who knows where and doing what, since two hours and he was already considering to call the police.

But nothing had prepared for hearing his allegedly sane friend, a psychiatrist nonetheless, telling him that “Marcial's hallucinations are one of the most elaborate and complex I've ever seen in my career. All data given on his imaginary friend is real. The places he mentioned, his account on the Spanish Reconquista is in line with recent Archaeological data, even the names of the captains in King Pelayo's Army are real and accurate. His description of the Visigoth court at Toledo or in Ravenna, is not something you find in a high school book. With your permission, I would like that an expert examines the sword and brooch from this entity.”

“Entity??? Is that how you call now hallucinations? He's crazy for Christ's sake!”

“To be honest, I'm totally lost with his case. He shows none of the characteristics attributed to schizophrenia, post traumatic stress disorder or psychotic depression.”

“NOOO, he only sees, speaks and lives with a platypus, who happens to be a distant cousin from a long dead Spanish king and used to slay Muslims as a hobby.” Carsten let all his sarcasm flow into his voice.

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”

“Don't quote Shakespeare like all of you do when lost. Your crisp accent won't save you from idiocy!”

“Do you know that he can easily read Latin and Greek? Pelayo taught him. Spanish public schools system must be excellent if they can afford it.”

“Are you telling me, by any chance, that the platypus has a Language School too?” Carsten asked very sweetly.

Adam's exasperated sigh was clearly audible over the phone. “No, I'm only saying that we should keep

an open mind in this case before we reach any conclusion. You even believed that the entity was a real human, based on other people's remarks! You have just told me that your butler quitted after seeing it!"

"Those were foreigners speaking in their own language. I'm not Cervantes. I could be mistaken and his friends were two junkies and an immigrant who probably still dances around the fire."

"Carsten, if you're looking for a miracle solution, you will not find one here. Don't push him too much. He does his best to cope with you and I support his decision of looking for another employment, away from your company."

"What?? Are you now trying to steal him from me?" Carsten roared.

"No!! Do you dare to question my professionalism? How dare you!"

"Why not? He's good looking, loves to please people and would be in your bed in less than a second."

"Take this as a friendly advise. Get a doctor and some Xanax or Valium." Adam said. "I'll see Marcial tomorrow evening." He ordered before hanging up on Carsten.

\* \* \*

"What are you doing here? It's about to rain and the Fabada is still warm." Pelayo softly said, sitting by Marcial's side, looking over the Thames.

"He doesn't believe me and thinks I'm crazy."

"The doctor doesn't do and he should know better. That's truly a cultivated man. Pity he's not interested in you."

"Would you stop looking for a husband for me? It's nerve-racking!"

"He will see your point eventually. Give him time. This society is based on the triumph of Modern Science and Rationalism. Humans traded miracles for scientific achievements, but they still look in awe at a computer. You're asking him to forgo of everything he believes in and accept a reality that is not his own. It's a quantum leap for him."

"He should leave me alone!"

"No, he can't do that. He's convinced you need his help, just as you need my guidance. He's jealous of

me." Pelayo softly chortled. "It's ironic. He hates me and would destroy me without regrets, but he can't accept my existence."

"What should I do?"

"Return home, eat your dinner and go to bed. Try to fix it there. Never go to sleep with anger in your heart. Don't force things. It's useless."

Marcial nodded, feeling his heart heavier than before. He rose from the bench and started to walk home.

\* \* \*

1. Meiga veidora. Is a kind of witch typicall from the area of Galicia and Asturias. They are good looking and can tell the future or contact with the recently decesased or those souls who are still in Purgatory.

"The other direction, boy. Walk two streets and then turn left. That's the way." The trasgu informed him.

## Chapter 16

The ticking of the kitchen clock was deafening for Marcial. He didn't know what else to do. He looked for the cups in the cupboards and prepared the coffee, as Jelle was truly away.

"Don't make eggs for me. I'll get a toast only." Carsten's voice startled the boy. He was already dressed and ready for work.

"All right. Do you want some juice too?"

"No. Take the day off." He dryly said and Marcial only nodded, fighting to keep his tears at bay.

"See you." The man curtly said before leaving, or better say, escaping from the kitchen, as he was still sore about last night's doings. Marcial had come back almost three hours after their fight, refusing to tell his whereabouts and clumsily attempting to lure him into his bed.

"No, I'm tired of fucking you. I want to make love with you," he had told him, but the lad had only looked at him with his big dove eyes, not truly understanding the words' meaning.

"Tell me what I should do to please you."

"Just go away. Even whores can tell the difference." He had answered, deeply hurt that no matter what he would do for his little elf, he would be always thinking on that damned platypus.

Hearing the boy sobbing -and trying to hide it- in the guest room next to his own bedroom had presented him with a horrible and unknown feeling. 'It's not as if it's entirely his fault. He's sick. He's no better than a young puppy in his affections. They don't love, they're nice, shake their tails and obey you. The problem starts when the owners believe that they can be considered as persons.'

'Fighting with him is like beating a child. I can't abate myself any further.'

Carsten was ashamed like he had never been before.

He went to work, hoping that somehow he would find a solution for the situation he was in.

\* \* \*

The Georgian had prayed for the opportunity and there it was. Unexpected but very welcomed. Against all odds, Marcial was completely alone, sitting on a bench, sadly looking at the river. His bodyguard was nowhere to be seen and the monster was also away as he was not carrying the abhorred platypus. Taking a deep breath in, he evaluated that it was now or never, feeling more nervous than ever.

"Hi Marcial. What a surprise to find you here." He jovially greeted the half slouched figure, startling him a bit.

Marcial opened his eyes very big and for a brief moment he seemed to hesitate, perhaps looking for the tall, muscular, dark haired man's name in his memory, till his eyes met those of the stranger and his heart fluttered within his chest.

"Slobodan!" He shouted, his eyes recovering his lost light.

"I'm glad you remember me. It's been a long time, Marcial." He said softly, checking the waters. "What are you doing here all alone?"

"Nothing. Carsten doesn't want me today at the office. We fought and today come new slaves. Better be away." He answered sadly. "I was thinking to look for another job before one of the new guys throws me out of the flat too. I'm not so clever as a grad student, you know? Perhaps, I could get something as a waiter. There are many pubs in this city."

"Are you free today?"

"He told me to take the day off. He's disappointed with me. I didn't understand him yesterday and I

really wanted to fix things between us, but I screw it up.”

“Do you want to go for an ice cream? Strawberry was your favourite.” Slobodan suggested, determined to get the boy's mind busy as he planned the best way to take him away.

“Are you not mad at me?”

“Why would I be?”

“I didn't give you a month leave notice nor paid the rent. I didn't have your accounts number and Elena told me I should go away immediately. Everything happened so fast.”

“I know my dear. You need time to think things over. I'm not upset with you at all.” He said while his mind frantically checked all his resources. Georg was busy and had taken four of the men with him. He was alone in this. Sometimes the boldest plans were the most effective. “Shall we go for the ice cream? I know a very good place. It's not far away.”

“OK. I need to go for my platypus. He doesn't like that I wander those streets alone. I could get easily lost.”

“No need to. I'll walk you home. Besides, Pelayo is always eating all your food.”

“Yes, that's true.” Marcial said, secretly happy that someone was not making fun of his friendship with the trasgu.

“Come, we pass by my hotel, pick up some papers for you and we can take the train from there. It's in the countryside. You like forests don't you, my dear? Slobodan suggested, not truly believing that it was going to be so easy.

“A lot, but I should phone Carsten, I live with him, you know?”

The Georgian had to make a supreme effort to hide his desire to gut the man alive and forced a smile. “I'll lend you my mobile later. Didn't he throw you out today? Perhaps he's still mad at you.”

“Probably. Pelayo really overdid it this time. The butler quitted because of him and I didn't tell him that I loved him. It's just that I can't. I like and respect him a lot, but I don't love him. Not like you.”

“Do you love me, Marcial?”

"I long to see you, but Pelayo says you're bad for me, that you will hurt me." The boy answered with certainty.

"I swear I would never touch a hair from your head, my angel. How could I do it? You saved my life."

"I didn't save your life. That doctor did it."

"You called him and stayed with me preventing me from bleeding to death, as a guardian angel. My enemies would have finished me if not for you."

"I missed you Slobodan, but we can't be together. Pelayo says you're a bad man."

"I swear I love you and I will never mix you with my work. Come with me. I know you want to or do you prefer to obey that thing forever? Tell me, have you been truly happy with that man?"

"He treats me very well and I enjoy the sex with him."

"Are you happy? Do your eyes light up like they used to do when you were seeing me enter in that bar?" He pressed.

"No, but I respect him, even if he doesn't understand me or wants to change me. He wants to put me under more medications."

"If he would love you, he would accept you just as you are. With the visions and everything. Like I do. You don't change the people you love."

"You can see him, do you?" Marcial asked fearfully and confused.

"Of course. He's truly ugly and bad for my business. I saw him that night, when I was dying."

"He never wanted you to see him. He says it was an accident."

"It was no accident that you came into my life. Come with me, now. It will be only for a few hours and you can have an ice cream and tell me what you have been doing." Slobodan softly said knowing that the boy loved to speak but was always afraid to do it due to people's scorn.

"I should warn Pelayo."

"It's just around the corner." Slobodan pressed, feeling the boy's clears doubts pouring over him."

"I don't know if I should. He forbid me to speak with you outside work."

"You don't work there any more, so the prohibition is useless. Tell me what happened yesterday, you know I love you and you can trust me."

"Yes" Marcial whispered as he drowned in the well known eyes of Slobodan, "Pelayo can't always be right. You don't mean any harm to me."

"Never, my little one." Slobodan swore and took Marcial's small hand to reverently kiss it. "Come, it's not far away."

The boy was astonished and uncertain about his next course of action. He wanted to go with Slobodan, but he was afraid that Pelayo would be most upset with him and his wrath was something you didn't forget very soon. He slowly pulled his hand away from Slobodan's, just to stop his movement in mid air when he saw the look of deep sorrow that his action caused on the man. His heart beat as fast as it did when he held the head of the dying man on his lap.

"I'll go, but promise me you won't tell Pelayo."

"Never. I love you and I want the best for you, my angel."

\* \* \*

After a miserable day in the office, Carsten packed his papers and laptop in his leather briefcase, hoping that he could be more productive in his own library. That morning's fight with Marcial and the sad expression in his eyes, had been haunting him the whole day. Carsten was aware that he couldn't place all the blame on the boy because he had pushed him too much in the last weeks, forcing him to remember his hellish past, pressing him to go to a psychiatrist against his will, fighting with all his strength against the damned platypus.

His little elf was sick, very sick. 'But I love him just as he's, even if he cooks for that blasted thing or gives it a foam bath once per week.'

Carsten dialled Adam's private number. "Hello Adam, it's Carsten."

"How are you? I'm glad you called me."

"It's about Marcial. I don't know how to say this."

"Do it as straightforward as you can."

"He should stop the treatment."

"This is most unexpected from you. May I ask your reasons?"

"It's not helping at all. He's more and more into his fantasy than before. I'm afraid we are only hurting him more."

"And what would be your solution?"

"Let him rest a bit. For a few weeks. I don't think he could be dangerous to anybody."

"I was thinking in putting him under clorazil, but his white cells level could drop significantly. It's a very effective new drug against hallucinations." Adam tested.

"The symptoms would be masked only but he will not be cured. Besides, he doesn't want to take more drugs."

"Isn't that what you wanted? To get the goblin away?"

"And then, what? He will be also gone."

"Yes, some patients report a decrease in the emotional activity, but it will not prevent him to lead a normal life."

"No. I'm aware that he's very sick but I haven't help him at all since I forced him to visit all these doctors. He's exactly as the first day I met him, but more vulnerable."

"How more vulnerable?"

"He's on the edge the whole time, fearful, hiding from people and... afraid of me. I can't stand that. When he had his friend, this Pelayo, he was dreamy, forgetful, but he trusted people and never judged them. Now he's permanently checking all the signs you make to be sure that he's doing what you're expecting him to do. Like an automata or a dog."

"He was very perceptive before. It's a mechanism he has developed to overcome his handicap."

"Yes, but he was happy in his own way. I stole that from him."

"And how do you propose to restore his happiness?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I should let him have that thing for a bit longer."

"I celebrate that you finally realised how unreal and childish was your approach to this situation. Stuffing him with pills wouldn't solve his problem. As I told you before, I can't recommend any pharmacological solution besides what the neurologist has prescribed. He has an hyperactive imagination, that's true, but I need to further evaluate him before making any recommendations. However, I must protest your decision of stopping all treatment. It's dangerous."

"I see."

"We should keep with what we have started. He should come here once per week and continue to assist to his wood turning classes. He needs to interact with other people, not only with you. Stop pressing him with the platypus issue. I'm convinced that the moment he starts to feel more secure in his environment, he will gradually reduce his dependence to this entity. Like when we were small children. You keep your favourite cuddle toy till you're seven, but when you turn ten, the thing is completely forgotten in a corner and your mother packs it away."

"He told me once, this Pelayo would go away the minute he feels that I'm a suitable partner for him. The thing even suggested Marcial that I should send him to school and be more open minded. Figures!" Carsten huffed.

"I'm glad that the platypus and I agree in our conclusions. Go home and try to be nice for once."

"I'm always nice!!"

"Really? You wouldn't be calling me if you would have not done something you're regretting now. Good afternoon, Carsten."

"One more question. Do you think he could ever love me?"

"That was an unexpected question indeed". "You know I can't discuss what is being said during the therapy, Carsten."

"He does not love me. I asked him and he couldn't say the words."

"I will explain you something about anterograde amnesia. The patients are not really able to understand abstracts concepts because their semantic memory -that is the general knowledge extrapolated from experienced situations- is affected. The semantic memory collects the meaning of words and the relations between these concepts. It's like a mental dictionary, whereas the episodic memory is related to what we learn from experience and it's organised under spatio-temporal patterns. The information in the semantic memory follows a conceptual pattern and this is why you can infer or deduce facts from new concepts that you have never experienced beforehand. When I say "I love you," the semantic memory immediately allows your brain to associate the word "love" with a pleasant experience, making all the associated relations you have become present. Or for example, it works if you need to understand a new concept based on older informations. In Marcial those mechanism don't work at all this is why he can't remember a book, unless he transfers this new information into his episodic memory, e.g. when he recites the story or resolves the maths exercises. Asking him if he loves you is still on a theoretical level for him. Love is a wide concept that enthrals many characteristics and relations he's simply not able to put together on his own. You should ask for what is associated with the concept of love and not about the general idea. As an example, I will tell you that he likes the way you always look like a petulant child at work and finds it absolutely sweet and wants to kiss you. If somebody would tell me that he likes me for my faults, I would move with him the next day."

"I'm not petulant. I have a strong and determined nature!" Carsten protested, becoming more incensed at the cackle heard at the other side of the line.

"Next Thursday at 17:00 in my office, Carsten." Adam said trying to do his best to control his laughter.

\* \* \*

Marcial was confused. Didn't Slobodan say that it would be only a few hours? It was getting darker and in summer it meant that it was more than 20:00. Pelayo might be worried because he was always back at 19:00 with Carsten.

Why were them in another train station and why people didn't speak English any more? He couldn't make out a word of what they were saying. That long tunnel had been very frightening. He pulled Slobodan's jacket.

"It's getting late. I should go home." He asked fearfully.

"Don't worry my dear, we take a taxi now. You will like "Le Burgundy" and tomorrow we will go back to Madrid. Don't you miss your friends, my love?" The man answered as he ushered the boy through the crowded platforms.

"I have a headache and I should take my night pills." Marcial complained with a bated breath.

"You don't need them. You're not crazy. He feeds you with pills so he can control you. He wants to make you a zombie, like those police-doctors in the Reformatory."

Marcial gulped, remembering the miserable place and how the pills were making him feel dizzy and stunned. Perhaps Carsten's pills were more expensive than the others and make you feel better, but it didn't mean that they were good for him. His granny was right; those things were bad and they had never expelled the trasgu as the doctors had promised.

"I have to go home." Marcial repeated stubbornly.

"We go now to the hotel, have dinner and go to bed. You're tired from the journey. When we get there, you can call that man and tell him that you're with me."

"He will not be happy about this. He said he didn't want any other man near me."

"Marcial, you told me he throw you out of your job and from his house. I don't think he will miss you. Call him and you'll see." Slobodan said opening the cab's door and barking "Rue Ducruet, 5" at the taxi driver.

\* \* \*

Under normal circumstances, Carsten would have bought a nice bouquet and a good bottle of wine if he wanted to make up with one of his dates, but he was well aware that it was useless in Marcial's case as he would be upset that the flowers had been cut and he couldn't drink at all.

He settled for a "give me the most expensive cured ham you have" growled at at Harrods' salesman and a delicate orchid in a white china pot so the boy could take care of it, as he has done with that half dead fern he got from someone in his company.

At 20:00, the jingling of his keys, didn't bring his little elf jumping to his neck, as usual. Carsten tried to remember, perhaps he had his carving lesson and had been delayed. Exasperated, he put his phone and punched his driver's number.

"Connelly, get Marcial home. It's getting late!" He shouted over his mobile phone. "What do you mean he's not with you?"

"No, sir. He has no lessons tonight. It was yesterday and he stayed at home today per your orders." The man said fearfully, closing his eyes at the obviously curse in Netherlander he received from his employer.

'He can't be far away. The bloody platypus is sitting on the sofa. He must have gone down for something for the dinner.' He thought, realising that there was nothing smelling in the kitchen.

"Hello George. Yes, it's me. Have you seen Marcial by any chance?" He asked the doorman.

"I saw him leaving in the morning, right after you, Dr."

"Did you see him coming back?" He asked starting to be agitated.

"No. I thought he went to work with you, sir."

Carsten hung up becoming more and more nervous. Where could that idiotic boy be? He had promised him several times not to take the tube or the bus alone as he didn't know the city... but what if he had decided to go for a walk with "his buddy Pelayo"? 'He's always with someone from this or another world,' he thought acidly.

"Where is Marcial??" An enraged trasgu shouted Carsten, but the man, as usual didn't hear him and only shivered when he pushed the Dutch. "Dickhead!" he shouted frustrated as he had looked for the boy the whole afternoon.

Carsten started to walk around the room like a caged lion, the worst case scenarios starting to play in his mind. He put his phone out of his pocket again and pressed another button. "Smithers! Yes, it's me. Who else? Where is Marcial?" He shouted.

"Sir, it's my free day. He was supposed to stay with you the whole day." The man stammered.

"You're fired. Incompetent!" Was his final shout before throwing the phone to the other side of the living room, fortunately landing on the sofa.

"Great job, asshole. Break it, so Marcial can't phone you!!" Pelayo shouted, feeling his rage constricting his throat. "Are you not supposed to be a genius?"

The phone rang and Carsten rushed to answer it.

"Good evening Carsten, it's Clive. Smithers just called me."

"The idiot lost Marcial."

"Please, calm down. He can't be very far away. Did you try with his friends?"

"He has no friends here!"

"He has lunch with Dr. Mun twice per week and they're together most of the time. Gloria wanted to invite him for dinner and there's that boy, James Monroe, 24, always hanging around him, and finally, there's his doctor. Could he not be there?"

"Check those people. I'll speak with Dr. Whitaker." He grunted back, more upset at himself than before. Who was this James Monroe? And if Adam had decided to break the patient-doctor relationship, he could consider himself as good as dead.

\* \* \*

It was more than 11 PM when Marcial entered in the beige modern looking suite, looking everything in a mix of awe and concern. Carsten should be furious by now as he had forgotten to leave dinner for him and Pelayo would probably beat him upon his return.

"May I call Pelayo now?" Marcial politely asked Slobodan, as the man was busy kissing him on the neck and putting his arms around his waist.

"Yes, of course. Tell that man that you're staying here to sleep over with me. He shouldn't be concerned about you. You're in good hands, my angel. I will be very gentle with you. You're so beautiful and I know you want me too."

"I want to go home. I want my platypus."

"Yes my love, call that man, tell him all what I've explained you and ask him to send your animal too." Slobodan shushed the frightened boy, softly petting his hair, his touch lingering longer than necessary just to enjoy the silky feeling of the blond bangs.

"You promise?"

"Of course. Have I not fulfilled everything I've told you so far? Call him and tell him you're with me so he doesn't worry about you." Slobodan whispered, unable to control any longer his desire to kiss the full lips.

Marcial was a little bit surprised when he felt the man's mouth playing with his lips, kissing him first delicately, almost pecking his lower lip, to later increase his ardour as his arms encircled him his waist and pulled him against his broad and muscular chest. The kisses he was receiving became urgent and he felt somewhat light headed, enjoying the warmth that emanated from under Slobodan's silk shirt. The boy put languidly his arms around the Georgian's neck and dropped all his defences down, allowing him to fully taste him, feeling overwhelmed by the clear feeling of raw power and desire for him.

Nothing would have pleased more Slobodan than taking his angel right there but he needed to first eliminate the competition. He abruptly stopped his kisses, leaving Marcial in the middle of the room, totally confused.

"Call him now. Don't worry him any more, my love. I will take good care of you." He whispered as he sat on the bed. Marcial only nodded, still dazed, looking for the phone over the desk. "First dial 9 and then double zero plus 44 and drop the initial zero in the number you have." He explained gently, his eyes fixed on Marcial's.

The boy took out of his wallet the small card with Carsten's phone numbers and decided to go for the one marked as "private." He took a deep breath before dialling it, perfectly following Slobodan's instructions.

It only rang twice before Carsten barked "De Vries" on the other end of the line, making Marcial's courage falter.

"It's me Carsten."

"Where the fuck are you, little idiot?" Carsten shouted letting all the tension and fears he had accumulated over the last four hours flow with his scream.

"I'm with a friend and I wanted to tell you that I'm going to sleep with him. I'll be back tomorrow." He slowly said.

Carsten couldn't believe his ears. The boy was fucking around and calling to inform him? His rage was so big that he couldn't find the words to express it.

"Could you tell Pelayo that Mr. Slobodan says that he's going to be gentle with me and that I'm in good hands?"

"Whore! That's what you're! You're with another man?" He roared.

"I'm with Slobodan. Do you want to speak with him?"

"I'm killing you!! You're not even a whore. They have more integrity than you!! Freak!!"

Marcial almost dropped the phone, afraid of the insults and threats he was receiving from Carsten. He had always been such a considerate and delicate man to him. Truly wonderful and now he was yelling him exactly like George had done when he had stabbed him.

Slobodan took the receiver from the boy's dead hand, barely hearing the yells and he hung it up. "Don't worry my love, you're with me. We'll dine together, have a little champagne and go to bed. He doesn't understand you like I do." He intoned with a grave voice, still not believing his good luck that his opponent was such an hysteric.

"Do you think he will ever want me back?"

"Unlikely, but I want that you come with me back to Madrid and live in my house. Permanently."

"What about my platypus?"

"Don't worry, one of my associates is still in London. He can pick it up, my angel. Tomorrow I will send an e-mail to this person, so he tells me where I can get it. You'll have your toy in Madrid in no time."

## Chapter 17

Carsten was devastated. He couldn't think any more. His elf was gone and all what he had from him was the damned platypus, sitting in its basket. His fingers squeezed his eyes to prevent the tears from falling, but it was useless. He bit his tongue so the pain could justify his crying, but his action didn't bring him relief. He continued to sit at his studio, with his gaze fixed upon the sword standing on the short table.

"I can't believe it. Take it and behead the one who stole your love!! Lord, Don't men do anything nowadays? It's your right and duty to kill him!" Pelayo shouted furiously.

"He's gone." Carsten whispered still dazed.

"With that man!!! Do you love him so much that you let him in a dangerous place? Twerp!"

But the Dutch didn't hear or see the trasgu, nearly hitting him. He only felt a chilling breeze running through his spine, in the middle of a hot summer night.

\* \* \*

"Have some champagne. It's very good and will lift your mood. Don't worry any longer about that man. You're with me now and tomorrow we will send for your platypus, angel."

"My granny doesn't let me drink spirits. She says it's bad for me." Marcial mind absently answered, his eyes rimmed because of the effort he was making not to cry at Carsten's harsh words.

"It's not strong, almost like cider back home. Would you prefer some instead?"

"No. I don't understand why he was so upset with me. I'm only going to sleep with you." Marcial continued dejectedly, still in his own private world.

"Yes, that's what we are going to do, my angel." Slobodan whispered his throat suddenly dried with desire for the beautiful creature sitting in front of him. In the Georgian's mind there was no other word to describe Marcial; he was a creature as he couldn't match this magical being with any of the men he knew. The boy was selfless, unable to hurt a fly, unearthly beautiful like an angel and kind to everybody. 'Opposites attract' was the only explanation he could find to feel so drawn to him. Saving his life was not enough for driving him mad with love. Under normal circumstances, he would have given him some money, perhaps make a favour for him and forget the business while his attention was directed towards the punishment of those who had dared such a blunt attack on him. But the small hands that had done their best to prevent the blood from coming out, had also bonded his heart to the most spiritual eyes he has ever seen.

"Try to eat a little more, dear. You had nothing but an ice cream today."

"I'm not hungry. I'm sorry."

"You haven't even tried your fish. I ordered as you like it. Baked, not fried." Slobodan coaxed Marcial gently.

"Yes, you remembered." Marcial smiled softly, recovering some of his spirits and wondering why were they having dinner at the suite. "What is the name of this city?"

"We're in Paris and tomorrow morning we take a train back to Madrid. You will like the TGV, it's very fast and comfortable."

"I had no idea they were serving anything besides breakfast in the rooms."

"It's called room service. Useful and you don't have to mingle with people. Bad for business. Now eat, it's

getting colder." He mildly ordered, trying to soften the command with a smile.

Marcial complied, weakly returning the man's smile, as he took his fork and cut the fish, taking a small piece. The Georgian leaned against the back of his chair, putting his mobile out of his jacket and quickly dialling the Gypsy's number.

"It's me. I'll be back tomorrow evening. Send a car to Chamartín and have ready the flat in Salamanca for two." He informed without bothering to wait for an answer. The Gypsy knew better than mixing his orders. Georg would have to remain in London for a few days more to liquidate that business and the man was already very interested in that girl-woman who was Marcial's friend.

"Slobodan, could you tell me something?"

"Yes?"

"Which is the difference between fucking and making love? Do you know it?" Marcial asked looking directly in the man's eyes.

"This is something you don't explain. This is something you feel." He replied in a mix of awe, embarrassment and unusual shyness.

"Would you show me?"

"Do you really want it?" Slobodan asked not truly believing that the boy was going to go into his bed by his own will after all the rejections and refusals he had endured over months, when the demon was around.

"Yes, I do."

"To fuck is just to have sex for self gratification. Like when you eat a chocolate. You just take it, swallow it, enjoy the taste and that's all. Nothing else. You're not related to the chocolate nor intend to. It's only that. Something created for your own pleasure. Making love is different and can only be shown or felt."

"Would you like to show me?"

"That means we are going to make love, to have sex and I'm going to take you fully, exactly as you were doing with that man you were living with, every night." Slobodan clarified so there would be no subsequent misunderstandings.

Marcial only nodded and cleaned his mouth with the napkin before standing up and going to the bedroom. 'I should have gutted that stuffed thing long time ago.' Slobodan thought, also rising from his chair and finishing his glass of wine before going to the bedroom.

\* \* \*

Pelayo had been hopeful that after the Dutch had drowned a full scotch bottle, would have been able to see him, but nothing happened.

"That idiot is too centred on his own pain to realise anything!! Damn fool!" The trasgu roared his fury, throwing a pile of papers standing on Carsten's desk under his glazed look. "Idiot!!"

The goblin knew that there was no possible way for him to return to Spain all by himself to look for his charge. He didn't have the strength nor the power to be for so long without a vessel. He needed that 'sorry excuse for a man' to carry the platypus there.

Carsten only looked at the scattered documents on the floor. "Who cares? He's not here and I don't understand why he didn't take his blasted platypus along."

"Because he didn't know he was going away!!!" The trasgu roared, his desire to use his sword stronger than ever.

"As long as I keep that thing, he will come back for it." Carsten muttered before his head hit the desk.

\* \* \*

"No, you should not be doing that. Let me show you how it's done." Slobodan stopped Marcial from mechanically undressing himself like he was used to do. The blond returned his hungry gaze with his startled eyes, uncertain of his next course of action.

"I thought we were going to have sex. Do you want to do it with your clothes on?" He asked slightly disappointed at the man.

"No, I should do it. We're making love, not having sex, my angel. When you make love your priority should be the other person's pleasure. You don't care any longer about your own needs." Slobodan intoned letting his baritone voice rumble in the room as he came nearer Marcial and put his arms around his waist. The man's lips started to trace long lines across the youth's neck and earlobes making him shudder slightly.

"Do you see, my angel? I'm already excited because I feel your desire to kiss me." He said, his lips brushing Marcial's mouth, caressing them slowly, afraid that the boy might be scared or doubtful.

Marcial kissed him back, opening slightly his mouth, allowing Slobodan to fully taste him. He had to cling to the big man's neck when his hold over him increased and he passionately returned his delicate kiss.

Slobodan couldn't believe that the boy could taste so sweet and divine. Not even Dimitri with all his experience, could make him feel so light headed as he was when he had kissed the boy. "You remind me of the scent of the orange blossom." He whispered reverently, hoping that the talk would calm him down before he would jump over the youth.

He interrupted the kiss to unbutton with shaky fingers Marcial's shirt. "You feel your heart beating in excitement, not because of the act itself but because of what you're going to share with the other person. You want to see yourself reflected in his eyes." He said as he caressed with his hand Marcial's flat stomach with long moves, lingering on his trousers waistband. "The anticipation gives more flavour to it."

Marcial mirrored Slobodan's movements and released the man from his shirt, marvelling at his broad chest and well defined muscles, just shyly kissing him on the shoulder as he was trying to understand all what he was telling him. The sucking noises he heard his companion made with his nipples took out of his lucubration and he disentangled from his arms, stepping back, towards the huge bed.

The Georgian observed how the boy sat, his big velvet eyes never leaving his face, and slowly removed his shoes. He bit doubtfully his lower lip as he expected him to resume his ministrations.

"You're so beautiful, Marcial. No one could compare to you." Slobodan said in a low voice, finding to control himself harder than before. "Let me undress you, please."

Their clothes were discarded at a very fast pace, Slobodan encouraging Marcial to remove his own ones as the boy always seemed to be hesitant. "Do as you like, my angel, we both want what it's going to happen, don't we?"

Laying against the glossy cover felt wonderful for Marcial as he let the man do as he pleased, reassured that he obviously knew what was he doing. He simply enjoyed the pleasure he was receiving from his kisses and light touches all over his body.

Slobodan couldn't hold himself any longer as he delicately turned the boy around. He needed to possess him and that he knew who was doing it. With one swift and decided move, he buried himself inside

Marcial, making him almost cry from pain and surprise. The man stopped all his moves as he let the boy relax himself and accommodate his manhood. "Shh, it's all right, it will be great in a few moments." He calmed him down as he imprisoned with his powerful thighs Marcial's buttocks to increase the friction of his thrusts. He leant most of his weight on his left hand to avoid to crush the small boy and he used his right one to stroke his member slow but decidedly.

Once the pain started to fade away, Marcial moaned in pleasure at the way Slobodan was pumping his member, hoping to encourage him to do more. The Georgian started his thrusts very slowly till he felt he could increase his pace to an almost frantic rhythm, deeply emptying himself inside the boy.

He fell exhausted over Marcial's back as he realised that the boy had also had his release. Making a supreme effort to recover his voice, he brushed aside the damp bangs from the lad to murmur "I love you. You make me feel incredible things. After making love, the only thing you want is to hold your beloved and feel closer to him." He finished his lecture, possessively hugging the slim body against his chest.

'But I also feel all those things when I'm with Carsten. I should have told him,' was Marcial's last thought before falling deeply asleep, exhausted from the love making session.

\* \* \*

Southwood was worried beyond words. If the boy was so sick as the doctors said, getting lost in a huge city like London, was a real danger. He was well dressed, probably had some money with him and he was hopelessly good trusting. Anyone could come to him and rob him, snatch him or rape him if he was in a bad area.

He phoned Carsten to check if he had some news and if he needed some assistance with the police.

"Don't worry about the little slut. He's whoring himself with that Georgian mobster he had back home. Shit! I'm an idiot!! He was laughing at me the whole time!" Was the slurred -and obviously inebriated- answer he got from his employer before he hung up on him.

He was more concerned than before.

\* \* \*

Nothing would have pleased more Slobodan than lazing for a long time, holding his angel, but he had to ensure his conquest by truly eliminating the competence. He left the bed decidedly to check what the camera had recorded for the past half an hour. "Good, but need more definition, so there are no mistakes." He thought before returning to the bed to remove the dirty cover and place Marcial under the

sheets.

\* \* \*

Marcial was deeply asleep when Slobodan shook him awake. For a full minute he was disoriented about his whereabouts and the man who was in bed with him. "I thought you might want to take a shower and then sleep some more. We have to catch the train tomorrow at ten, angel."

"Yes, of course." Marcial automatically obeyed, leaving the bed and standing on wobbly legs as he felt the pain from his previous activities shooting up his spine.

"Come, I have the bath top filled."

Marcial was half expecting that Slobodan would like to engage in some more sex, like Carsten was doing every time he wanted to take a bath. 'It's impossible for him to keep his hands off.' Marcial remembered feeling a pang of sadness hit his core. But Slobodan didn't want to do anything more than bathing while delicately kiss and caress him.

"Did you enjoy what we did, dear?" Slobodan asked as they both returned to the bedroom, only wearing their towels

"Very much, Slobodan."

"Do you love me too?"

"I think yes." Marcial answered doubtfully.

"Would you show me how much you love me? Do you remember when I told you that you only cared about your partner's pleasure?"

"Yes, I want that you enjoy it too. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, my love, you couldn't do anything wrong. I just wondered if you would like to show your love to me." He reassured the partly frightened boy. "Come over here and let me feel your mouth on me."

Marcial hesitated because he had not understood what Slobodan wanted to tell him. His look of bewilderment didn't went unnoticed and the man sat on the bed, delicately pulling the boy towards him, so he would be standing between his legs. "Suck me," he ordered softly but with a commanding tone.

The boy was relieved to finally understand what the other wanted for him. 'He could tell things more clearly,' he thought before putting the man's towel apart and place his lips over the already erected member.

Slobodan had to close his eyes in ecstasy to enjoy more the strong and enthusiastic sucking Marcial was exerting over his shaft. 'I should have made a purse out of that platypus a year ago,' he regretted as he realised that he needed to stop it before he would deplete himself again in the boy's mouth. He needed to show the other who was in charge now.

He firmly pushed Marcial's head away from his manhood and placed himself against the headboard and pillows so the boy would be in direct line with the camera. "Come my love, mount on top. You will like it and have total control of what we do."

Marcial sat astride, carefully impaling himself on the man's shaft, writhing in pleasure at the intrusion as he placed his hands over the strong shoulders to support himself, the towel still wrapped against his hips.

Slobodan nearly had his orgasm when he saw the slender body on top of his, almost weightless and ethereal, pumping his member in a fast pace, exactly as he liked. His hand reached Marcial's hip to guide him in his thrusts and to feel that it was real, not another dream as he knew that his sanity was leaving him with every move the boy made. His gaze travelled upon the boy's chest to finally be fixed in the towel folds stacked around his hips, slightly quivering with his moves. The force of his orgasm nearly blinded him as he depleted once more inside his boy and no one will ever take his angel away from him.

## **Chapter 18**

Slobodan woke up to the wonderful feeling of being completely relaxed although he had spent most of the night awake, taking care of his business and preparing the file for that Dutch who had dared to steal his angel. It was most fortunate for the cretin that Marcial had been so happy to see him and obedient because otherwise, he would have killed the man a painful and slow way. No, making him suffer and see what he had lost was a more appropriate punishment. He softly shook the boy awake, still curled in the crook of his arms.

"Hey, sleepyhead, time to catch a train." He said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Where is my platypus?" Marcial asked, sitting on the bed, still dazed.

"In London. You left it there. You have to write an e-mail to this man so he gives it to my man there. Georg will bring it home soon."

"Pelayo is going to be furious with me. I didn't tell him I was going away with you."

"Never mind him. He's not here and you're with me. Let's get dressed, send the e-mail -I can help you to write it in my netbook- and have breakfast in the Restaurant."

"Yes, of course. I'll get dressed in no time." Marcial spoke, leaving the bed.

"Good."

"Do you know where are my clothes?"

"You toss them around last night. Can look for them by yourself."

"No, the clean ones."

Slobodan had to repress an exasperated sigh. "You have no other clothes. Only what you were wearing yesterday. I still have some of your older ones at home, but they look horrible and I'll get you new ones. Imagine what the others would think if they see you in those tatters."

"Oh" Marcial replied dumbfounded as he started to pick up clothes and sort them out.

\* \* \*

By 9 AM the news had reached the whole Z3 Solutions staff. The dork had left Darth Vader for another man and he was in a mood... More impossible than ever.

'He seemed so in love with the Sith' Lisa thought, still not believing what one of his secretaries was telling her. 'It's so strange, two days ago, Marcial was talking so highly of him that you could only think that love besides blind is crazy and foolish. Never mind. I can't do a thing.'

She picked up the phone to call that hot tall dark haired import-export businessman from Georgia she had met yesterday. Yes, that Georg Chavchavadze was truly stunning.

\* \* \*

The letter was not bad but it certainly needed some editing in Slobodan's view.

"Dear Carsten, I'm sorry if I made you upset. I'm going to Madrid with Slobodan and I wanted to ask you for my platypus. He says he has a man working for him in London and he will call you to arrange a date

at your convenience to pick the platypus up. Slobodan understands that I need Pelayo at my side. Good bye."

"My love, could you check if they have a free table at the Restaurant? It's on your right side at the first floor."

"Yes, of course. Should I wait for you there?"

"That would be fantastic. I'll send your e-mail and put my things together. We have to hurry to catch the train."

"Carsten, You made me upset. I'm going to Madrid with Slobodan and I wanted to ask you for my platypus. He says he has a man working for him in London and he will call you to arrange a date to pick the platypus up. Slobodan understands me and I need him at my side. Good bye." Slobodan rewrote the letter attaching a .MOV file to the letter. That should be sufficient to make the man explode when his angel would call him. 'Those computer geeks are the whole day hanging from their screens.'

\* \* \*

Marcial found a table next to the huge window and sat there, looking mind absently at the traffic and elegant women passing by. 'Pelayo would love to be here,' he thought before feeling a pang of remorse for leaving his friend behind. Hopefully, Carsten would give the vessel to Georg and Pelayo would come back to Madrid.

"A penny for your thoughts." Slobodan said.

"I don't carry Euros with me. Only pounds." Marcial replied, making Slobodan think how adorable but clueless the boy was. 'That's good, he won't meddle with my business,'

"I sent the e-mail. Perhaps we should call this Carsten once we have taken the train, dear."

\* \* \*

The resounding noise of a laptop crashing against the wall, was something that Gloria would not forget so easily. She rose from her chair and bravely knocked his superior's door as the man had locked himself in, refusing to speak with anybody.

"Is everything all right, doctor?" She asked politely, doing her best to avoid the scattered pieces laying on the floor.

"NO! It's the new Olympic event. Laptop throw! Get the fuck out!" He roared.

"Shouting and being vulgar will not solve this situation, sir." She retorted deeply offended with his manners.

"Drinking tea and scones also not!" He barked. "Out with you!"

She didn't move an inch from her place. "Don't bother, doctor. I've seen many tantrums in my life. I have three sons and a former husband."

"He's a whore!! The worst kind of whore!!"

"If would you tell me what happened, perhaps you would feel better."

"I don't know. In the morning I told him to stay at home and in the evening he was away with another man in Paris!!! He was in bed with him!! He even has it on tape! And the only thing he can think about is on his bloody platypus!!!" He cried on the brink of tears.

"That doesn't sound like Marcial's. He's a very shy boy. He's afraid of people most of the time."

"He was fucking with another man!!! Do you think I don't know him??"

"There's something very wrong here, sir. The lad would never do something like that."

"Get out and send someone with a new laptop! I have to work." Carsten roared again, furious that even HIS secretary was taking the little tramp's side.

"Do you think this is appropriate under the circumstances, doctor?"

"I'm in love of a fucking crazy whore!!! I would say that's inappropriate!"

Gloria sighed as she realised that he, as all men, needed to vent his frustration, disappear into his cave to lick his wounds and then he would be ready to talk. "I'll call someone from maintenance right away, doctor." She said as softly as she could, turning around to leave the room, closing the door softly to avoid hearing his sobs.

\* \* \*

Marcial was looking the city in awe, surprised of all the things that were around and the elegant tall buildings. "It's beautiful," he whispered, his nose almost stuck against the taxi's window shield.

"Yeah, it's nice. We can come later. When I have some free time. In the moment I have to close some deals with some Latin American people." Slobodan shrugged, not interested in the landscape or the town at all. The boy followed meekly the big man as he easily passed through the crowd in the train station and into the ticket office and the first class compartment. "It's a huge city, it never ends." Marcial whispered again, shocked as the train passed through the suburbs, not so elegant as the tall buildings have been. "Pelayo would love to see it."

"Why don't you call this man? I sent the e-mail but perhaps he doesn't check it and throws your animal to the trash can."

"He wouldn't do that! He let platypus live with us. He knows my mother gave it to me!!" Marcial exclaimed very frightened that something might occur to his pet.

"Use your mobile. Mine has the battery almost empty."

"You're right, I forgot about it." Marcial said, fishing it from his pocket, where Slobodan had put it back, after taking it "into custody" during the previous night. The less he wanted was to have a jealous former lover calling his angel in the middle of their lovemaking session.

Marcial seemed to hesitate a bit before he remembered that he should press the red button for long if he wanted to switch it on. He looked for Carsten's number in his agenda and press the green button.

\* \* \*

For the past three hours, Carsten had been in hell, his feelings ranging from his desire to kill both Marcial and the man he had run away with to his need to hear the boy's voice and have him back, no matter the consequences. 'I want to kill him and then jump over a window. How am I going to get through this?'

The ringing from his mobile startled him and when he was going to throw the offending item, he realised that the call was from Marcial.

"What do you want?" His mouth spoke harshly before he could even stop it.

"Hi. I hope you got my e-mail. I wondered if you could give my platypus to..."

"You fucking little bitch!! You cheat on me and you only want your thing back?? I'll burn it down so you know how it feels like to be raped by someone you love!!" Carsten roared at the mention of the animal.

"Carsten, I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted to know the difference..."

"Shameless slut!! Who knows with how many you might have been "experimenting" lately!!!" The man roared smashing his fist against the desk, the carefully organized mountain of pendrives falling all over.

"Carsten, I've never been with anyone but you..."

"Liar!! You fuck, send me the video and then you deny it? Right in my face??"

"I didn't fuck! I made love with him as I did with you! I never fucked with you! I don't know why you always want to confuse me!"

"I'll take an enormous pleasure to burn it down."

"Don't do that!! Pelayo was never mean to you!!" Marcial shouted almost on the brink of tears. "Give it back to me!! It's mine!!"

"You were also mine and look how you fuck the first piece of shit that comes around. Is it because he's younger? More handsome? Or is it because you like it hard, freak?"

"Please, give it back to me. I don't know what I would do without Pelayo!"

"Come for it for yourself if you want it!" Carsten roared, still undecided if he was furious because the boy only wanted his damned platypus; was unfaithful or the half contained sobs he heard when he threatened to burn it down.

The man slammed the mobile against his crystal-steel desk. 'Destroying the bloody thing won't fix this,' the rational part of his brain told him. 'If you keep the platypus, he will come back for it.'

He snorted as he realised that his great plan to recover a crazy little slut was to keep a stuffed platypus hostage.

"I should get a grip on myself. He's driving me crazy. Do I really want a brat who runs after the first cock he sees?" He muttered. "At least, those in the Laughing Buddha know they won't last the week. I'm going to fuck the brains out of one tonight. Yes, that's right."

Carsten took a deep breath. It was over. "Sometimes you win, sometimes you loose... but always keep your cool."

"Gloria, could you call the employment agency? I need a new butler. Maarsten resigned yesterday and some one has to clean my closets... Yes, they're full of rubbish... Like always, non smoker, with some basic cooking for the breakfast, Netherlander spoken is a plus."

## Chapter 19

Returning to Madrid in the middle of July's scorching summer temperatures, was a shock for Marcial. The city was half empty as many had ran to their holidays in the South. The neighbourhood where Slobodan had brought him, was nothing alike to where he had lived before. The district of Salamanca was one of the most expensive and exclusive areas in the city, called the Golden Mile by their own inhabitants.

The boy felt truly small in front of the big iron gate protecting the entrance to a tall building, built over one of the biggest avenues, ornamented with old sycamore trees. The doorman opened the door the minute he saw the big black Porsche Cayenne stopping, with the discreet but terrifying Georgian that had moved two years ago to the last floor. It was rumoured that he owned many restaurants and hotels in Spain but no even his two cleaning ladies -foreigners too- wanted to speak about him.

"Good afternoon sir." The doorman greeted as he bowed his head -a gesture that went unnoticed by Slobodan or the Gypsy- and gaped when he saw the young man accompanying the men, looking like nothing at all to those professional killer looking men that were always around his employer. The boy was simply gaping at the trees, with big blue eyes and a frightened look.

"Marcial, move. It's too hot to be outside." Slobodan barked almost reaching the elevator, making the boy rush after him.

The Gypsy still couldn't believe it. His boss had finally gotten what he wanted: the half witted boy from that disgusting place. How a man who was one of the most feared crime lords in Spain could be after that little thing, was incomprehensible. True, that the boy had saved his life, but he could have given him some money or a job and be done. Despite he looked really good, in fact, better than most of the boys in the escort service, he was not even able to remember "bring two coffees and two scotches," without writing it down. In his view, the lad was good for a night or two, but nothing else. 'It's not my problem what boss does in bed. Besides, was he not living with a rich guy in London? Hope boss has done nothing to him because that could cause us troubles.'

He continued with his inspection of the boy as they all entered in Slobodan's big living room, traditionally and tastefully decorated like one of those houses you saw on the magazines. The place where you would put a princess to live and not an uneducated bun, like this one.

One of the maids, Irina, softly asked them if they wanted to drink something and Slobodan only said "Whiskey for us and an apple juice for him. Sit over there Marcial, I have to discuss business with the Gypsy."

Slobodan waited for the girl to disappear before removing his jacket and tie and sitting on one of the yellow damask chairs.

"So, how's everything with Martínez? Still making troubles?" He fired.

"Should we speak here boss?" The Gypsy replied slightly moving his head towards the boy demurely sitting in one of the deep red chairs by the windows.

"No problem. He won't remember or understand most of what we say."

"Really? Could be a trick."

"No, it's not. He's brain damaged. Saw his medical reports in London. Let him be, Gypsy, he's not going to take your place in my heart." He grinned in a feral way.

"Who knows... Martínez is in holidays now, deep in the South. Yoseb took him there with some of his friends too. His partners offer now 37%"

"No way. It's 40% or doing it through Amazon."

"Boss, is it wise? We almost have what we want."

"That's the problem with you Spaniards. You have no ambition or self respect. A few leftovers and you're happy. It's not about the money any longer. They have to respect our territory. Do you remember how long it took us to get this place? Your people couldn't hold it for more than 6 months because all of you were internally fighting and thinking that you could use us to eliminate your competition. We only wiped you out and dealt with the Russians. You should complain less about immigrants and take a few lessons on how they do business."

"Your people were brutal and merciless."

"And they still are. Look at him." Slobodan said, pointing with his index finger towards Marcial -looking through the window. "I wanted to have him for over a year. I waited for my opportunity but it flew away. Did I give up? No, I looked for another, and look, there he's, sitting exactly where I always

pictured and doing what I want. The Colombians should learn that fast. No one robs anything from me."

"You were right boss," the Gypsy changed the topic as he knew that a lecturing Slobodan could end very bad for the person who was hearing the lesson. It was common knowledge that when the Georgian decided to explain something, someone would end with his guts popped out or with his brains scattered over a wall. "Dimitri found some resistance the first week, but the number of visitors increased by 17% and the earnings by 25% He practically reorganized the clubs."

"Good, let him run two other more, the worse we have. I want to see how he manages. Something else?"

"Yes, the guy at the Town Hall wants more money. What should I do?"

"Replace him. We don't need more greed in this world, do we?"

"No, sir. Where is Georg?" The gypsy asked, fearing that the boss had finally enough of his constant challenges towards his authority.

"He's in holidays, running after a vixen he saw in London. Ask Vania to take care of it."

"Yes, boss."

"Another thing... Tell Dimitri to come by tomorrow. He should take the boy out for shopping. Nothing cheesy as he's very shy and not going to work under him."

"Dimitri is resented that you brought this one to your own home. Do you think it's a good idea to ask one peacock to lend his feathers to another one?"

"Don't you dare to speak about Marcial like this." Slobodan growled. "He's my lover and you all will respect him. He's not a whore. If you're still alive, it's because he would be very frightened to see your blood on the floor. Tell the others he's off limits for all of you! Get out of my sight!" He roared finally making the slim man flinch and Marcial stand up from his chair, afraid at the unexpected yelling.

"Sit down, dear. It's just a business disagreement." Slobodan said, returning to his kind and polite persona in less than a second, convincing the Gypsy of how serious his threats had been. "Gypsy, tell Yoseb to come for dinner tonight. He should meet Marcial too. Good bye."

The man ran away from the living room, not caring if he almost bumped into the maid holding a silver tray with the drinks.

"Sit down, I said, Marcial." Slobodan exclaimed again, this time harsher than before, making the astonished boy obey him in less than a second. "That's better, my love." He praised as he hated that his orders were disobeyed. "Irina. Marcial will stay with us for the time being. He will sleep in my room, but place his things on the next bedroom as he can have it also."

"Immediately, sir." The maid hurriedly said. "What would you like for dinner, sir?"

"Do you like meat, Marcial? We had fish yesterday." He asked, his voice indicating that he undoubtedly preferred the meat.

The youth only nodded his agreement, still pondering why the man who had comforted him in the train after Carsten had shouted those hideous things at him, was now harsh and terrifying all the people around him.

\* \* \*

"Hey, don't get too comfy. I have to work tomorrow." Carsten warned the red haired man he had picked up in the disco.

"Yes, it wasn't worthy of starting anything." The thirty something shrugged. "Can you call me a cab?"

"I enjoyed it too." He replied acidly, irked at the remark, but picking up the phone and dialling Connelly's number, while the actor dressed.

"Yes, it was nice." He said for politeness sake. "See you around. You have my business card. Call my agent if you need anything."

"Sure." Carsten lied, also leaving the bed to accompany the man up to the front door.

After one more friendly greeting, Carsten closed the door, heavily leaning over it. He had never felt so tired after sex. The red one wasn't bad but it had been more gym than pleasure. 'Surely, that slut is getting it hard, exactly he likes,' he darkly thought. 'I need a real drink.' he decided going in a beeline to the bar to pour himself a scotch. "Whore," he muttered drowning his drink in one gulp. "Crazy whore."

Tomorrow the new Black Bird should pack everything away and put it in the basement before giving it to the poor people for Christmas, if they wanted it, because no one in his right mind would take a fat, ugly, asshole, old platypus, like the one sitting on his Van der Roe couch when he was sure he had locked the beast in the cabinet along with the sword, brooch and cross, at his studio.

"Shit!! That thing is still around. I'm throwing it to the trash!!"

"Don't you dare, human! Marcial should get it back!! It's all your fault!!"

"Filthy thing, you ruined his life!" Carsten shouted as he took the platypus by its tail decided to throw it to the trash.

But the crystal glass that grazed his head to finally crash against the opposite wall, forced him to change his mind.

"Look at me, human!!" An unearthly voice roared at his back.

## Chapter 20

After two weeks of living with Slobodan, Marcial started to adapt to his new lifestyle. The first days were the hardest as he was totally lost, unaware of what was expected from him. Pelayo was not there to help him and Carsten never answered his calls or e-mails. Slobodan had done his best to get his platypus back, but Carsten had refused to see his man, Georg, and the new butler haughtily told him that "I regret to inform you that there's no monotreme in Dr. de Vrie's custody." Fortunately, the dictionary had a picture of a platypus along with the "monotreme" definition. Marcial was devastated as Carsten had probably fulfilled his threat and destroyed the vessel.

Slobodan had done his best to comfort him by getting him another stuffed platypus, specially ordered from Australia, but it wasn't the same as the trasgu never showed up, destroying Marcial hopes that perhaps a new vessel would be all what he needed.

He felt truly lost without his friend in this new and strange world full of rules and codes, impossible to remember them all.

On his first night in Madrid, a large, sinister-looking man -Yoseb- came for dinner and he spoke the whole time with Slobodan in a strange language, not caring at all that he was there.

"Marcial, finish your dish. The food is to be eaten, not thrown to the trash. It's a sin." Slobodan had told him and silenced his protests with only one deadly look. He only nodded and quickly finished the baked meat and potatoes on his dish, not lifting his eyes from the china.

When Yoseb left, Marcial fearfully asked if the Georgian was upset with him. "No, but you should be always quiet when I'm doing business and obey me. It's for your protection, angel. Next time, eat your

food because I don't want to repeat myself. You will not like it." He growled, frightening Marcial with his reaction.

But when they were alone in the bedroom, Slobodan had again repeated how beautiful he was and held him tightly till he had fallen asleep, protecting him from all the ghosts lurking around him.

On the next day, this strange looking man, Dimitri or Dima -pending on Slobodan's mood- had taken him for shopping, not caring at all about his protests that he needed nothing as Slobodan had kept his old clothes.

"Please, do you want to look like a beggar? It's already bad enough for the Georgian's status to have a moron as a boyfriend. Do us all a favour; keep your mouth shut and look good for the clients."

"Do you think I could get a job in one of his clubs? The lights don't bother me as much as before." Marcial asked, full of hope to solve that pending issue: get a job.

"You? Working with me?" Dimitri snorted. "Please! You can't even tell cava from champagne and fucking you must be pretty boring as you're bird-brained."

"I'm not going to take your job, if that's your main fear. Getting old is not so bad, there are many things you can still do." Marcial simply said, hoping that clarifying the situation would be the best. "Tomorrow, I will go to the employment office."

"Shut the fuck up."

Marcial thought for a long time about that phrase but he couldn't understand its meaning. Perhaps Slobodan could explain it that night.

But Slobodan didn't want to explain it as he stormed out of the room, leaving him alone with the other man, the Gypsy, slowly moving his head in disapproval.

"Next time, be quiet, will you? Now Dimitri is in deep shit because of what you told the boss."

"I didn't understand him, really."

"Yeah, I can imagine, but hear me well. The Georgian says that you're his boyfriend. The official on top. If someone insults you is like insulting him and he has to set things right. We can't afford any internal challenges. Those are bad and Dimitri is nothing more than a clever whore. He's not one of us or ever be. Whores are disposable as they're not reliable. I do hope Dimitri literally survives this one."

"I don't want that Mr. Slobodan is upset with him. Dimitri doesn't like me. He thinks I'm going to steal his job, but I don't want it."

"Marcial, the best you can do is keep your mouth shut and the boss happy in bed. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good. Now go back to your room. I have to make some phone calls."

On his fourth day as the "Georgian's friend," as everybody seemed to know him -not bothering to learn his name- he felt more confident of his position and decided that it was time to look for a new job, something down-town. During breakfast, he politely asked Slobodan if he could have the newspaper and the man silently gave it to him as he was busy checking on his restaurants' figures.

Marcial started to circle the job offers he thought he could apply to when Slobodan's cry of "what the fuck are you doing?" nearly made him jump up to the ceiling.

"Looking for a job. I'll go tomorrow to the Employment Office." Marcial explained under the man's furious gaze. "Oh. I shouldn't have written your news paper. I'm sorry, I didn't realise."

"Do you want the others think that I have no money to support you? YOU? Working?"

"I have enough experience as waiter or in Supermarkets. I worked in Lidl, you know?"

"Sure... if you want a job, you can have one with Dimitri." Slobodan smirked, using irony as a way to release the frustration building up inside him.

"No, Dimitri told me I'm a boring fuck as I'm bird-brained. Besides, the lights there give me headaches. They're looking for people at Burger King and you can have lunch there if you work more than...."

"Enough!! You're not going to work! You're my lover and nothing else!! I take care of you. Only our whores work. Do you want that my underlings think that you're one?"

"I'm not a whore despite what you and Carsten say!! I can't sit here and do nothing! I have to work to help you to pay the flat. It must be pretty expensive and your two maids must cost more than 1.700 Euros per month!" Marcial shouted back

"What am I going to do with you?" He sighed, inwardly counting up to ten. "You don't need to work nor should. I suffice myself to take care of you. The flat was paid cash and I can afford the cleaning ladies. If you're bored, you can come with me on some occasions or go the park -El Retiro is near- shopping or even attend school. There must be something for you to study or learn. If you want, in a few months, I can set you a store or a small restaurant. But YOU will not serve anyone but me. Is that clear?"

"Carsten let me work in his company." Marcial trailed still not understanding everything.

"I will not mix you with my business! You can't work with me! You will remain in the house or go somewhere else with one of my men! In fact, Bagrat will look after you. He needs to learn better Spanish. You can teach him. Can't be worse than what it's."

Bagrat was not as tall as the other Georgians and his Spanish was very rudimentary but he wanted to supply his lack of loquacity by doing a good job. Being appointed the "boss boyfriend's bodyguard" was a huge promotion for the recently arrived man from Tbilisi and in his eyes, it proved that Slobodan had him in mind for greater things. He was only a little taller than Marcial but he was built like a tank. The men used to called him (at his back) "the shorton" because he was small but very strong and determined (stubborn to an incredible point) when needed. The Spanish avoided him like the plague because he was normally in charge of the "punishments" if something went wrong.

Marcial liked the man immediately as he was polite and didn't scorn him like many of the other gang members, snickering at his back whenever they saw him with Slobodan. He was not telling him what to do or be quiet and was kind enough as taking him to the park every morning as it was less than a mile from the penthouse.

Bagrat was almost as good as Pelayo, but not the same. Marcial permanently missed his friend, but Carsten didn't want to pick up the phone from him.

After one week of looking after the boy, Bagrat was more than convinced that his bad Spanish had nothing to do with him being unable to understand the boy; he was simply unusual and his boss had been more than right when, one drunken night, had said that "he looks like one of us but he's not." Sharp observational skills were a key factor in his line of business and he had not reached his 54 years anniversary -almost a 'grandpa' compared with the crazy and disposable youths that worked in the drug business- because of his good looks. There were many strange things around the boy, like his unearthly beauty, making men, women or children gape at him; the way he was always knowing in advance what everybody needed or how he could read your own feelings much better than yourself. In a way, Marcial, reminded him of a story his Greek grand-mother had told him when he was a child.

The incident in the racetrack fully convinced that the old lady was right; that such people do exist,

although they're hard to see. Five days after he got the boy under his protection, Slobodan decided to show him off in front of his associates and took him to the hippodrome where two of his horses were racing. As usual he went -with the boy in trail, mostly interested in watching the animals- to the stables to check his beasts before the races. He spoke with the jockeys and the trainers and later installed himself in the paddock where most of his own people and acquaintances were already speaking. Some very attractive women were also accompanying them, but Slobodan completely ignored them.

"Marcial, do you want to bet? My Furia is one of the favourites for the next race." He asked casually.

"No, he's not going to win. He feels bad today. The other; "Pride," is better; he can run better with this heat." The boy answered sweetly, ignoring the collective gasp for air at his words; no one in his right mind ever contradicted Slobodan.

"Did you get it from the horse's mouth?" Slobodan smirked.

"Yes."

"Well, in such case, we can't dismiss such inside information. Do you want to bet 100 Euros for this "Pride?" He laughed as the others followed him.

"I don't have so much money." Marcial simply said, cutting all laughter.

"I can lend it you. If you win, we share the winnings. Deal?"

"It's throwing your money away, Slobodan. It's 1 to 19." Yoseb snorted.

"It's only 100 Euros. Do you want, Marcial?"

"My Grandmother didn't let me play cards or bet. She said I should never do it because it was cheating and abusing my gift. Pelayo, on the other hand was doing it when we needed money. Someone from the pub helped him to place the bets." Marcial explained very seriously.

"All right. Jorge! Bet 100 on my name." He ordered to one of the new boys, who rushed to fulfil his order.

Bagrat was uncertain, but he felt that it was time to prove his theory. He gulped and asked very politely Marcial which names he liked for the next 5 races. Yoseb called him "idiot," but Bagrat only growled "mind your business," in Georgian with that special tone that most of the old-timers had grown to fear.

"You must be making a lot if you plan to throw 600 Euros to the trash." Yoseb laughed.

"Why not? I'm also bored. Let's put some spice to this. It's not much money. Jorge! He's gone. Martín, take Bagrat's list and bet 200 per horse in my name. If this "Pride" is able to win, it's about 5.700 Euros." Slobodan laughed openly. "It's only 300 Euros. A bottle of good champagne."

"No, It's 3.990 Euros after taxes. They charge you before you get the money." Marcial answered, making the men gape at him again.

"Fernández Hutton, be careful, he wants your job, now." Slobodan joked with his accountant, deciding to ignore Marcial and pass the challenge to another.

"I could use some help in the office. Too much money to count." The man kindly answered as he didn't know Marcial like the rest.

Slobodan told everybody to join him in the box for some champagne and a chat. The first race was almost finished when they sat and the his own horse was taking its place for the second.

"Bagrat, that's not a horse, that's a donkey!" The Gypsy chortled when he identified "Pride" with his binoculars

Bagrat just shrugged and kept silent, carefully looking at the boy as he was near the balustrade and in danger of falling if he perched himself too much.

"No, I'm fine. I won't slide." Marcial told to his perplexed bodyguard, briefly smiling and sitting back in his chair next to Slobodan, very busy speaking with his accountant to notice anything.

The joyful yelling at the horses came to an abrupt halt when "Furia" unexpectedly slowed down, finishing third... and "Pride" advanced from the sixth to the first place. There was a huge silence in the box as the men didn't know how to react. Slobodan's horse had lost and that was enough to leave him in a mood for the rest of the afternoon, but on the other hand, the boy had been right and therefore he was not the idiot who everyone thought and should be respected beyond the Georgian's orders.

"Well Marcial, it seems that today, dinner is on you." Slobodan exclaimed not upset at all... "Or on Bagrat's?"

"It's your money, Slobodan, not mine." Marcial clarified, making the older man smile as he saw that the boy had accepted his prominence over him and was not gloating, like most mindless youths used to do. A good sign that boded well for his future.

"Good, then, it's on me, ladies and gentlemen." Slobodan said. "Now, if you are right about the last race, then I will have to take you all to the "Café de Oriente." That horse you choose is 39 to 1." He added casually, taking a look for the first time to the tickets the younger man had given him.

Bagrat said nothing when Marcial proved right for the 2nd and 3rd races but missed in the 4th as his boss had stuffed the tickets inside his pocket and made no remarks at all, primarily focusing on talking with his associates and throwing quick glances to his boy when his horses were winning.

The last race was impossible to predict as one horse tripped over and fell, dragging down four more horses along. Marcial's horse was so slow that the jockey could avoid the collision, winning the race.

"Are you a billionaire now?" Yoseb asked, laughing still irked that he had just lost 500 Euros on a clear winner.

"Not yet, but I can still pay dinner... Let's go to the Café. Shall we?" Slobodan replied feigning some humour in his voice and throwing a warning glance at the bodyguard. "Perhaps Bagrat could share the tab."

"Are you a millionaire, now?"

"I'm fine." He shrugged, still not believing that he had just won about 6.000 Euros, after taxes. "Can take you to Mc. Donald's, pretty face."

"Asshole." Yoseb retorted in a perfectly spoken Spanish.

"Gentlemen, no need to fight as we have ladies around. Tomorrow, Bagrat you can collect your money and mine too." Slobodan interfered, giving the man all his tickets who hurriedly buried them in his pocket. "Keep the change." He added throwing him another warning glare that he should be quiet about what had perspired. "Marcial, we go now."

"To Mc. Donalds'?" He asked merrily, much to the present women's dismay, who immediately turned their gazes, half imploring the Georgian. Slobodan seemed to ponder for a minute, as certainly 'the vixens could get a lesson and learn to respect Marcial's place at his side,' but he dropped the idea as his punishment of Dimitri was still fresh in their memories. There was no need to tighten the rope even more.

"No, dear. Another day. The girls need to show off or they will pout. It's in their nature." He smirked, showing clearly his contempt for the group of 6 peroxide blonde women remaining by his men's side. In his opinion, prostitutes were only good for their job and nothing else, even if those were "high standing

escorts," not streetwalkers or like those in the clubs. 'Nothing that could compare with my angel. He never took anything from me. I should have not brought him here. He can't be by their side, but he's not a girl to be sent with the wives or mothers. I will have to find a place for him. Certainly I don't want him near my men.'

\* \* \*

"Boss, why didn't you say that he got 5 of 6 races right? The others would have respected him more." Bagrat couldn't help to blurt the minute they returned to Slobodan's flat. The question had been haunting him the whole dinner.

"This should be a secret. I don't want the others to find it out. Do yo understand me, Bagrat? I would be very displeased if this happens."

"Of course, I'll tell nothing. The others would use him to bet almost daily. We need some discretion here."

"True, but I also don't want that they make his life miserable. They're not good for him. He's not like us or part of our world."

"I'm 54 and considering retirement, boss. This one is my last job. I have saved enough and would like to go to the South, marry and all that. I'm getting old and will not go further up."

"I'm in my thirties still, but I would like to go away. It's not the age what make us feel old. It's how fast you reach the top."

"If you go away, this would be war. Georg and Yoseb hate each other and would lose the territory in no time. The Gypsy could hold it, but our men don't respect him and the Spanish wouldn't last long by themselves. They need you boss."

"I know and I will not let them down." Slobodan lied.

"He's special, not doubt. Very. I'm normally not into boys, but for one like him, I would throw everything away. My grandmother told me that you have to be careful with them. It never ends up well for the humans."

"You speak with riddles. Be honest with me. We know each other for a long time."

"My grandmother told me -when I was a child- a legend from her area, near Skoupa. Many years ago, two shepherds found, during St. Nicholas' Feast, a small baby abandoned in the mountain. Although it

was very cold, the baby was in perfect conditions and healthy so they took him home as they had never seen someone so beautiful, with blond hair like the sun and white skin like the snow. The whole village decided to keep the child and each family would have him a week or a month as they all will provide for him because he had been found on one of the most sacred nights for Greeks. The boy was called Nikolas but everybody knew him as the Wonder from Skoupa because of his beauty, kindness and that he was always telling stories of wonderful places that he had never been. The rest of the time he was silent or looking at the sky. He became a shepherd but was always disappearing on St. Nikolaos day. When he reached the age of 17, the man who found him, followed him and saw him returning to the same pine tree where he had been found. Suddenly, all the fairies appeared and started to dance like snowflakes and he just vanished with them. The man returned to the village thinking that it had been a dream. The whole town looked for him, but they never found him again. My grandmother told me that fairies like to mingle with humans and when they have a child they give her to the mortals to look after till they're old enough to go into their realm."

"Do you believe in fairies now?" Slobodan snorted and Bagrat knew that he was treading on dangerous grounds.

"Of course not. Those are stories for children, but who knows what's beyond our world. All I say is that whenever we mix with them, is bad for us."

"What wrong did the boy do to them?"

"The whole village was heartbroken when he left. He was their child. Look in mythology and there's not a single time when the humans associated with Gods didn't get screw in the process. Look today, he has all the signs of one of them"

"Bagrat, he's not a god-damned fairy. He's strange, yes and does strange things too. Disturbing, but that's the product of his illness. Part of his brain is destroyed and gone forever. He will not change. Human brain can recycle itself or something like that. Like in that film, "The Dead Zone," the guy is in a coma, wakes up and starts to see the future by touching people's things. Who knows what is wrong with him! I don't want to hear anything about fairies, gods, demons or whatever!! If you ever call him "fairy" in front of my men, I will kill you! Dimitri is a fucking "fairy"; not him!" Slobodan exploded finally.

"Boss, I meant no disrespect at all! I swear! I have nothing against your boy! He just made me earn 6.000 Euros! I said fairies because that's what my grandmother told they were. No second intention, really, boss."

"Better remember it or I will save you the trouble of retirement." Slobodan growled.

"I will, sir."

"Take good care of him because if something happens..."

"Of course, sir. None of the men will bother him. They know better." Bagrat whispered recovering his spirit partly.

"Keep your mouth shut. Keep my tickets."

"Indeed, sir. Thank you very much."

## Chapter 21

It was a product of his imagination and two mojitos; two bottles of champagne, a few whiskeys and sleep deprivation for two nights. The piercing migraine was his main evidence, Carsten considered after gulping two more aspirins Gloria had discreetly left with his morning coffee. Unable to concentrate in his work, the man went to his bathroom to wash his face for the fifth time that morning, hoping that the cold water could chase the ghosts away and give him some courage for the meeting in two hours with that building company. The reflection of the man in the mirror was not the Carsten he used to know.

His face was pale, haggard and looking extremely tired. Despondent. Collapsed. Not the self confident brilliant businessman who could convince anyone to buy his products.

He took his mobile out and dialled Peter's number. "Just come over here and don't give me that good Samaritan shit of how I feel!" He shouted, enraged at the other man's polite question.

Carsten slouched again in his huge chair and there it was again. That horrible tall thing, looking at him with pure rage in his green eyes, dressed with a simple tunic, decorated with vertical stripes and a thick buckle belt, in a dirty red colour, loose brown pants, stuck inside muddy leather boots. Over his shoulder he wore a short cape held by his horrible eagle brooch and his round shaped cross hanging over his neck. His face was of a dark brown shade with a protuberant nose and chin, furry eyebrows and he smelled like something escaped from the grave with dry leaves hanging from his caked with mud shoulder-length hair. He ignored the furious trasgu once more, but realised that the wretched thing had decided to leave his sword at home.

"It's incredible, that even if I'm standing in front of you, your reason does not allow you to see me, human."

"Shut up. You're the product of many drinks and living for three months with a lunatic. Folie á deux it's called."

"You certainly take a lot of thought to refute your imagination, human. Don't believe in me, but take me to Marcial! He's in grave danger!"

Carsten didn't answer him as he had opened his laptop and purposely ignored the demon when he threw a shelf full of CDs, loudly scattering them all over his office. Last night, that blasted thing had nearly destroyed half of his dinner service.

"My, Carsten. This can't be good for you and certainly it's bad for the office." Peter exclaimed when he opened the door and nearly fell on the CDs. Very carefully, he circled around them and approached the desk, taking a good look at his boss.

"Maintenance people should fix the screws better." Carsten growled, throwing a dirty look at his PA. "You know the project for Merrywaters. Take care of today's meeting. I'm feeling under the weather this morning."

"Yes, looks like you drowned in liquor last night." Peter said with a blank expression as there was no risk of being fired if his boss was in need of a favour. The trasgu chuckled from his corner.

"Mind your business, will you?" Carsten vulgarly told the trasgu.

"It turns out to be my business the moment you can't attend a meeting that could report us a contract for 3.8 million pounds."

"Are you in the board now?"

"No, but the board pays my salary."

"Will you take care of the meeting or not?"

"Of course, I will, but what about tomorrow? We have the meeting with Atomic Corp. Lawyers. Should I send Jansen to that one? Or what about that one with the guys from Cubika Solutions? My knowledge about computers restricts to the Microsoft Office."

"Shut up. I'll be fine tomorrow."

"Sure, if you don't drink to death tonight and go clubbing. Your way of handling this situation is very mature, indeed."

"Get the fuck out!"

"Another show of your wisdom Carsten? I'm most impressed."

"You're fired!"

"Effective before or after the meeting?" Carsten's loud snort was the only answer Peter got, reinforcing his courage. "I supposed so. Are you at least aware of Marcial's whereabouts?"

The trasgu left his perched over the desk position and rushed to Carsten's desk to hear the answer, but the man again ignored him.

"Whoring himself to a Russian gangster somewhere in France or Spain."

"Don't you think that it's dangerous? He's with a mobster! He has no idea of where he's standing most of the time! And do you let him go like this? What if he drugs him, hits him or sells him to a prostitution ring?" Peter shouted truly enraged. "That boy is sick, for Christ's sake!"

"Now, someone who thinks. It's easy for you. Send the vessel to Spain and I will take care once and for all of this matter, human."

"Shut up!" Carsten roared at the trasgu to then return his attention to Peter. "He's just a slut. A cheap one. Let him be. Maybe he likes to have his brains fucked every night by several clients."

"Don't you dare to shut me up! For an allegedly genius, your mental processes lack of consistency! He just packed in one hour, left the building with his imaginary suitcase and forgot his passport and his stuffed pet? He carries that thing around all the time according to Smithers and Jones!"

"He had the nerve to phone me and write two e-mails asking for it! He only cares about that Pelayo."

"Excellent, now you're jealous of a stuffed platypus!" Peter snorted.

"He said it, not I." Pelayo added.

"Shut up. I won't tell it again!"

"Look at me when you're shouting me! Being hurt doesn't give you the right to treat people badly!" Peter roared, totally furious. "Clive has almost exhausted his credit looking for the boy. Do you know where to send the Platypus?"

"Who cares?"

"You're an idiot!! How did he leave the country if he had no passport? Tell me!!"

"I don't know."

"That person took him away! Don't you realise? A so called slut leaves behind a wardrobe for several thousand pounds plus his beloved animal? It makes no sense at all!! According to Clive, that sword alone could be sold for several thousand pounds as a replica!! And hear me this, Clive showed photos of that sword to an expert he knows at the King's College and he's convinced that it could be real. It's too good to be a replica! That man wants to see it and run several tests on it. If it's a real one, it's invaluable as it would be an unique item!"

"Someone finally realises my importance. Do you know that even King Rodrigo loved it?" The trasgu mumbled, secretly pleased but disappointed at the same time as none of the humans had heard him or even looked in his direction.

"It's a matter of scales." Carsten snorted. "That one must have more money than I or gives it freely."

"That was mean even for your standards, Carsten. You're setting a new record today. When did that boy ever ask you anything? God dammit! He works here for 800 pounds and suffers you at home too! Let me tell you this as a friend. It's pathetic when a 40 something spends his Thursdays night in pub looking for someone. You're walking the border of a man with a younger lover and a sugar daddy." Peter finally let all his resentment and frustration pour. "Give me the bloody address where he wants his toy."

"NO. He can come and pick it up if he's so brave."

"Excellent! Very good move indeed! Should we also gag the pet and tie it to a chair?"

"Give me to Marcial, twerp or I will make your life a living hell!!" The trasgu roared, increasing Carsten's headache some more.

"Do you want Pelayo, Peter? Help yourself! Clean my house and tell Clive to take that hideous sword of his too!"

"Give me the boy's number if you're so childish! I want to know if he's fine!"

"It's off and the slut forgot his charger."

"The fucking e-mail address then!"

"No. The little whore can take a plane and pick up his animal."

Peter stormed out of the room, too furious to answer, slamming the door to clearly express his frustration.

"Human, you really don't want to know what I'm capable of..." Pelayo trailed from his corner.

"Gloria, I'm going home for the day!" Carsten barked at his com, pulling the door open, startling his secretary.

"Yes Dr. de Vries. Your new butler will start tomorrow morning. He's already moved in."

"Good."

"We don't need another twerp in the house! With you is enough!" Pelayo shouted, making Carsten flinch at the sudden noise.

"Are you all right, doctor?" Gloria asked truly concerned.

"Yes, of course. Just a headache. I must be getting a summer cold." He replied with a forced smile. "Call Connelly and tell him to pick me up with the car. I don't feel up to walk home."

"Yes, doctor." She answered sympathetically.

The drive home didn't help Carsten's nerves at all as the illusion jumped inside the car and sat next to him, polluting the air and caking with dirt the small carpet.

"Clean the car, Connelly!! And change the perfume dispenser! Do I have to make your work too?" Carsten roared, leaving the car by himself, not waiting for the chauffeur to open his door.

"That boy was the best thing that ever happened to that man. Pity he couldn't stand him. Who can?" The man mumbled before driving away.

"You have no idea human, how accurate you're." Pelayo whispered, making the driver shiver.

The trasgu jumped in the elevator a split second before his cape would have been trapped by the slidding doors. "Ignoring me won't make me go away. In fact, I'll become nastier to you... and not giving me food is a bad idea too. I might start to look for it in your neat kitchen."

"You can't. Marcial was always giving you the food. You can't touch anything without our permission, demon."

"So... do you acknowledge my presence, human? About time. I took you almost a full day."

"You're the product of my imagination and several bottles. I'll sleep it off and you will disappear in the morning."

"Good. Sleep it off, but if something happens to him because of your idiocy, I will make you end your days sleeping under a bridge and talking to a cheap bottle of brandy. Ask around about Althorpe and how he finished his days..."

"Is he dead?"

"Do you speak with your illusions? Don't bother to answer human." Pelayo smirked, glad to taunt the man. "Once a donkey, always a donkey. Yes, he's dead. I finished him off a few weeks ago. Nice work, but don't tell Marcial. He wouldn't understand it. That bitch and he messed with his mind more than you can imagine." Pelayo explained with a voice that made Carsten's blood freeze in his veins, The man forced himself to look at the serpentine pattern of the elevator's carpet to hide his terror.

"Good. Fearing me is the best way to start a friendship with me, human." Pelayo smirked, his face contorted in an ugly grin. "Feeding me also helps to keep the trasgu happy."

"I'm not setting a dish for the platypus!! I'm not crazy like that poor lad!"

"Now he's a poor lad? I thought he was a shameless slut. Did you finally realise how badly you need him back?"

"Shut up."

"Or is it that you love him and can't live without him? We're slaves to our passions, human."

"I'll throw that thing to the fire!"

"And lose your only link to Marcial? Besides, it will not help you. You invited me to your house, you fed me, you bought me a comfortable bed, a satchel and allowed me to place my earthly belongings here. You have adopted me, if that could be the term, human."

"This is craziness. You're a bloody ghost!!"

"I'm not a ghost, human. I'm a demon who was a human long time ago. I kept my things and took care of them. Transporting them over so long distances might be challenging and this is why I need a human's help. The vessel allows me to rest, so you need to return me to Marcial if you don't want to spend the rest of your mortal existence with me. Bring another tart home, and you'll see me in action. Why can you buy a film about vampires and believe it and not believe in me?"

"Those things don't exist! You also don't!"

"All right, suit yourself and while you check your beliefs -which won't be very deep rooted if you all can adore a 6 foot dark helmeted warrior pagan idol at lunch time- leave some chicken for my dinner."

"That's not an idol, you brute! It's a character from a film!! It's Lord Darth Vader!!"

"Really? Are you named after an idol? What was your mother thinking? Was she not baptised? All of your servants approach in awe and fear to it, so it must be powerful god."

Carsten doubted between shouting the trasgu at his insolence for rubbing his nickname at his face, the ludicrous idea of her very Calvinist mother being compared with a heathen or being shocked that he was "talking" with an hallucination in the form of a 1.300 years old peasant from Spain.

"I'm not a peasant! I'm the eldest son of the Duke of Cantabria!! Thanks to my people you're still Christians!" Pelayo shouted making Carsten stare like an idiot.

Carsten opened the door and purportedly slammed it at the trasgu's long -imperial- nose, making him yell in outrage. "So, do you want it hard, human? We'll see who lasts long." He growled passing through the door just to find the man drinking at the bar.

\* \* \*

Five days had passed and the human stubbornly clung to his denial. Pelayo was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Never, since the Battle of Guadalete, he had been so frustrated, enraged and furious. "This human's name should have been used as a synonym for stout, obstinate, obdurate, pigheaded, worse than that stupid cow, Bibiana the Social Worker, so bent in denying my existence even after seeing several

proofs.'

Throwing things or destroying the china had proven ineffective. The Dutch would blame the nail, the table, his own clumsiness, the cleaning ladies, etc., etc., etc. He was always finding a perfectly good logic excuse ("explanation," as he would tell) for anything the trasgu might destroy. The new servant was a phlegmatic dummy who only cared to find a place to store Marcial's clothes and was not impressed at all when he returned to a nearly destroyed room, all the boy's belongings scattered all over the floor, after answering the phone. The man only exclaimed: "my, my, what a temper we certainly have, Dr. de Vries," and put everything back in the boxes.

Following the idiot to his work was useless too. The human continued with his routine and purposefully ignored him, even if Pelayo smashed the expensive flat screen in the meeting room, where Carsten was making a presentation for some idiots doing their best to look smart.

"We might be writing the future with HTML5, but some old elements still conspire against us. Let's have a coffee while we talk over our project in the traditional way, gentlemen." Carsten jovially said, perfectly hiding his fury behind a toothpaste propaganda smile.

On the third day after his escapade, Marcial called, but much before the trasgu could jump on Carsten, the man, vulgarly shouted. "Fuck you whore!" and hung it up. Pelayo, in his rightful rage, destroyed with one single thrust of his sword a Mac Book Air. "Next time, it will be your head, human!" He shouted to a bewildered Carsten, sitting in his own library and looking at the smoking white rests over his desk.

"I should stop retaliating on my laptops. Fortunately, the hard disk is in one piece." He said, deciding to continue to ignore that ugly thing, shouting obscenities from its corner. "If it worked for Nash, it should be the same for me. This is the product of my guilt over arguing with him. I shouldn't have done it. He doesn't understand half of the words I'm saying. He liked me for my bad temper."

"Yes, for some unknown reason Marcial falls in love with idiots. First Althorpe, then you. He's infatuated with that man. He ran away with him just to piss me off. Like all children. I'm surrounded by children. Lie down with children and you'll be wet in the morning." The trasgu mumbled.

\* \* \*

The afternoon at the Races and the following dinner with 14 people, all merrily shouting -specially the girls- and some partying in a posh disco afterwards had left Marcial nearly exhausted and suffering from a pounding and merciless headache. He looked tired, lost and miserable when he quietly entered the big living room.

"You said almost nothing tonight, Marcial." Slobodan commented as he removed his jacket and tie, throwing them over a chair, but the boy quickly picked the clothes up and hung them carefully over the chair.

"No one really wanted to hear from me so I kept myself quiet. The girls spoke a lot." He answered weakly smiling at the man who couldn't help to return the smile. "Are you upset because of the races?"

"Not at all, my dear. I like that you tell me the things clearly, but don't do it in front of my men. I have to keep them with a very short leash. They're not nice people like you. They are permanently looking for conflict."

"Bagrat is nice. He doesn't laugh at me, like the others."

Slobodan softly sighed and made a sign to Marcial to come closer. He took the boy's head in his hands, briefly wondering why he didn't jump or felt afraid like all of his lovers had been when he had performed that tender gesture with them, and enjoyed when the boy slightly rubbed his cheek against his palm, trusting him like no one had done in a long time.

"I know, but hear me this. Never again repeat what you did with the horses today. We don't need to do this and I don't want you near my men. The minute they'd find out that you can do that, they'd use you to place their bets or who knows what else, and I don't want that you get mixed with our business. You don't belong to this world and I promise you that I will do everything I can to leave all this behind."

"I miss Pelayo. Do you know when he will be back? He was always knowing what to do." Marcial said sadly. "You do your best to cheer me up, but I'm lost in here."

"Marcial, call again that man if you want your platypus. You told me you can have your friend without it. If he doesn't want to give it back. What should I do? Kill him and get your vessel back?"

"No!! Never that! I will call him tomorrow again. He shouts me and hangs up on me."

"I know, this is why I'm not so sure it's a good idea that you speak with him. He only wants to hurt you. I promised to take care of you as well as Pelayo. I swear that I will leave all this. I'm tired of all that and I'm only 36. I can start again but this time differently. There are people who can help me, for a fee, of course."

"You sound sincere in your words."

"I want to leave all this violence behind. I don't want it any more. I have reached as far as I can. To be one

step higher, I should be more educated or have connections that I don't. From here there's nothing more than the abyss and I don't want to end my life, stabbed in an alley; bleeding alone."

"Pelayo says that you won't change; that you're too deep involved with your world."

"What does he know? Was he not a nobleman leading an Army and now his main concern is which broomstick is the best? Does he not take care of you when before he was throwing his enemies' children to the pyre? We all can change if we want. I will never be the Mother Theresa, I know, but I will stop to earn my life like this. Nothing more illegal. I have more money than I could ever spend."

"You should stop risking your life. Many of the men who were with you would kill you to get your place."

"I know, but I need them for the moment. I have to eliminate them when they think they can rise against me."

## Chapter 22

Several days after the races, Marcial decided to try his luck again with Carsten as he needed and missed Pelayo more than ever. Slobodan had told him to use his new mobile phone because his old one had its battery exhausted and buying a new one was cheaper, without mentioning the roaming costs of a British company. Marcial took from his wallet Carsten's business card and dialled Gloria's phone number, hoping that he could leave a message and that the man would comply with his request if the old lady asked.

"No dear, the doctor hasn't been at the office since four days. He was not feeling well and stayed at home. This Autumn weather is very bad for his lungs. How are you, dear?"

"I'm fine Gloria. Living in Madrid but I miss the platypus. My mother gave it to me and Carsten does not want to return it."

"Darling, he's hurt and behaves like a resentful child. He will give it back to you in no time. Call him home; he's much calmer now. Do you have his number?"

"Yes, I do. Thank you very much Gloria."

"Not at all. You're a good boy Marcial. Try to fix it and come home, darling."

Marcial hung up and took another deep breath before slowly dialling Carsten's private number, He was

well aware that the man hated to be disturbed at home and if he was with the flu, he would be crankier than usual. "He was so cute when he was sulking, his forehead covered by small wrinkles and I wanted to kiss them to make them go away, I also miss him a lot." Marcial briefly thought with his heart hammering his chest.

"De Vries." Carsten roared in the phone, making Marcial's resolution falter.

"Hello Carsten. Please don't hung up or shout. It's important what I have to tell you."

"Well, if it's the Spanish whore." Carsten gloated, making the trasgu rush from the kitchen where he had been boiling a strange stew for several hours. "You caught an STD and want to tell it to me?"

"I don't know what is that but you have something that belongs to me. The platypus and Pelayo's things. Can you give them back? I need them. Please." Marcial pleaded.

"It's not my fault if you're a stupid whore who can't remember how to pack!" Carsten shouted,. furious that the only thing the boy cared about was that fluffy and fat thing.

"Please give it back to me. I'll pay the postage. Just put them on a box and.."

"Come for them, whore."

"Carsten, please, you're not ready to live with a trasgu. You don't know them and have no idea how evil they can be. People fears them where I come from. First they start with minor things like destroying your dishes or frightening the cows, but later they kill all your cattle, your crops and don't stop till they kill you. You have to respect them and feed them or they'd be the nastier thing on this earth."

"You're a shameless whore! You fuck with another man and send it to me! Do you think I'm going to lift a finger for you?"

"I didn't fuck with Slobodan. We made love, like we used to do. He explained me now the difference! I don't understand half of what you say!" Marcial shouted back, desperate and the urgency for crying stronger than before.

"You come with that now? You're not even able to ask for forgiveness after frolicking in another's man bed? What kind of slow witted whore are you?"

"You never told me the things clearly! Like now! What's frolicking?"

"How clearer do you need besides "I love you"? No, you only played with me and now you found someone better and ran after him before he would realise what an idiot you are. I will be very happy when he throws you into one of his clubs or to the streets."

"Why are you so mean? Give my toy back! It's not yours! I took nothing from you!"

"Only my heart and my life. Piss off, freak!" Carsten shouted back, a pang of remorse biting harshly his heart when he heard the boy sobbing on the other side of the line. More furious than before he smashed the phone against the table.

Pelayo's rage knew no limits and he was unable to control himself any longer when his right fist connected with the human's face with all the power he could muster. The man flew the room, hitting himself against the wall and falling like a broken wall. For a second, the trasgu thought that he had killed him like that other time several decades ago when a mortal tried to touch one of the village's children, but the human was only in shock.

"You ruined the only opportunity we had to know where he's! Your selfishness is unheard of!!! Idiot!!! I'm going to kill you slow and painfully!!"

"You don't exist," Carsten muttered horrified, his left hand touching that cold liquid running from his head. He stared at the blood in his fingers, still unable to believe that it was his; that the acute pain in his back was the result of flying more than 2 metres through a desert room and his body smashing the wall.

"I hit, therefore I'm, human." Pelayo growled. "Heed well Marcial's advise, human. I'm a demon, not a fairy or a nymph! I enjoyed to cause pain before and still do."

"Those things don't exist. They're old women's tales."

"All right. Ask the others who had seen proofs of my presence if a sword, a fibula and a cross are not enough material evidence for that thick skull you have the nerve to call head. Call Marcial's social worker, Bibiana, the stoutest cow I ever met. Ask the neighbours in that village. That doctor friends of yours is almost convinced that I exist. He can understand Latin and tested Marcial several times. Ask your man, the soldier, to check my weapon again. Eat the from the bloody stew that's boiling over there! If you still believe, everything is a product of your imagination, then do us all a favour and jump from the window. The world doesn't need another selfish twerp!"

"How can you be?"

"I'm, that's all that matters to you. Should I tell you how I met Marcial and about his life back in

Asturias? You always wanted to meet that "Spanish punk," Pelayo suggested considering that perhaps another strategy would serve him better. 'After all, its the carrot what makes the donkey walk.'

Carsten rearranged his back against the wall, pulling his long legs against his chest, still dazed from the hit and the shock. "How?" He croaked.

"Now we finally are having a civilized talk. It only took you two weeks to accept the truth. But first, let's leave something very clear human. I'm no punk nor a peasant. My name is Pelayo, eldest son of Pedro, Duke of Cantabria and I was born in Amaya two years after it was named again the capital of the Duchy in our Lord's year of 682."

\* \* \*

Marcial had spent the whole afternoon sitting in his room, trying to read a book as Slobodan had a business meeting with a man called Georg and Yoseb and they didn't want him around. Even Bagrat had been rudely dismissed and Marcial missed the opportunity to escape with the man to the park. The big city was suffocating for him and he missed more than ever his forest back in Asturias, when Pelayo would show him the animals and plants.

The TV was too loud and difficult to follow as everybody seemed to be permanently fighting with the others sitting at the table over a singer's romance, one of the Big Brothers' activities or the misadventures of a bullfighter's mistress. Cartoons were for children and he was already an adult, and the films were too complicated to follow. The news were depressing. So he sat and read a book with short stories.

"Get your jacket and we go out." Slobodan ordered him from the door frame not even waiting for an answer as he dashed for his own bedroom. Marcial sighed as he disliked with all his soul to go out with him. People were vulgar -although they believed to be so elegant and classy; they were nothing like Doctor Adam or Peter- the music was loud and the lights were hurting his eyes.

Slobodan was already waiting for him, along with the other two men, impatiently tapping the floor with his foot. "Marcial, we don't have the whole day for you!" He barked and the boy jumped inside the big black Porsche Cayenne, unwilling to further enrage the man.

The ride was made in silence and Marcial could feel that the men were nervous when they quickly spoke in that strange language of theirs. The car stopped in front of an old looking warehouse in the outskirts of Madrid.

"Come with me, Marcial. Be quiet and do what the Gypsy tells you." Slobodan warned the boy as he

slightly pushed him towards the entrance.

Although the night was very warm, Marcial shuddered violently when he entered the vaulted and spacious room, scantily lit. Four other men were inside and the boy recognised one, Juan, who had been at the races that day. The Gypsy was sitting in front of a battered table, busy cleaning his weapon. Marcial couldn't name what he was feeling but it wasn't good. It forebode of pain and death.

"Hello boss, the Colombians agree to your conditions and want to deal. We'll meet where you know." The Gypsy growled. "What's he doing here?"

"Baby sitting you, Gypsy." Slobodan said in a very low voice. "Take care of him. I'll take Juan and the Canicas with me."

"Great." The Gypsy mumbled. "Sit over there boy and be quiet. I'm too busy to play with you."

Marcial did exactly as he was told and sat next to the man, his eyes wide open, looking at the metal pieces scattered over the table.

"Be nice and remember what I told you, boy." Slobodan said.

"If you enter in a windowless red room, stay away from the door and get down the minute the man there leaves the room." Marcial said out of the blue, not truly realising he had spoken.

All the men in the room stared at the boy, who cast his gaze down, embarrassed to be the centre of their attention. Slobodan only gaped at him and Georg nervously gulped as he was certain that this one was a warlock, after that hot looking woman, Lisa, had told him many things about him.

"Or shoot the decorator." Yoseb giggled like a hyena. "Let's go, boss."

"Yeah, right." Slobodan shrugged, not paying attention any more to Marcial.

\* \* \*

"One very cold night in winter, when Marcial was about ten years older, I was with my companions in misfortune -speaking over the futility of life at the roadside that leads from Ribadesella to Parres- Lugan, Rodrigo and I heard a thunderous noise a few yards ahead..."

"Speaking over the.." Carsten repeated in disbelief.

"All right, we were drinking some cider the locals had given Lugan so he would stop scaring the cows and sharing some old time stories! Do you want the story or not?" The trasgu huffed visibly upset again with the man who had dared to question his word.

"Yes, of course, sorry for the interruption." Carsten mumbled. This thing was very touchy and nasty.

"As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, we heard a deafening sound and we decided to investigate it."

"Investigate or scavenge?"

"Investigate, of course. We're not ghouls, who, by the way, are noble creatures and very shy. They would never attack a living thing and they fear, with certain reason, the humans. Trasgus prefer real food, not bodies. Human meat is sweet but you eventually tire of it."

"That was really unnecessary to explain." Carsten mumbled already sickened at the images flashing through his mind.

"Don't interrupt me any longer. We saw a small car almost buried under a big truck. I believe the biggest vehicle skidded on some ice colliding against the smaller one. The woman inside the car was dead and in the back, there was a small child, almost ready to meet our Creator." Pelayo told, crossing himself at this part. "We were about to leave as there was nothing else to do but the boy briefly opened the eyes and looked at me -when it was certainly impossible that he could have been able to see me. You only do it when we let you- and smiled very weakly. In that moment, he reminded me my youngest child, Childeric. I had him with one of the maidens -a truly exquisite woman- at the Court in Toledo. I asked Lugan and Rodrigo to help me to remove the harness trapping him to the car. I took him to a side of the road and stayed with him till the other humans arrived. He kept looking at me, all covered in blood, all the time. Strangely, he clutched that thing, the platypus. Perhaps he already knew his mother was dead. I don't know. I never asked. Lugan said that he was not the usual kind of mortals as he was able to see us and was not afraid of us."

"Some hours later, another car passed and the men there called for help. Marcial was still alive but had fallen into a deep sleep and I thought that it was for the best that he would go with his mother. But he chose to stay. The humans took him to a hospital and I followed him as I couldn't leave him all alone, surrounded by so many strangers."

"They cut his brain several times and thought that he was going to die or never come back from his sleep. The doctors called his grandmother -a truly powerful meiga, witch- and told her that he was going to be an idiot or a vegetable for the rest of his life. No one believed for a minute that he was going to live. So I

stayed with him, just to prevent some hot headed human would kill him just to act out of mercy. I knew he wanted to stay. His grandmother did her best for him and also stayed. One day, he just woke up and started to quickly recover but he was not the same child. According to his grandmother he had been a brilliant child, very clever and inquisitive in school, but now he couldn't remember anything for more than two minutes; he was wilful, furious with everybody and crying for his mother. He was having very violent seizures every day. He was very afraid of the doctors and was able to see all those who had departed in distress. Like many of his family before him, he could also see the humans' heart and their future actions. In my time, people like him were very sought after and respected whenever you could find one. Now, you call them warlocks or sorcerers and despise their gift, but when I was young, it was a great blessing to have one of them in your village."

"Did he really see what happened with the lettuce people? The betrayal of Atomic Corp., people?"

"I don't know how he does it. It's not my field of expertise, but I don't think he had really seen the murders, only felt the victims' pain and as for the others... didn't you realise he always knows what you want? He can feel your emotions and thoughts much better than any human I've seen in my many years on this Earth. Pay attention, next time he tells you something!"

"What happened then?"

"He was in the hospital for more than six months, learning to walk again as his legs were severely broken, learning to speak new words and suffering many good willed but mistaken doctors. It was very hard to speak with him because he would forget everything the minute you have told him. "Wash your hands" and he was going to the sink and then stayed petrified in front of it not knowing how he had came there or what was he supposed to do. Doctors recommended to send him to an institution as the grandmother was old, sick and certainly didn't know what to do with Marcial."

"Why did you stay with him? He told me you're supposed to look after children."

"Not really. We look after the forests and the animals living in them. Diana couldn't care less about humans. That bitch only wanted to humiliate us and forced us to do labour work, like cleaning a house as women do and taking care of the forests. Her power has decreased over the centuries and she's not what she used to be, but we, trasgus, are more powerful than before as humans believe in us and respect us. Go to the North and you will find people telling about us and fearing us. We are demons, not nurses."

"I decided to stay with Marcial because he asked me to. When he woke up, he saw me again and smiled. "Don't go away you too," he just said and I asked him what he loved the best so I could use it as a vessel. To my utter embarrassment, he chose that platypus. Honestly, I was expecting a ring, a talisman or something in that direction, but he immediately went for that half duck, half beaver creature, obviously

the product of a drunken sailor's story."

"Platypuses do exist. They live in a far away island called Australia."

"Well, they should keep them there. Anyway, I've should have known better than letting a child to chose." Pelayo said, visibly disturbed that he had freely admitted to the human one of his most embarrassing mistakes ever made in his long existence.

"Why did he have to choose the vase?"

"Vessel, human. It must be something the human feels close to. We need the energy you have to nurture our own power, but you have to give us permission to use it."

"Like with the food. You can't touch anything unless Marcial has given it to you. This is why he was always setting a dish for you!" Carsten realised.

"Yes, that's a nice gesture from him, but I don't need to eat. I like it because it reminds me when I was a mortal."

"You can't touch our things until we allow you to!"

"It won't help you because you have already given your consent to me and can't withdraw it!" Pelayo shouted somewhat sounding childish. "The best you can do is return the platypus to Marcial, along with my things."

"Tell me more about his life and I will consider to give you dinner, demon."

"You learn fast for a human. The grandmother took him back to her village and I went with him as it was deep in the forest. She had no idea of what to do with him and put him to work in the orchard because he was very good with plants and could look after them. Thanks to that orchard they ate because she had no gold at all and many times there was not enough food for them. He stopped going to school because he couldn't remember a thing and it was impossible. I decided to school him on the forest and the first thing I did was to teach him Latin as its structure is very complicate and forces you to meditate before you speak. Contrary to what everybody believed, he can learn, but you have to repeat the lesson many times and permanently ask him what he has understood. He needs to put the knowledge into practice immediately and then he remembers. It's as if the information would be stored through another way. He slowly improved over the years. I taught him mathematics, rhetoric, logic, Roman law, literature, some Greek, natural sciences and all the things I remembered from my time and what I could learn in the old encyclopedia "El Tesoro de la Juventud" written at the turn of the previous century and thrown to the

trash by some people. I was the Visigoth Ambassador in Rome under Pope Constatius for three years and a Royal Advisor for Rodrigo in Toledo till the Battle of Guadalete. I was not a brute. I studied in the Ravenna court with the best teachers they had. I did my best with what I had, considering that the old witch didn't like me at all and said that I was ruining his life."

"What happened when that man came?"

"It was a huge mistake to let him come closer to Marcial. In my times, it was normal that you would give your children to another man to be educated after they turned 7. Marcial was already 13 and he looked really interested in him. First, he was very kind, giving the boy some sweets and only asking him to clean his brushes or take care of his garden. He started to teach him this barbaric language we speak now and I allowed because I was well aware that my knowledge was insufficient for these times. But this man had unnatural desires towards Marcial and I wanted to take him away. The witch prevented me to do it with her sorcery and protected the house where he was. I couldn't enter any longer and this Althorpe did all what he wanted with Marcial as he was almost like a little puppy, always eager to please people. I tried to speak the boy out of this, but his grandmother always pressed that he needed someone to take care of him when she would be away and that man was the best he could get as he was retarded. Marcial thinks he loved him but he never did. He has no idea what love is. He liked him even if he was afraid every time the man touched him. He liked to be called "beautiful" and have something to eat afterwards. He was always hungry."

"If you couldn't enter the house, how could he have seen you?"

"One night, when Marcial was almost 15, the man took some mushrooms and bragged that he didn't believe in old wives tales and invited me in. That lifted the spell and I could enter to settle our score. He saw me and attacked Marcial before I could stop him. He threw him over the window and the boy nearly died again. The old neighbours stopped him but the police arrived before they would have stoned that monster. Many of them liked Marcial as he was one of the last young ones remaining in that forsaken place. He was seriously hurt, but the worst for him was not the wounds but the fact that Althorpe had hurt him."

"This is why he was sent to that institution."

"Institution? That was a jail for young delinquents and he had done nothing wrong! Fortunately, I went with him or those thugs would have done unspeakable things to him! I had to beat three of them to the point of death because they wanted to rape him! They were robbing his medications and food! The guards were worse than those boys and I had to teach manners to several. Finally, they left my boy alone and the authorities send him to the hospital, where the psychiatrists immediately filled him with drugs telling him that he was crazy and I was non existent! Fighting with them was impossible so we agreed

that he would obey them in everything. The stupid cow and stoutest woman I've ever met in my life, with that certainty that only ignorance can give you, laughed at his schooling and sent him back to finish the elementary school saying that he couldn't read or write properly! We had to start again to read all the "new material" and learn to write with new syntax and calligraphy. Learn all over the modern Science and History."

"You were his teacher?"

"Who else? The teachers in that school were complete ignorants only willing to give marks and pass him. None could understand his problem and thought that he was idiot or lazy, like the others boys. Those had nothing that a good flogging and some days in the pillory, couldn't have cured. "Poor children from a dysfunctional home." Whores where also throwing their bastards to the streets and for that we had monasteries or kind women who took them in!"

"When he turned 18, he was released from that prison and he returned home. The witch was very old and dying as all the neighbours hated her for giving her grandchild to a pervert. No one was speaking with her any longer. I think those peasants would have prevented her to do what she did if they would have known. They were kind hearted people, gross and foolish too, but good and decent."

"Marcial mentioned that the locals didn't like you."

"It was not my fault that Lugan and Rodrigo decided to move to that village too. To have three trasgus around can be a lot for the humans, specially if you are like Lugan. He's always looking for trouble and something to drink. If they would have complained less and leave a jar of cider out, like in the old times, no one would have had troubles with him. When the witch died a year and a half later, Marcial had to leave because although he was welcome, we were not. We travelled to Madrid but Lugan and Rodrigo decided to move to Cangas and Covadonga. We had not much money but he managed to get a job in a supermarket till he started to work in that bar day and night, studying whenever he could."

"This is when he met that Georgian man."

"To my disgrace. Marcial saved his life and that slug fell for him. I never wanted to have him around as he was bad and he would have drawn Marcial to his own degenerated environment. That boy is like a child, totally innocent and kind. His own light attract the evil people and he comes to them out of sympathy."

"I'm not evil!"

"No, you're strong headed, narcissist, selfish, childish and whimsical. It's a real improvement if we

compare you with what he got so far. At least you don't want to harm him and do to the best of your abilities -very low in my opinion- for him. I know that he could never fend by himself. He needs a husband, and a good one, one who's ready to take a lifetime commitment with him, like you."

"What's making you think that I want him back? He ran away with another man!"

"Did he? Or did you not press him till he had to escape to keep his sanity? Did you not throw him out of the office that same morning? Did you not call him a lunatic all the time? Did you not consider him a slut much before Slobodan would have appeared? You two are guilty of what happened. He for running without thinking and you for acting without listening."

"I don't want him back!"

"Good, perhaps that doctor, Adam, is better for him. He's almost convinced of my existence based on the evidence he has gathered about "Marcial ramblings" as you call them. He's a truly educated man and would be good for the boy. Marcial could better and more easily understand the meaning of love next to a man like him than with one like you. Hell, I'm sure that murderer is more sensible and sensitive than you!"

"Be quiet, demon!"

"So human, would you return me or do you want to stay with me and hear a few more truths about yourself?"

"No, Marcial has to come for you. I will not present battle at the enemy's territory!"

"I see your strategy now, but it's dangerous. Marcial could be hurt!"

"He won't be! That man took great care to take him away and Marcial is too sweet to fight with anybody. He will return for his platypus and I will be waiting for him."

"Slobodan will never let him go away and much less to get me! He knows about me and hates me like you do!"

"I don't hate you. I want to get rid of you which is something different. Go and eat your dinner, demon!"

"If something happens to him....!"

"Yeah, yeah. I heard you several times. You will cut me into pieces, feed me to the pigs or make me live

under a bridge. This is my battle and I'm not yet decided to fight it."

"What kind of man are you that your mate is stolen and you sit and cry?" The trasgu spat with contempt.

"So your grandiose plan is to go and use your sword?"

"It's better than sitting, drinking and whining!"

"What guarantees do I have if I rescue him from the clutches of that man -and let me remind you that he happily jumped into them- that he won't run after a Yakuza boss in two years?"

"That for the first time in his life, Marcial truly loves a human being. He does not know it yet, but that night he cried in fear that you wouldn't like him any more. He feared you would think he's not good for you. He's not polite with you, he loves you and copes with you, human, even if you're mean to him. You should have sat and listened to him and you should have explained him what you understood for love and stop dazing him on a permanent basis."

## **Chapter 23**

"I hate waiting and taking care of you." The Gypsy huffed while he finished to mount his weapon.

"You'd probably don't know how to play poker."

"No, I don't." Marcial answered as Slobodan had clearly told him that he didn't want him to gamble any more and his granny also forbade it.

"Gypsy, playing with this Dodo must be impossible!" The young brunette man smirked while he circled the table to stand in front of Marcial, smiling menacingly. "Must be a great fuck, if the boss copes with him."

"Be careful, Martín, the boss doesn't like that you mess with his things. Take a look at Dimitri and see how he paid for his insults."

"Hey, pretty boy, can you suck me?" Martin asked casually, rising an eyebrow. "We won't tell if you're good."

"Motherfucker." The Gypsy muttered. "Leave the boy alone or you'll be sorry."

"What's gonna happen? Will he tell? You said he's half witted."

"I don't want to clean the floor after the Georgian spreads your guts around. I had enough with doing it once with that policewoman. Get the fuck out and take care of the cars."

Martín looked at the Gypsy incredulously. Had he just been sent away? "Fuck you." He snorted.

"Every time you want it, sweetheart." The Gypsy smirked. "I wonder why the boss brought you here. Perhaps he thinks you bring him luck and he's gonna need it if the Colombians want war."

\* \* \*

For the fifth time that morning, Carsten wondered if it was a good idea what he was about to do. He looked again at the small piece of paper with the phone number written in pencil. "Bibiana Fernández de la Sierra, Social Worker, +3496...."

'How do you ask this? Hello, one of your boys used to carry a demon around?' He pondered but the need to know if the illusion was real was too very strong. 'Well, Nash got a Nobel Prize after all.' He picked up the phone and dialled the number, hoping that the woman would be at her desk at the "Consejería de Minoridad" and she wouldn't be a legalistic bureaucrat.

"Fernández speaking." A female voice answered the phone.

"Good Morning, Dr. Fernández de la Sierra." Carsten said, perfectly aware that Spanish loved to hear their titles. "We have not been introduced. My name is Carsten de Vries and I'm the CEO of a London based software company, Z3 Solutions and I would like to ask you some questions about a former case of yours."

"We don't reveal information about our cases. It's forbidden by law as they're minors under the State's custody."

"Yes, I'm perfectly aware of that. It's just one of my employees was under your care in 2006 or 2007 and he has shown some peculiarities in his character that makes very difficult to make a decision about him. His name is Marcial Fernández Martínez. He's a good boy and I have no complaints about his performance but..." The deep and prolonged sigh he heard on the other side interrupted his speech.

"Yes, I remember Marcial, one of the saddest cases I've ever had. Is he in London now?"

"Yes, he lives in London and works for me. Should I give you his Spanish Social Security number so you believe that I know him?"

"No, I'm looking at the your company's web page and your name is certainly listed as CEO."

"Yes, he works as assistant to my secretary, Gloria. I can't complain about his job, but there are many, how would I say it?"

"Strange and unexplainable events perspiring around him?" She helped him. "I know. Marcial is a very good boy. Strange, but he means no harm. You can deduct his salary from your company's taxes as he's a disabled person. I think it was a 30% what he got because of that strange amnesia."

"Yes, I know. The doctors confirmed the original diagnosis, but is his character what I'm concerned about. He explained me that he was in your institution because of an incident with a paedophile when he was 15 years old."

"I'm not supposed to discuss this, sir."

"Please, his behaviour has been very erratic and we want to have all the facts before reaching any conclusions." Carsten said, pleading very softly.

"It's true and he was deeply affected, but not in the way you might think. This man abused him since he was 13 years old and nearly murdered him when he was 15. We took Marcial into custody till he turned 18 when he -against all recommendations- decided to return to his grandmother's house. In more than 20 years of work, I have never seen a case of neglect like this boy. He was undernourished, unschooled and no one had given him his medications although he had a state pension to buy them."

"That's the strange part, Madam. You say he's unschooled but he's able to read and write well in Latin and Greek, according to some Oxford graduated people. I've seen several examples of his handwriting in Spanish and it's good, nothing from an illiterate boy. Once my secretary explained him some rules of English Grammar, his spelling showed a great improvement. His knowledge of Mathematics and Logics is good."

"When we got him, we couldn't understand almost a word from him. His syntax was very old, his grammar was horrible, old and he couldn't understand the most basic and normal expressions. He knew how to write but with a pen and ink, and had no control over a ball pen. His knowledge of Maths was good but old and in Science... Well, he was still in the penicillin and telegraph times, although he knew what a phone was."

"I would be surprised if most of your boys know what penicillin is." Carsten mumbled.

"He didn't want to come with us despite all what had been done to him. I never saw a Stockholm Syndrome like that. Finally, he agreed to stay and take his medications and restart school again. We could never mix him with the other boys as it was very problematic for them."

"Problematic for them? Marcial? He couldn't hurt a fly." Carsten snorted.

"The doctors believe he suffers from a multiple personalities disorder, although they couldn't prove it. It's the only explanation. Every time he was with the other boys, the later would be hurt in some way. We could never established who had started the fight, but Marcial was never hurt and the others ended in the infirmary or in the hospital. He was always saying that he had done nothing, that it was Pelayo's fault. The doctors believed that this was his other persona."

"Pelayo isn't a platypus he carries along?"

"Yes, I think that was at the beginning, but we removed the toy per the doctor's advise and returned only when he left the institution. No, Pelayo is the way he calls himself when he's violent. No boy ever wanted to be near him."

"Why didn't you send him to a special institution?"

"We tried, but the judge and the forensic psychiatrist didn't consider him as legally incapably. He even discussed some Roman Law with his honor!!" She said very frustrated.

"Did no one checked what was he speaking? Could have not been that dialect of Asturias?"

"Yes we did; it was very old Spanish form, from the XV or XVI century. He said that he had learned reading old books. At home he was speaking the dialect or English. He comes from a remote area and his family kept him apart civilization as he was considered an imbecile."

"How could he know all those things if he was an illiterate? He couldn't possibly learn Latin by himself!"

"According to him, his friend Pelayo taught him, but we believe that the old priest in the village took pity on him and schooled him against his grandmother's wishes."

"So this Pelayo, does not exist, right?"

"Of course!! Since when a 1.300 years old demon takes care of a child?" She laughed.

"I never said it was a demon."

"Look, those things don't exist. Perhaps the boy suffers from schizophrenia." She said very nervously.  
"He's a good kid and if you put him to do something repetitive, like boxing computers, he won't give you troubles and work very hard. Good day to you, sir!" she shouted at the end of the sentence and hung up.

'The demon was right, she's the stoutest cow I'll ever know.'

\* \* \*

Yoseb couldn't get out of his mind Marcial's words. Perhaps the little prick was right and this all was a set up. Colombians never retreated without leaving a trail of bodies behind and after "Martínez job" they had been more than amiable, offering first a 37% for their pride's sake and finally complying with Slobodan's demands.

"Boss, what if your boy is right?" He asked in Georgian.

"They wouldn't dare. It's going against the whole organization and they have already felt our combined power in their homeland."

"Maybe they do want war." Yoseb insisted. "None of us would have believed it a few months ago, but they proved us wrong. Look what they did to the Head."

"And they're still bagging their families and revolutionaries. Most of their money is lost." Slobodan replied. "They can't be so stupid."

"Human idiocy has no limits boss."

"Let's keep the eyes open. I don't trust them too." Slobodan replied, also thinking that perhaps his angel was right. "Do we have some Willy Pete with us?" White phosphorus grenades were a highly educational device while dealing with the competition.

"M34 only. The last M15 finished several months ago."

"The bigger the better. Tell Bagrat to gather a team and join us discreetly. No one should leave that house alive if they want to fight. Is that understood, gentlemen?"

"Good, no whiny Spanish around. It would be like in the old times." Georg smiled with infinite pleasure.

\* \* \*

Carsten still couldn't get used to the idea of finding the trasgu in his kitchen. It was horrible. The demon always insisted on cooking as the new butler was more efficient than Jelle had ever been and he felt "displaced." 'Great, now I care about a demon's feelings,' the man thought darkly when he saw the long figure leaning over his Le Creuset designer's pot, stirring something that was relatively good smelling.

His chef had also quitted the moment he had found one of the demon's stews in the refrigerator along with some pigs' noses. Carsten shuddered at the memory and remembered that he should better never ask where on Earth -or Hell- the thing had found those hideous items. Fortunately, that "delicacy" was very appreciated by Asturians demons and the thing had devoured it.

"We have Fabas Asturianas con manos de cerdo." The trasgu announced triumph ally.

"Come again?"

"Fabas are those white beans from Asturias. Your butler finally got them at a new Spanish shop. He's more cooperative than the previous one."

"I know what Fabas are, I'm concerned about the second part of the recipe. Did you mean pettitoes?" Carsten asked looking at the pot as if it were Macbeth witches' cauldron, and fearing the worst.

"Of course. Do you know how difficult is to get them here? Butchers in this city throw everything good to the trash."

"I'm not hungry tonight. You eat and don't wait for me." Carsten answered quickly.

"You don't want some? It's very good."

"I take your word, but it has cured ham and I should take care of my blood pressure." Carsten added, doing his best to avoid to hurt the demon's sensibility as he was very temperamental and destructive - exactly as Marcial had predicted.

"All right, more for me. I wish the boys were here..." Pelayo sighed dejectedly.

"But they're not, right?" Carsten asked with growing concern..

"No, they stayed in Cangas de Onís, where the tourists and good restaurants are. They can't travel so far."

"Good," Carsten sighed visibly relieved. The last he needed in his life were two more drunk, rowdy and bully demons, cleaning and cooking in his flat. For the fourth time that week, he fought against the desire of packing the platypus in a box and send it by post to Madrid. Unfortunately, the boy had forgotten to give him an address.

\* \* \*

The chosen meeting place was an old farm near the mountains of Madrid -at the Colombians insistence. 'Idiots, they chose a battleground exactly like what we have at home. They don't even know how to operate here. I hope the boys don't feel too homesick after this.' Slobodan thought briefly, remembering his old days in the Red Army. The house looked in the dark like one of those old colonial buildings that had seen better days, now totally abandoned but not in ruins. Georg placed himself next to him. Bagrat and his people should have taken their positions by now as he heard a soft tongue clicking as confirmation. 'The show starts' muttered Yoseb when five middle aged men came out of the house.

"Glad you finally made it, Majardze. Punctuality is not your best feature, it seems."

"We got lost on the way and we're poor immigrants, not speaking well the language." Slobodan answered slightly pouting.

"Leave your weapons and we go inside."

"Inside that hut? No way, this suit alone cost 4.000 Euros. Do you want to kill me with the my men's laundry bills, Rodríguez Puebla?"

"Don't insult my ancestor's birth place!" The tallest man shouted, his Caribbean accent very clear.

"Don't make us all dirty and ask your mother to clean it before you invite your friends to play if your sister is too busy with her boyfriends." Yoseb answered, with a flash of energy going through his back. The moments before the killing were the best as he could feel the growing fear of the second line men.

"Yoseb, please, calm down! I suffer from claustrophobia Rodríguez Puebla. If you want to talk, bring a chair outside."

"Fine, get your weapons down and we'll talk inside. You're surrounded."

"Really? Call your men and see if they're still alive. My people takes good care of me."

The Colombian swallowed hard as the Georgian's dark eyes were the closest thing he had ever seen to Hell.

"Colombians were more impressive during "La Violencia." We used to study your techniques, but now it seems to be a lost art for your people. All mechanically done. It doesn't work like that." Slobodan slowly explained.

"We don't want troubles, we agreed to pay what you want. You're breaking your word!"

"My word? What about yours? All this happened because you didn't respect us. You thought you could impose your laws here and murder me. No Indian or "Mestizo" will ever tell me what to do."

"Martínez approach was a mistake..."

"Yes, of course." Slobodan cut the man off. "Your death will teach your friends how to deal with us in the future... if any of them is left alive."

One of the younger Colombians lost his calm and attempted to shoot the Georgian but a dagger accurately sank in his heart, making his body hit the ground with a thud. Georg and Yoseb were too fast for the remaining three men and had them wailing in pain from the wounds they received in a fast lightening and vicious offensive.

From the house, the still living Colombians, fired back with semi automatic weapons but two of Bagrat's men dropped their grenades through the window, setting the house in a burst of white shinning fire, scorching everything in with its deadly smoke. The ghostly colour of the phosphor flames was painful to the eyes but the men couldn't help to stare as they lightened the sky. The foul smell of the scorched human meat at 5.000 degrees was like a balm to their desire to kill.

Slobodan was the first to come out of the trance and took by the throat one of the surviving men.

"Do you want to die fast or slow? Answer me."

"Tell you nothing!"

"Which colour were the walls inside?"

"What? Don't know," the man gasped, struggling to breathe as Slobodan increased pressure to obtain some results.

"Purple or deep red, couldn't see well, boss." Bagrat shrugged while he recovered his favourite knife from a dead body. "Give them to us, sir. Everything went too fast to our liking." He asked when he was

cleaning it with a rug that he threw to the burning house. "Are you cold Yoseb? You might be getting the flu." He added when the tall man shivered.

"No, Bagrat. Deep red, I would say. Like this bull's blood colour they like so much here." Zurab added in a jovial tone under the astonished looks of Slobodan, Georg and Yoseb, too shocked to move or speak.

"What?" Zurab blurted, upset that his comrades were looking at him as if he were an alien. "My fucking wife forced me to spend the whole fucking day at the fucking Leroy Merlin, looking for a fucking new colour for the living room!"

## Chapter 24

Georg and Yoseb were silent in the ride back to the old warehouse, still wondering why Slobodan's had forced them to go back to their homes to shower and change their suits and destroy the worn clothes, exactly like the whole team had been ordered. It wasn't like the Spanish CSI would come to that forsaken place to inquire about some dead drug dealers and the ones who could be concerned about the deaths, already knew who was responsible.

"Boss, are we not overdoing it? In a way we were solving Spain's problems with aliens. No one will look for them." Yoseb protested feebly.

"I don't care about the police." Slobodan answered dryly.

"It's true, isn't it? The boy is like a fucking medium. He can see the future. Lisa told me that he can even know what you're thinking or what you want in advance." Georg asked bluntly as he was sure that as driver his boss wouldn't retaliate.

"Do you take advice from a 30 year old slut who dresses like a school girl? That you like teenagers doesn't mean that they're good for you." Slobodan snorted in a derogative way, making the other man flinch at the insult at his girlfriend.

"He got them all right, didn't he? Even the last race. Bagrat said nothing about his winnings that day and he's like a child when he makes some extra money." Yoseb fired.

"And your suggestion is...? We kidnap all the witches in Madrid and put them to work for us? It was a fucking coincidence! Spanish paint everything in red! It's their favourite colour. It's even on their damned flag!" Slobodan exploded and doing his best to conceal the growing fear that their underlings would discover Marcial's abilities. "I only won a few Euros with the first and last race. Try you next time. If

you're so certain of what you're telling, bet 10.000 or better a million Euros!"

"Perhaps, I'll do that, boss." Georg said.

\* \* \*

Marcial was very happy to see Slobodan again and he nearly jumped to his neck, not caring at all the scornful look he got from the Gypsy. Slobodan disentangled from the boy, only patting his cheek affectionately.

"Gypsy, I have some items for your people to dismantle, can you do it?"

"Sure thing boss. Good quality?"

"BMW" Slobodan said as the Spanish softly whistled.

"Will be ready by tomorrow afternoon, boss. He was nice. Didn't give me troubles," the Gypsy told referring to Marcial. "He stayed in his chair and was mute while I was checking some numbers. It's not so bad to have him around."

"You have no idea how good it is to have him around." Georg muttered.

"Shut up or I'll do it!" Slobodan roared, immediately regretting his outburst as Marcial looked terrified at his yelling.

"I'm only showing my appreciation for your boy's abilities, boss. Nothing more." Georg sauntered, deciding to go for a challenge, courage taken from their previous killing.

"Really? I thought I have told you to be quiet, perhaps I should make you silent." Slobodan immediately reacted to the challenge.

"Would like to see it."

"Good." Slobodan growled, pushing Marcial aside and his hand going to his interior breast pocket.

"Boss, it's too late to make me mop the floor! Please, let him go!" The Gypsy interfered as a fight between those two would be to death and he couldn't afford to lose Slobodan's support and being in the middle of a war between Yoseb and Georg was the worst possible scenario for him and his people.

"If Pelayo were here, he would help you without problems, Gypsy." Marcial commented dejectedly, as he remembered his lost friend."

Yoseb erupted in laughter, secretly glad that the boy had spoken, inadvertently saving Georg's life. That man with his arrogant attitude was everyday closer to make a mistake and he would be there to finish him off. "Boss, the boy is right. We're running low of "Mr. Clean" and the Gypsy is getting too old to do it." He chuckled as the Spanish made an offensive gesture with his finger.

"It seems your life has been spared twice tonight. Don't get used to it, Georg." Slobodan growled as killing a man in front of Marcial would be too much for his frail angel. "Let's go home, boy. I have enough for one night." He said trying to sound as gentle as he could.

\* \* \*

Marcial was very nervous and afraid, unable to locate the source of his uneasiness, when they reach Slobodan's tall building. He was still not understanding why the man had taken him to that warehouse and why he had left him alone for more than six hours as it was already dawn, the soft warm red lights dancing on the firmament.

"Hi, Xavier." He greeted the doorman, very busy cleaning the street, not yet dressed with his uniform.

"Good morning, sir." The man formally greeted the boy as he was with the owner as he bowed the head towards him.

"Come Marcial, is getting late." Slobodan ordered sharply and the boy ran after him.

"Poor boy, that man is not good for him. He should go back to his own land and never set a foot in a big city again." The doorman shook his head. "That foreigner will get him into troubles."

In the elevator, Slobodan asked Marcial if he wanted breakfast as he had nothing for dinner; "yes, that would be nice. I'm hungry."

"I'm also" Slobodan answered, hungry for something else.

"I'll fix you something, the maids are not here yet." Marcial softly offered as the man laced his arms around his waist, pulling him against his broad chest. Slobodan's right hand cupped the boy's face as he reverently caressed his cheek before sweetly kissing his forehead. "You're my angel again, Marcial. Thank you," he muttered almost inaudibly, not missing the puzzled look from Marcial.

The elevator halted and without releasing his boy, Slobodan opened the door and slammed it as he started to ravenously kiss his love. "God, your skin is so soft as if it were made of feathers." He muttered as he took the slim youth in his arms and carried him towards the large Chesterfield sofa, almost forcing him to sprawl over the leather as he mounted him, not willing to let him escape.

"Slobodan, what if the girls..."

"Shh, my angel. They will learn something new. I need you now." He pleaded as he needed to take his love right there, to feel that anyone would come again to steal him or that none of his men would use of hurt him. Still positioned over Marcial's pelvis, Slobodan quickly threw his jacket and shirt to the floor, reveling in the light that shone in Marcial's eyes when he saw his lover's powerful body. He bent to deeply kiss the boy while he felt the small hands expertly unfastening his belt and opening his fly.

Slobodan's fingers were never so clumsy as he tried in his eagerness to unbutton Marcial's soft cotton shirt, making the boy giggle just a bit. The man forced himself to calm down if he didn't want to finish right there, like an inexperienced teenager.

"I love you so much, that I would leave everything being just to have you."

"I think I love you too, Slobodan." Marcial carefully said as the last time he had pronounced those words, Carsten had thrown him out, breaking his heart.

As all answer, Slobodan pulled his trousers down urgently and put the boy's legs over his shoulders, penetrating him with one and swift move, making him wail in pain and the brutal intrusion. Slobodan bent again over his lover to kiss him tenderly as he waited that the boy could get used to his member. Only when Marcial's lips looked for his own ones, he started to move at a very slow pace, savouring every pleasure moan he provoked in his love. His right hand firmly secured Marcial hips to have a better control over it and to guide him in his response moves. The boy laced his arms over Slobodan's neck, pulling him closer and burying his face in his chest, a gesture that the man found endearing and moving.

They both laid spent, with their bodies intertwined, the remaining clothes crumpled around them, heavily panting while Marcial softly petted his lover dark hair. "Slobodan, we should get up, the sun is up." The boy suggested, but only got a grunt as reply. "I'll make breakfast for you."

"Now you're speaking, little one." Slobodan gently smiled, removing his body from Marcial's arms and looking for his clothes. "Here, this is your shirt." He said while he offered the recovered item.

"Thank you." Marcial whispered, gathering his clothes and quickly redressing himself. He directed his steps to the deserted kitchen where he set the coffee machine and broke some eggs to make an omelette.

So intent he was following exactly the recipe that he jumped when Slobodan put his arms around his waist this time burying his head on Marcial shoulder, making the boy smile and shudder.

"It's difficult to whisk eggs with you around." Marcial protested feebly, leaning over the man's touch.

"You forgot to cuddle me, so here I'm." The man whispered, nuzzling the delicate neck -'that could be broken with just a snap'- "You're so beautiful and sweet, that I can't believe that you exist."

"Such things you say!" Marcial chortled. "If you don't let me work, I might burn this down."

"All right. I know when I'm not wanted." Slobodan chuckled and went to sit at the table, waiting for Marcial to serve the coffee and eggs. "After this, we should go to bed."

"Again?"

"To sleep. It was a long night for me."

"Oh." Marcial answered, sitting to nibble a toast with marmalade for a while.

"Why do you have such a sad face? Do you want more?"

"I was just thinking." Marcial shrugged, remembering that Pelayo liked the eggs exactly as Slobodan.

"About what?"

"Pelayo. I hope he's fine. Carsten doesn't want to give me back the platypus. He says I should go for it to London."

"NO, you stay here. Besides, why do you need that thing around? Don't I take care of you well?"

"You're very good to me, but you're never around or with your business partners. I'm edgy around them. Only Bagrat is truly nice to me."

"I know but if Pelayo comes, he and I would be fighting over you the whole day. He doesn't like me and he's stubborn. Do you want to go away, Marcial?"

"No, I love you, but he's like a father to me. He was always there for me and I miss him a lot."

"There's a time when you have to leave your house and set your own. We are now together and live

happily. If he comes, everything we have, will be destroyed. I do want to start a new life with you, but he won't let me. I do love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you."

"I can't leave him in London! I have to take him back to his friends in Asturias! He could make Carsten's life a living Hell, like he did with George, but he doesn't listen to me! He only has to put the vessel in a box and send it here!"

"If the demon is that nasty, this Dutch will ship it away in no time. Ask him to send it to your old house, back in La Riera. He will find his own kind in no time. I don't want that he comes to us. You're old enough as to forgo to have a nanny. In a few months you'll be 23 and you can make your own decisions, like when you came with me. Was it so bad? Did I ever mistreat you as Pelayo told you I would?"

"No, you're probably right. I should try to speak with Carsten again. He might be calmer by now."

'I highly doubt it. I was on the verge of mass murdering when that son of a bitch stole my angel,' Slobodan thought. "Yes, do that. Ask him to send the demon to Asturias. It can stay at your old house. You won't need it any longer, my love. Besides, if your demon was behaving like he usually does, that man will be glad to put him on the first plane back."

"Pelayo is not that bad. Accidents happens." Marcial defended feebly his friend while he kissed the man, happy that he had found a good solution for all of them.

\* \* \*

Carsten's sleep was abruptly interrupted -once more- by the loud noise of broken dishes. Startled, on the brink of a heart attack, he sat on his empty bed rubbing his eyes -as the only time he tried to refill it with another boy, the trasgu had ended the date by pouring a bucket of cold water over the new fling, fulfilling his promise of keeping Marcial's place unpolluted. He cursed when he saw in his alarm clock that it was 3AM. "The fucking witching hour," he mumbled while he looked for his slippers. "Please, not the new service from Villeroy and Boch," he whined.

Carsten went the stairs down, still cursing and wondering why the blasted demon couldn't go to bed like the rest of mankind at 10 PM and sleep. He wasn't so active when Marcial was around.

"I was, but you never heard me. You sleep like a log." The trasgu merrily said from the bottom.

"How many times do I have to tell you don't do that?? I hate it and it's privacy invasion!!"

"There's no privacy since I had to see those pyjamas of yours or your drunken and clumsy attempts of

seduction."

"Shut the fuck up, demon! What was this time?"

"A tureen. The one from your mother's."

"Minor loss. I'll buy you a new one." He mumbled not upset at all, enjoying in advance the long lament his mother would throw over the Delft piece, property of the Aunt Nienke III. He turned around to go back to bed. "Pick up the shards, will you? And go to sleep!!"

"We are creatures of the night!" Pelayo informed him proudly.

"You didn't make so much rubbish when Marcial was here!"

"Incredible. Your brain still works. As your friend the doctor would tell, my actions might indicate a hidden desire..."

"Don't go in there because I'll box the fucking platypus, stuff the box with rice and place it on the basement! You know about my plans!"

"All right. I'll continue with my "non violent" revolution. By the way, can you buy some more history books for your library? What you have is too technical and boring. I finished already those about Astronomy."

"Leave my things alone!!"

"I asked and you allowed..." The trasgu pouted.

"I never thought you could read!"

"I can... Do you know what an I-Pad is? I saw it on TV. Sounds intriguing."

"Something to keep the masses entertained. VERY expensive and delicate..." Carsten answered nonchalantly till he saw the piqued light in the trasgu's green eyes. "No, you won't get one... It's for the masses; and that means the serfs and the peasants. Nothing worth of a former Papal Ambassador."

"I was Ambassador to the Pope. If I'm busy I'd clean less and less things would be broken...."

"Fuck!"

\* \* \*

Entering the Apple Store was one of the most humiliating things Carsten had to do in his life. Even if he owned several products from Apple, he had loudly sworn never to buy such an useless device as the iPad, ridiculing himself in front of the whole Board when he predicted it would be a total sales disaster. 'Who would have believed that humans were so stupid? Shit! Now I'm speaking like the bloody demon! He even wants one with 64GB on top! When did he learn to use Internet?'

He growled his order to the poor salesman, not even caring to hear the boy's long well learned speech about the benefits of purchasing such wonder on Earth.

"Yeah, yeah. It also makes my tax declaration. It's for a child!" He said malignantly. Not a second after throwing his credit card over the counter, someone yelled, at top of his lungs. "If it's not the CEO of Z3Solutions!! Finally decided to enter in the XXI Century?"

"Hello Ravid. Are you also buying one?" Carsten greeted the Head of the FLEX Department, inwardly cursing to meet the man in that particular circumstance.

"My second one, but in a smaller size. For travelling, you know? My wife checks the other one." He explained, winking at the last sentence. "But you enjoy the happy life of a bachelor!"

"I see." Carsten answered, full of hope that if the man was in an "offside position" he wouldn't tell the others about this encounter. "Nice to see you. Bye." He finished the conversation as this one was best friends with Jansen and if someone could have been tampering with that bloody program, it was him. His mobile rang and after a forced "sorry" as the man was not moving from its place, he took a brief look at his screen to see the word "home" on it.

"What's now?" He barked at his butler.

"Which time do you come home? If the lamb gets dry, it's impossible to eat it, no matter how much wine you drink." Pelayo's voice clearly resounded over the speaker.

"What do you care which time do I come home?" Carsten roared, furious that the trasgu even knew how to use a phone.

"No need to be rude! I spent the whole day with that leg in the kitchen..."

"Right! I'll be home in 20 minutes. I'm buying your damn iPad!!!" The Dutch shouted, making several

customers look at him. He punched the mobile off.

"Congratulations. I'm glad you found someone. That boy was not good enough for you." Ravid commented jovially. "You already sound like a married couple!" He chuckled. "With that lad, you were always too polite to each other, nothing real people do. Only builds more tensions up and Marcial was too young and inexperienced."

"This one is an old demon." Carsten grunted.

"Perfect for you. When you are more than 40, the time for changing diapers is over. Good boys were never your style, if I see correctly. A little bit of spice in the bedroom is always good." The man sauntered, winking again.

'Does he have a tick or is he an idiot?' Carsten pondered, undecided to be furious because he had been told that he was an old man; that Ravid believed he was somehow involved with the trasgu; that by tomorrow the whole office would assume that he had a new boyfriend or that they indeed had started to sound like an old couple. 'Shit, I have to ship that thing away as soon as possible. It's driving me crazy and I don't want to retire in a padded cell!' "See you tomorrow at the Board, Ravid."

"Likewise. They're not happy with you. It's gonna be a carnage."

"I suppose, but I'm not on the menu yet."

\* \* \*

Carsten opened the door to his flat to find that the trasgu had set the table for two and there was something really good smelling in the oven. 'At least he cooks,' he sighed, leaving the package over the table. "Honey, I'm home!" He had not even finished to shout the words, when a cold hand touched his shoulder making him jump to the ceiling.

"Irony is not befitting for you, my love. It's make you look much older than you really are." The trasgu chirped.

"For once its smells good." Carsten growled, crossed at the mention of his age for the second time in less than an hour.

"Do I hear a compliment? No way! I think you're starting to appreciate me and my advises." The demon observed while he sat at the table and started to expertly cut the meat and Carsten served the wine.

"I would pack you in the first box I could find if I would have an address to send you to! There's no Astur Embassy in Madrid!"

"Your strategy is not working at all. He has not called you again. Get a policeman to look for him and then get him back!"

"Do you really think I could enter in the house of a mobster, a heartless killer according to you, and take Marcial away? It's ridiculous what you're proposing!"

"The problem is that you're afraid that Marcial doesn't want you any longer and prefers the other man. Send me there! I know what to do!"

"What if he doesn't want you too? What if he's happy with that man? What if he doesn't need you any longer? Have you thought about it, demon?"

"He needs me. Without me, he's lost." Pelayo answered with great dignity.

"You were looking for a "husband" for him and wanted to give him to me."

"Yes, I could take some holidays but he's too special to be left alone. I would never disappear from his life, human. He's like a son to me."

"Yes, but the river never brings the same water, demon. Things might have changed."

"There's only one way to know it, human."

"All right. After tomorrow's meeting and fixing some things, I'll take you to Madrid and we will look for him. Southwood is also driving me crazy about getting the boy back."

## **Chapter 25**

Two days after that night spent in the warehouse, Bagrat took Marcial again to the park as it was his usual routine. Taking care of the boy was soothing for his nerves as he was polite, not speaking too much, helping him with his grammar exercises and he could read his German newspaper in peace while the boy was busy reading a book or a magazine. Marcial seemed to enjoy to sit under the big trees and look at them. However, today the boy was restless, fidgeting noisily with the pages, getting out and putting back his Ipod in his coat's pocket and shifting permanently on the bank.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Doesn't look like. You should go to school. You're bored. Most classes start in October, why don't you choose something? You like plants and jewels, why don't you start that Jewellery course you liked. You said you learn everything you do with your hands and you don't draw too badly."

"I don't like jewels, I like the stones and how they're ingrained in the pieces. I'm nervous because of something else."

"What?"

"My platypus. Slobodan says I should call Carsten again and ask for it, but I'm afraid he yells at me and I don't like it. It makes me feel very bad."

"Look, that's your property. Never leave another take it because more will come to take more from you. If you want your thing, you yell also. It's not as if the ass hole is a god. Do you want that I help you with that? My English is good enough to scare the shit out of him."

"No thanks, but you're right. The platypus is mine. First, I'll call my friend Lisa. She was always nice, perhaps she can convince him not to yell at me."

Bagrat rose his eyes to the sky, praying for divine patience.

\* \* \*

Once Marcial was alone in his bedroom he decided to call Lisa. He looked in his phone for her office number in his jacket before sitting on the window bench to look at the passing cars under the dense foliage. The phone rang several times before he heard her soft voice saying the mechanical "Lisa Mun speaking."

"Hi Lisa, it's me, Marcial."

"Hey you. What a surprise to hear from you! You should get a Facebook so I can check what you're doing cupcake." She shouted happy to hear from him.

"I'm not so good with computers or cameras. I always get them wrong."

"Yeah, I imagine so. It's just a matter of practising. It's not as if you could break something. Only delete your work." She chuckled. "How's the weather in Madrid? Georg went there but hasn't given me a call in two days."

"Sunny and hot, as usual, but the Autumn is near. You can already feel it. Is Georg your new boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend is too much. Let's say is a good friend and we like each other a lot. Figures, he wants to introduce me to his mother! He says her mother always told him to get a college girlfriend! Do you know who else got a boyfriend too?"

"Who? Gloria?"

"No, you silly. Darth Vader got a new one! Everybody talks about it! Ravid, Dr. Bankar, heard them speaking. He's much older and they live together! Can you imagine? Porcupines are in!!"

"Do you have porcupines in your office?" Marcial asked totally shocked. "Perhaps Carsten will return my platypus, now that he has a new pet..."

"No, no, no, no. You got it wrong! To be in means that you're hype, cool, trendy. Do you get it now?"

"Are they not a little big for the office? You could have the same with a hedgehog. There was a family of them living in the barn back home. They were really nice guys, shy and sleep the whole day."

"You're hopeless. Sometimes you can call a person like an animal. Carsten is so nasty and mean, with so many thorns around him that he's like a porcupine because he's too big to be a nice looking hedgehog."

"I see. I made the fool out of myself again."

"No more than usual, cupcake. You're truly funny. Tell me, how are you?"

"I'm fine, really but I wanted to ask you if you could ask Carsten to give me a few things I left there. My platypus and his sword, brooch and cross. Nothing else. He's always furious with me and doesn't let me talk."

"You have to admit that the guy has every right to be furious with you. Fortunately, he has found someone else and we should take advantage of his honeymoon. Didn't take him long to find another one after he was so depressed for the first three weeks. They're living together." She told him casually.

Marcial felt his world collapse in front of his eyes. He gulped but he was only able to make a strangled sound so dry his throat was. "Oh, shit! You didn't know, did you? I'm so sorry, Marcial. I was so tactless." Marcial heard Lisa's voice so far away.

"No, it's OK Lisa, he needs to continue with his life. I hope he's happy." He stammered, trying to recover from his shock.

"Do you still love him, Marcial?"

"I don't know. I think love them both but I can't have them both." Marcial whispered. "Slobodan needs me like no one else before did and Carsten wants the best for me, but he doesn't need me and treats me like a child. I miss him a lot too."

"Why don't you call him? This time don't mention the things You both have to ease the tensions down."

"Yes, perhaps Lisa. Good bye." Marcial sadly said before hanging up and starting to weep.

\* \* \*

In Carsten's opinion the Board meetings were the biggest waste of time in the month. Why did they wanted to make him loose his time when they could do nothing because he owned 57% of the shares? No, it sole purpose was to make his life harder and bitterly complain that they were not making enough money. There was Bankar with 7% of the shares, Southwood with a miserable 3%, his long time partner, Jansen with 7%, the representative from the employees collectively owning 10% of the company and several private investors with the remaining 23%, only caring about the winnings. This time, the meeting had been called by Jansen and for once, the bloody demon had been right -not that he would admit it freely but a good advise was a good advise no matter from whom or where it came from. Carsten glanced around the table while Gloria and the other hot girl -Jansen's girlfriend- were serving the coffee and setting some pastry dishes. 'Hope she has some antacid tablets somewhere when I'm finished with these greedybastards, if there's someone still awaken after Mountbatten's Power Point moment.'

"In conclusion, our figures for the first and second trimester exceed our previous estimations and with the new projects on the way, we stand in the path of a bright future." Peter finished his presentation in a clear and proud voice, pleased to hear some courtesy applause.

"Thank you, Peter. Impressive and organized as always." Carsten spoke stifling a yawn. "If there's nothing else, then we should vote to approve the numbers for the next trimester."

"I would like to draw this board's attention to another issue." Bankar interrupted Carsten, exactly as

the trasgu had predicted he would do. 'Let them first burn the ships, human and then, go for the blow. Let them believe they have the upper hand while you manoeuvre in the dark. They would not show any mercy for you.' The trasgu had told him several times.

"Please Ravid, enlighten us." Carsten said sarcastically, making the smaller man flinch. 'And for the Love of God, try to look like a lamb and not like constipated wolf!' He remembered the demon's voice and did his best to force a smile.

"We are a bit concerned about your ability to take over so many responsibilities like you used to do. This past month you have been sick and unable to attend several meetings. We lost the deal with Merrywaters because they wanted to have you on the negotiations."

"I did my best and they couldn't afford our prices anyway. It would have been another Atomic Corp. mess." Peter defended his boss.

"No, Peter, let Ravid continue. I'm interested in what he has to say."

"We don't criticise your past management. It has been great and no one in this room can say anything against it. Our main concern is that your behaviour has been erratic and you seem to be distracted all the time; on the brink of a surmenage."

"I see."

"It's not that we don't appreciate your qualities but perhaps you should delegate some more responsibilities on this Board's members." Jelle suggested. "In the moment, I'm in charge of evaluating projects but I think I could take over the Bombay office. Travelling permanently is not good for stress."

"I see."

"This new rule that you have to personally supervise all the new developments is costing us time and efforts. Many of our programmers resent that you check their work as if they were graduate trainees." Martin Everett, the employees representative added. "We should return to the previous organization where every head department is the ultimate responsible for the project."

"I see."

"Four of our latest additions in key positions resigned in the last month saying that you mistreated them."

"Not to mention the several complaints I get almost on a daily basis from the Personnel Office or Accounting." Martin added quickly.

"I see."

"The Rich Internet Applications Team is almost on the verge of a strike because you rejected all their proposals during the past month and they say that your reasons are inconsistent."

"I see."

"Can you please stop using the same sentence?" Southwood exploded, furious at Carsten's passivity and dispassion.

"No, I agree with every word you have said so far, gentlemen." Carsten said smiling and enjoying the look of pure shock that went all over the table. "I've been under considerable stress during the past month due to a personal situation and I think that I should delegate some of my functions."

"It's not a bad idea to..."

"Let me finish, Jansen. I listened to everything you had to say. During the past week, I gave a lot of thought to this -as I realise that I'm more nervous than usual-" Carsten paused as some discreet laughs were heard around the table, "and I remembered that old offer I got from an Austrian Hedge Fund to buy my share. I asked them if they were still interested and they still are. I have an offer for 2.2 billions pounds for my share and an extra 3% Of course, I will have to step down from the presidency as they want to name their own people, but they're willing to considerate our people's candidacies."

"You can't do this!! You can't sell just like that!"

"Sure I can. According to our Statutes any partner who wants to sell his share has to give one month notice to the other partners and present a binding and serious offer from the buyer. I have done it. You have a month to offer me the same amount or increase it and another month to collect the money if I accept it. My lawyers had presented the papers this morning to Z3 Solutions legal office.

"You're bluffing!" Jansen shouted.

"I never bluff and you know it. I'm very tired of all of you; of your permanent lack of cooperation. I want to start anew, perhaps in another country and with a new team and this time, I will have no partners."

"The 3% of 2.2 billions is 6.6 millions?" Southwood asked not truly believing, the "other" figure.

"No, Clive, it's 66 millions pounds." Peter answered him softly.

"Where do I sign Carsten?" The soldier asked and he got a rare kind smile from Carsten

"Your share is now valued over 3 billions! If you sell for such amount you're ruining us!" Jelle shouted.

"Yes, I know. Should be easy for you to get the credits to buy me over. You have a full month starting tomorrow; till October 25th 2010 at 17:00, Greenwich Meridian Time."

"You're crazy if you think you're going to get away with this one!" Bankar shouted. "We are going to sue you!"

"For what? Not willing to be your slave any longer?"

"For dumping!"

"I got an offer and I accepted. Valuations are not always accurate. It's too much stress for me. I need a long holiday. It's for the best. There are many programmers in this company. I could be easily replaced, you have said it several times, Jansen." Carsten retorted sweetly.

"You will hear from our legal office."

"Good, tell them to call Thornton and Thornton. They run my affairs. If that's all, I'll go and enjoy my last days at my office. The stapler is mine; costed me five pounds." Carsten smiled, leaving his chair. "But you can stay and decide who's going to get my place."

\* \* \*

Slobodan had Marcial with him for more than a month and he wanted to celebrate it. His angel had finally learned his place and behaved better than he would have ever expected, only asking about his demon now and then, concerned that the thing would be missing Spain. Fortunately, that crazy Dutch had decided firmly to keep the platypus, saving him the trouble of lying to Marcial. That Saturday morning everything seemed perfect with the coming of the Fall as Slobodan bent his body over the sleeping form of Marcial and nibbled his ear, softly licking his neck, eliciting some soft protest grunts from the boy at being awoken so early.

"You sleep more than a dormouse, my love." Slobodan chuckled, fascinated by the half closed blue eyes, looking at him through the veil of sleep. "I want to do something with you today, but if we sleep the whole morning, we're going to miss the whole day." Marcial felt the heavy body come on top of his own

and the bulge caressing his thigh.

"Do you want to do something, right now? I thought you were tired from yesterday."

"I wasn't thinking on that, but now that you mention it." The bigger man chuckled as he nested himself against the boy's body, kissing his neck very softly and deciding to postpone for an hour or two the romantic getaway he had planned for his angel, to the forest he liked so much and to a small restaurant near a stream where you could choose your own trout. His angel needed some real fresh air and peace.

\* \* \*

The news over Z3 Solutions spread like fire in less than an hour. Darth Vader was selling everything at a low price and leaving without any explanations or caring about what would happen to his suffered employees when the new owners would arrive and start to restructure the company.

"What a bomb you dropped today. Don't you know that Monday morning is the day with the highest amount of coronary failures?" Southwood chortled from the door. "Gloria let me in. She's barking at anyone who dares to come to your office."

"Did you really mean to come with me?"

"Come with you? Never in my life. I'm not so crazy. I'm willing to sell along with you. Peter thinks that it's a good idea to leave. This will not be the same without you. I put 400.000 and now I get 66 millions, I can't complain of my investments."

"Are you going to finally retire?"

"Who knows? I would also like to plant tulips in the Caribbean."

"I'm not going to plant tulips! I hate those things!" He roared. "I'm going to Madrid." Carsten finally confessed ashamed of his own weakness. "He has to come home and fix the mess he left there. I can't live with it any more."

"For a second I thought that you were going to be romantic and say that you still love him and need him by your side, but I was wrong. Well, my friend, we are as we are. Do you need my assistance?"

"I need that you use your contacts and find where he's. I'll pay whatever it takes."

"No problem. Could use an excuse to escape from the office for a few days. This month is going to be hellish." He chuckled, very glad that Carsten finally would take his heed. "Lindsay is already driving Peter mad in her vain attempt to convince him to convince me to drop the sale."

"Move to my flat for two weeks and you'll know what is hellish." Carsten grunted.

"One piece of advise... Don't eat or drink anything in the office. If I were you, I would buy a lunch box. I hear those from Star Wars are on sale. One with Darth Vader would be very appropriate."

"I resent that. I'm not the second in command. I'll get the one with Emperor Palpatine."

"That boy really changed you."

"Not the boy, the platypus. I want to get rid of it and Marcial has to take care better of his property." He mumbled, returning to his papers as he had a lot of things to finish before his resignation in a month. The Austrians wanted to put a new CEO and merge the company with another. Carsten completely forgot the man standing there as he switched on his computer.

The bizarre sentence forced Southwood to ponder if the solitude and sorrow were not starting to take their toll on his friend or if, in fact, he had always been like this, but no one had ever noticed as everybody had been too busy saving their hides from him.

\* \* \*

"I have a huge problem Slobodan and I don't know if I can take it whole." The desperate voice said on the other end of the line.

"That would be a first, Dimitri." The Georgian chuckled, his mood in a rare good shape as he observed his glowing companion, entertained with some stones near the small stream. How he had found a practically invisible salamander nearby was a mystery. 'He truly needs to be among his trees,' he thought before returning to the business.

"Please! This is very big. Come now to the Paradise!!"

"I'm on my day off, with Marcial, in the countryside. Call Yoseb or Georg." He answered, his voice very dry.

"It's too big for them. Please, Slobodan come as soon as you can." He pleaded as he heard Slobodan angrily turning the mobile phone off.

"I'm terribly sorry, my love, but we have to return to the city. Some problems arose in my absence. You will have to come with me and stay for a little while in one of the rooms."

"As you wish, Sloba. It's getting darker anyway and I'm very happy that you brought me here for a walk." Marcial replied sweetly, drying his hands on his designer trousers like a little child.

\* \* \*

"What is so important that it couldn't wait?" Slobodan barked after driving for 50 minutes and leaving Marcial in one of the rooms upstairs with strict orders to remain there and speak with nobody. The place was certainly nothing for his little angel to be, but Dimitri had never sounded so distressed in his almost 20 years of career.

Dimitri only moved away one of the velvety curtains to show a full covered of blood body, the mature man's face deformed in a horrible grimace and rigid posture.

"Dimitri, you know the procedure. Call Georg to help you." Slobodan said very upset that he had been bothered for something so trivial.

"Check the hand."

Slobodan glanced at the dead man's right hand and saw the small dragon tattooed there. He loudly cursed. "Who's he?"

"He was Alexei Petrov, from the Korsakhov gang. I know you don't want Russians in here, but he insisted and I had to let him in as we don't want troubles with them. Inside he started to drink like crazy and fought with Llanez from the National Police over a girl, Galina, and one thing led to the other and he's there."

"Do I have to clean after the National Police now?"

"He left it there. Llanez says it's not his problem, that you should fix it and he will forget this month's contribution for the police ball.

"If the Russians see me bagging one of their own, they'll come here and kill all the women, including you, just to teach me a lesson. It's impossible what you're asking!"

"What am I supposed to do? Suck up the Health Counsellor from the Town Hall so he gives me a special

license to work with the body here? Or do I put it in the freezer?"

"See that you can think straight when you're not so nervous? Shit!!" Slobodan shouted throwing a chair to the floor. "One perfect night to the trash as I have to get rid of a policeman too!"

"He will not speak, the girl saw it."

"And a girl on top!! Get her down before she speaks with the others!" The man huffed.

"Slobodan, Galina is with us. She won't talk." Fast as a snake, Slobodan took Dimitri by the neck and started to suffocate him

"I'm sure she won't be able to talk as well as the policeman. I don't want to have a brass bragging in front of his cop friends that he killed a Russian and the Georgian had to clean his mess. Are you getting soft or just stupid, Dimitri?" He growled, finally releasing him by throwing him to the corner. "Get Yoseb and Bagrat here. They will help me. Put the body in the freezer, burn down all the fabrics and the furniture and tonight we open as if nothing would have happened. I will stay here in case the Russians come looking for their little lost lamb, but I doubt it."

"As you wish, Slobodan." Dimitri croaked.

"Smile for the customers. Don't want my profits ruined any further. Take care of Marcial while I fix this situation." He ordered to a sullen boy-man.

\* \* \*

Marcial felt very sad when Slobodan told him that he should stay with Dimitri while he worked. He was always worried that something might happen to the Georgian and he had only a light jacket with him, nothing good for the chilly Autumn night. He was supposed to stay in that jazzy room where Dimitri had left him and sleep if he was tired. According to Dimitri, Slobodan had ordered him to be nice to any gentleman who might come to visit him because those were important customers and he should earn his keep like everybody else. "Don't you want to help, Marcial? Well, it's time to do so."

\* \* \*

"Boss, I'm getting too old for this. Freezing them makes them heavier and this one was truly eating like a pig." Bagrat complained to Slobodan as Yoseb was driving the car towards the mountains, their deathly load hidden in the trunk.

"It makes easy the chopping and you know it." Yoseb said nonchalantly. "I hate to clean after a fucking

cop. He should do it and face the Russians. Men don't know anything about chivalry any longer."

"We're not chopping it. Too dirty." Slobodan said.

"Boss, digging at this hour?" Yoseb whined.

"No, we're giving it back to the Russians. We leave it in front of Korsakhov's house, the dogs will find it in the morning when it starts to smell. That policeman had the grace of cutting his throat like the Colombians do. We have some coke left from them with Martínez fingertips all over it. The Russians will assume that it was a revenge on the wrong man and attack them. I don't want those two motherfuckers to start anything together. Those fucking Russians are in disarray but the only thing they care about is to expand in our territory. Look Marbella, they came 10 year ago for holidays and they're still there, buying everything they can."

"But we're Georgians and we know how to treat them, boss." Yoseb said very proud.

"The harsher you treat them, the bigger the statue they make of you." Slobodan chuckled at the memory, making the others laugh openly.

\* \* \*

The boy was asleep over the bed when Dimitri entered the room decided to finish that peculiar threat to his own position. Since that little pathetic thing decided to burst in his life, Slobodan forgo of him, only coming when he wanted to release the accumulated stress and nothing more. Before he was visiting him just to speak about his business or only have dinner when he needed company. The minute he was out of the hospital, Slobodan ran like an idiot to that disgusting and shabby bar almost every night, staying there, staring at the boy and miserably pleading for a look or a word from him.

"Hey, wake up!!" He shook the boy's shoulder. Marcial sat on the bed, looking around, completely lost about the place and the person who was in front of him. Somehow, he looked familiar but he couldn't remember the name of this blond.

"I have a customer. You know how to serve a man, don't you?"

"I worked in a bar for a year. I can do it."

"Good, because this one is a very important man and Slobodan wants you to make him happy. Be a good boy and do all what he asks from you."

"All right."

Marcial was confused by the lights and the loud music. In a way, the place was like a disco but the girls were dressed only with their underwear, not the short dresses and boots Elena used to have and doing their best to rub themselves to the men there. He stopped in the middle of the large room, dizzy because of the blinking lights, uncertain of what he should do. He didn't like the place as could feel the cold of death, not the cold he felt when Pelayo's friends were around, but the freezing coldness of decay and pestilence.

"Come, don't stall. He's waiting for you!" Dimitri pulled him from his arm, nearly making him tumble.

"I don't want to go with you. I go back with Bagrat." He said as the man had told him countless times that if any of the Georgian's henchmen were nasty to him, he should invoke his name. But Dimitri was no henchmen.

"Do you want to upset Slobodan, boy? Do you want to disobey him?"

"No."

"Then you know what to do." The man whispered making Marcial tremble and nod again.

\* \* \*

The room was small and suffocating, with a table, a bar and a huge bed with red covers facing some mirrors. Marcial had never been in a place like that and it was very strange that a bar would be in such a restrained area.

\* \* \*

Tatiana was very surprised. Was not this blond boy the Georgian's boyfriend? The one who had been such good friends with Elena? By the way he was looking around, he was clearly not a professional and only the good ones were in this club. Why was Dimitri taking him to the Emperor's suite? Something was very wrong and she decided to give a call to his new boyfriend, Bagrat, as he was responsible for the little twerp. If the boy was screwing around, he should better fix it before the Georgian would kill the wannabe lover and they all would be in troubles with the Spanish Police. Deportation back to Romania was the least she needed.

\* \* \*

The man entered the room and slowly inspected the boy he had been offered. Normally, he preferred girls but a little spice was not bad and this young one, looked not older than 17 and had truly a very harmonious face. "Come here, let's have some fun." He purred, removing his jacket and tie.

"Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure, why not. It's on the house, isn't it?"

"I guess." Marcial said thinking that if the man was a special guest, then he should not pay.

\* \* \*

All the girls knew that something was very wrong the moment they saw Slobodan enter with long strides to the "Paradise", furious, -and murderously- looking everywhere, with Bagrat and Yoseb trailing behind and doing their best to catch him. Many of the women started to pray as they didn't want to be in his trail if he was in a killing mood, but Slobodan ignored them, continuing in a straight line towards the bedrooms.

Slobodan exploded in a murderous rage the minute he saw his angel kneeling in front of a half dressed total stranger, massaging his feet as he used to do when he was tired.

"I'm killing you, you fucking whore." He shouted and before he would think it over or Bagrat could prevent it, he took Marcial by the neck and threw him against the wall with all the force he could muster. The boy's head hit the stone and he fell like a discarded rag doll on the corner and lost his conscience when Slobodan hit him on the cheek with his right fist.

"Stop!! Do you want to kill him?" Bagrat jumped to catch his boss, his hands effectively locking his boss arms in a vicious grip. "If you do it, you'll regret it for your whole life! Yoseb, get that bastard out!!"

"Who the fuck are you to burst in here? I paid for him good money! I don't want a senseless or broken bitch!" The man protested.

"Get out, you idiot before he kills you for touching his boy!" Yoseb howled, grabbing the naked man and pushing him out of the room. One of the girls quickly entered and picked up his clothes, closing the door after her.

"Are you calmer now?" Bagrat said, still holding Slobodan.

"Whore!"

"He? Don't make me laugh! Why is he here with a customer? You left him in one of the rooms upstairs and he never disobeys you! Before you hit him, let him explain! Look, now he's bleeding from the head and will need stitches! Great, another hit to his head! Clever boss, really clever!"

"Let me go." Slobodan said through clenched teeth.

"No till you swear on your mother's grave that you won't do a thing against him till you hear what he has to say!"

"What is to say? He was touching that piece of shit!"

The half muffled cried of pure horror of Marcial when he saw Slobodan, made his heart sank as his angel sought refuge on the farthest wall from him, almost adopting a foetal position. Bagrat checking carefully his boss, saw that he was petrified by pain when the boy clearly showed how terrified he was of him.

"See boss what you have done? You'll never forget that look." He growled as he released the bigger man.

"Hey Marcial, easy boy. Do you know who I'm? The guy from the park?" He spoke as gently as he could, but the youth was too focused on his terror and couldn't pry his eyes from Slobodan.

"Come, look at me boy. He won't touch a hair from you. Tell me, do you know my name?"

"No, no. I want Pelayo."

"I'm Bagrat and I take care of you. Do you know who's standing there?"

"Sloba," Marcial answered feeling more and more afraid, increasing Slobodan's guilt for nearly killing him. "He hit me like Pelayo told me he would." He added with his eyes painfully fixed on Slobodan's dark ones.

"My angel, I'm sorry, so sorry. I went mad when I saw you with that man. What were you doing with him?"

"You told me to be nice to him and do what he wanted!" Marcial cried. "It was gruesome and disgusting. You're like George and his internet friends!"

"What? I never said such a thing!"

"Yes you did! I want to go home. You're a bad man!"

"No, angel, I have to take you to a hospital so they check your head."

"Never to a hospital. You want to put me in one so they poison me with their drugs!"

"You need stitches and then we will speak about how you came in this room."

"I don't know. I was sleeping in my bed and then came this man and he told me you wanted me to serve your customer, that I should earn my keep."

"Who?" Slobodan pressed, shaking Marcial from the shoulders

"Don't know." He mumbled, afraid again of the huge man.

"I have an idea boss from where all this might come from. I'll ask Tatiana. She knows everything." Bagrat interfered before his boss would cause a heart attack to the boy.

"Do it. I'll take Marcial to the hospital."

"No, you won't. Get your hands away from me!" He cried in open terror.

"Angel, I want to fix what I broke tonight, please let me do it. I'm terribly sorry. Can you forgive me? You're bleeding and need a doctor. Let me hold you, please. I promise that I will take you home afterwards. Don't be afraid, it's me. It's your Sloba, give me your hand, my love."

Marcial looked again in the man's eyes and felt that he didn't mean to hurt him again and that his sorrow and repentance were true and launched to his arms, sobbing and looking for comfort.

\* \* \*

'I can't have him here any longer. I have to get away with him. What if next time some one puts cocaine in his drink or sells him to make some extra bucks. He's like a small child, unable to understand anything and has no malice at all. He would go with anyone who tells him that those are my orders,' was the Georgian's only thought as he waited for his love in the private clinic sanitized waiting room, while the doctors ran some more test over Marcial to discard any kind of concussions. He pulled out his mobile and dialled Bagrat's number.

"How's the boy?" The man immediately asked.

"He's fine. Only a few stitches on the head. They're running some more tests to be on the safe side. Did you checked the other thing?"

"Yes. We'll need a new manager here, boss."

"Tell Yoseb to choose one. He's good for that." Slobodan decided not regretting for a single moment Dimitri's fate, but only that Bagrat had taken the matter into his own hands, depriving him the pleasure of setting an exemplary punishment for the rest of the gang. Perhaps Bagrat had had also a soft side for the man and decided to do it in the fast and clean way. Yoseb should name his replacement. After all, he was going to be his successor if everything went fine. He should be free to choose his own people.

Thank you very much for your votes and comments... I couldn't agree more with you Miles, Leroy Merlin is a nightmare...and IKEA on a Saturday is Hell on Earth.

## Chapter 26

Lake Como

"Thank you so much for accepting to see me at your house, Mladic." Slobodan intoned reverently in front of the old man, bordering his 75 years, as he accepted a cup of tea from his silver samovar.

"It's the less I can do for one of my favourite nephews, but I believe this is business and not family." The man answered in Serb as his interlocutor could be considered as one.

"You're right, uncle Mladic." Slobodan tested as he knew for certain that his "uncle" -his mother's cousin from Krajina- was a difficult person to deal with. The only man he had truly feared in his life. "I need your help. You're the only one who can do it."

"You made my retirement more easy. I could have never truly been in peace till I have liquidated that matter. Since 1989, I was after that slippery French, but you come and zac! -he made the imaginary gesture of a falling axe- found him and solved the problem in 2005. Or was it 2006?"

"Who keeps numbers among friends, uncle? It's done and I'm honoured to be of service to our organization."

"Good boy, you always knew that all this is about respect to your elders and superiors. The youngsters don't understand and then, they wonder why they don't last long!"

"Indeed, uncle. I want to leave my station and retire."

"Are you not too young for that? You're not even 40. Goran will not be pleased."

"This is why I need you to speak with my cousin, uncle. I'm willing to pay whatever fee he establishes."

"My nephew is heartless. Nothing moves him. You will have to offer something more to his superiors. There are new rules since 2008. You can't go back to Georgia, nor even Russia. Everything is a mess there. All of them fighting and we have completely withdrawn from there, but you know this. Montenegro, perhaps. Why the sudden change?"

"I'm in love with someone from outside our circle."

The old man huffed with infinite tiredness. "What is wrong with all of you? Everybody falls in love, these days? First the Supreme Boss, then our greatest enemy -and that was truly a mess, boy- and now you! What's next? Goran will start writing romance novels?"

Slobodan chortled. "Goran loves no one, I'm sure. I want to go to the safest place."

"Well, the nearest to the Sun King, the better, but not too near as you could get burned. I would recommend here; Como or better Lugano. No one shits where we all eat. Who's going to be your successor?"

"I would recommend my lieutenant Yoseb Gorgazali, but I understand that the organization allowed me to take the Madrid territory thanks to your and Goran's generosity and support. I was not born here. Goran should decide what to do. It's his privilege as Summus Marescalus." 1

"Good, Goran will be pleased. You know that nothing more pleases the Hochmeister 2 than a repentant sinner. You will have to give to charity a 25% minimum of your assets and don't even try to hide how much you have made because they count up to your pocket money."

"I would never do something so stupid, but that would be around 59 million Euros."

"Greed is a mortal sin, my boy. Make it 75 millions Euros because you should use our security services. It's for the best. The lawyers will contact you on how to make your contribution for your brothers in need. I'll speak with Goran and if he agrees, you can start to look for a house in two months time and Ratko will provide you with some of his men."

"How's Irina?"

"Fine, waiting for the third little one. A boy, it seems. Ratko also wants to take a long holiday. Too much around, even for him."

"Yes, those Latinamericans believe they can come here, sell whatever they want and we should let them do whatever they please. That we do things more privately doesn't mean we are little girls. Imagine the scandal I would have if I were to send a policeman's head in a box!! Some people wanted to use my ports in the North, paying only 30% when I clearly said 40% "Margins not wide enough," the idiot told me." Mladic chortled. "Now, they go to business school too. Anyway, I had to send a clear message -and private- to them -Bagrat, do you remember him? Took care of the matter- They even refused to use our channels to process the winnings. "Bahamas is cheaper," was his excuse. Our own money, made on our streets, sent to some Flamingos with a cash machine." Madlic snorted in disbelief.

"We will have to teach them a lesson very soon, my boy. Do you want to stay for dinner?"

"No, I'm sorry. I have a plane to catch at 19:00." Slobodan excused himself.

"Pity. Must be really good what you have at home."

"It's the reason why I'm leaving."

"We never leave, this you understand, do you? We only take a leave or holidays if you prefer. We swore a lifetime oath."

"I know and I will abide it."

"Good. Ratko will contact you with the details. Be glad that the Boss is going through a sentimental phase. You're a good soldier to loose so early. Unfortunately, we can take the horse to the river but not forcing it to drink."

'So sentimental that he needs 75 millions to mend his self esteem.' Slobodan thought but kept the words to himself. 'If that's the family price, I don't want to know how much you pay if you're an outsider.' "I'll be indebted with you and cousin Goran for life. I will never speak about our brotherhood or betray any of my brothers."

"May the Lord gives you the strength and clarity of thought to abide your oaths, Slobodan." Mladic's voice intoned gravely, repeating the last sentence of the initiation ritual, before he shook hands with the Georgian, sealing their pact.

\* \* \*

"Honey bee, I'm home." Carsten couldn't help to yell when he opened his flat's door. One month of living

a pure hell in the office, everyday full of small -and stupid- retaliations had nearly depleted what he considered his good mood. Strangely, he had not fought back and his thoughts focused around on how to get his little elf back with him and the bloody demon.

"Don't call me like that or I'll show you the sting I have!" Pelayo roared, furious that the human had no respect for him any longer. 'Wait till you meet the others, Rodrigo, Lugan, Chlodovic, human. They will show you why we are called demons.'

"Are you not going to ask me how was my day, pigeon?" Carsten sauntered as he also was taking some pleasure in tormenting the trasgu. His sense of honour and pride were so big that it was impossible to resist to pull his legs a little.

"Fine, I suppose, as you're in a good mood for a change."

"Can you believe that I had to fight with the secretaries so they would let me use my former meeting room for signing the final documents? The tarts were most uncooperative and didn't bring coffee to me." He pouted.

"Is it done?"

"Yes, sold for 2.143 million pounds. Her Majesty's men at the tax office might be a little crossed with me because I had all my properties in a Isle of Man society, as Southwood and Peter suggested once. The new owners want that I help them to choose for my replacement but I declined as we have to go away."

"Do you know where we should go?"

"Madrid, but on a commercial airline as I have no plane any longer. I'm a poor pedestrian now." He chuckled. "Can you believe that they didn't throw me a farewell party? I was paying for all of theirs. Anyhow, I will have to take comfort in my money."

"Finally; this waiting was driving me crazy."

"Sure, to the platypus and to the briefcase with you."

"I refuse to go into an enclosed box! In the satchel and put the head out!"

"It's a real Vouitton! I'm not Marcial. Briefcase or you swim after me!"

"No way!"

"Good, stay here. I had enough with sending your damned sword by the Royal Post to the hotel in Asturias!"

"It's an insult to my status! I'm not something to pack in a bag!"

"I'm not going to cross the god damned Heathrow with you hanging from my arm. Look for another vessel if you have to! Like the bloody iPad you love so much! I'll open the briefcase in the plane and the minute we reach the hotel, I'll order a big tray of cured ham for you."

"Not good enough. You have tarnished my honour."

"I swear to buy you the biggest chocolate box they have at the Duty Free Shop. All for you."

"I would prefer an almond cake." Pelayo trailed, sounding half convinced.

"The minute we reach Barajas Airport. You know, British can't really appreciate what is good."

"In that case -and only because it's a short trip- I could be in that place."

"Thank you very much Pelayo. We leave in four days. I have to finish wrapping up some financial aspects of the deal, but it's decided then."

\* \* \*

Ratko hated these business trips. He had to wake up very early in the morning, fly a packed with yuppies business class -making faces at him because he had not the latest iPad or laptop- get a greasy coffee -and even smile to the vixen serving it. Those things were for Milan or even Goran, but no, Mladic had decided to force him to catch a flight scheduled at 7:30 to Madrid.

At least this one was easy. All the documents were finished and the customer only had to sign them, play the Real Estate Agent and nothing more. He was not in the mood for a difficult prick. He vaguely remembered this Majardze, a distant cousin to Goran from his mother's side, a Georgian.

The taxi driver was as usual not speaking English but the man quickly understood where he wanted to go and that he should not try to drive around with the tourist. Standing in front of the hotel in Paseo de la Castellana, among the tall buildings and nearly deafened by the roaring cars, he asked himself, why he was into this business. He crossed the glass doors and approached the girl at the Reception, gently smiling at him. 'I'm a married man, slut!'

"Good morning, sir. Welcome to the..." The blonde started with her merry voice.

"Majardze. I have an appointment with him." Ratko growled.

"Right away, Sir." She answered visibly upset that her charm had been so rudely cut off. She picked up her phone and briefly and lowly spoke in Spanish. "Mr. Majardze asks you to come upstairs. Suite 367. It's on the 14th floor, sir."

Ratko turned around, not bothering to thank her, and dashed to the elevator. The sooner he had finished, the better and he could pass by this place his wife had told him about. Pregnant women were so sensitive.

The grey, pink and blue moquette along with the cream painted and aluminium detailed walls, reminded Ratko why he hated these missions. Why all these gangsters had to choose the most cheap looking places if the price was the same that a good and tastefully decorated hotel? He knocked the "367" door.

"Hello Ratko, nice to see you again. I'm Mirjana's grandchild."

"I remember you now. We played together as children several summers. You took care of that mess pending since 1989. It made us all look like idiots."

"Wasn't that difficult. The man made a mistake and I found him. Traitors always do and that American journalist was also messing around with my territory." Slobodan shrugged. "Do you want a coffee or something to drink."

"Capuccino. Bloody ulcer. Can't drink any longer." Ratko confessed as Slobodan softly chuckled before ordering the beverages by phone.

"Tell me the conditions, Ratko."

"The money you offered is fine by the Hochmeister. He understands your reasons and tells through Goran, that you should be more clever than him and protect what you have. You two will be given a new identity and an EU citizenship along with the Swiss residence. You're a proud Spanish now; the boy is Irish. He almost looks like one."

"Good. I like this country."

"You should sign all these forms. Those are the needed transfers to the Foundation. You should live your

life discreetly, if you understand me.”

“Of course.” Slobodan answered dryly as he took the documents from Ratko's hand. The sharp look he got from the Serbian prevented him to start to read the papers because it could be understood as a lack of trust towards the Order, specially after the Hochmeister himself had been informed and had accepted his plead. He quick and silently finished to sign the documents.

“About the house. There's this property in front of the lake. It's not in the city but nearby. Well isolated and in good condition. Easy to defend and not bad looking. It's on sale for 7 million Euros.” Ratko said while he took out of his briefcase a folder containing many photos of a turn of the century villa with a big garden on top of a small hill.

“I was not expecting to spend so much...”

“I has just been repossessed by the bank. Take it or leave it. The price is very good.” Ratko growled as this was no his work, really.

“All right. I take it.”

“Good,” Ratko said, fishing another leather folder. “Sign where there's a cross. The money will come from one of your accounts. What do you plan to do with your business here?”

“I assume you can make a suggestion.”

“No, I'm no banker, we don't care about some restaurants. Those don't give much out. Liquidate them and transfer the money to Geneva. Leave the clubs to your successor. You can keep your other properties in Spain.”

“Thank you.” Slobodan retorted acidly, sipping his coffee rather strongly.

“Don't be nasty. It's unusual to retire with 36, but the Hochmeister understands and sympathizes with your personal circumstances. Two years ago, you would have gotten a bullet in your head for making such a suggestion. Goran says that Gorgazali is fine by him, but he will be “on probation” for a full year before he's appointed.”

“Fine.”

“Take heed about what the Hochmeister told you. It's very bad for him and your little one looks very similar to the other one. We are on the brink of war. If Goran finds out what really happened, it will be a

full scale retaliation, not the isolated hits you have seen so far.”

“Before I would have never understood his reaction, but now I do. It's really a pity all ended like that. Nothing new?”

“Nothing, but we will have our revenge, brother. No one touches one of us and survives to tell it.”

“I cannot offer my men any longer but I can offer myself if the Order needs me.”

“Thank you. Goran says that you're a good and loyal soldier. We will see each other beginning of November when we'll move you.”

\* \* \*

1. Summus Marescalus; Order Marshall
2. Hochmeister: Grand Master

## Chapter 27

Although it had been almost a week since Slobodan's hit, Marcial couldn't forget it. The Georgian had been very kind and delicate with him since that episode, but the boy couldn't shake the feel of terror clutching to his heart every time he saw his lover approaching him or wanted to touch him. In his mind, Marcial was always comparing the violent and vicious blow he had received to the strong slaps he used to get from the trasgu when he was disrespectful or didn't obey him. Marcial could always tell when the hand would rise because he knew that he had pushed the old knight to his limits by refusing to learn something or just being lazy. This time, everything had been completely different as there had been no previous warning, no reason and no lesson to be learned afterwards. Slobodan had apologised to him countless times and told him that they both had been deceived, but what hurt Marcial was that his lover would think him capable of cheating on him like that. He has not sent him away or anything! In fact, it had been Slobodan's idea that he should be nice to that lewd old man. He couldn't forget the hungry look in the man's eyes while he was serving a drink for him, how he had touched him, his hands burning his skin and the deep revulsion felt at his kisses. He had offered to massage his feet, just to put some distance between them and escape from his touches.

Slobodan had forbade him to go anywhere without him or Bagrat. He was still going to the park every morning, but the coming winter would soon prevent it. Slobodan had asked him if he would like to live in a small city by a great lake, with mountains and forests and he didn't know what to tell. He wanted to be back with Pelayo, in his own house back in Asturias.

The only way to do it was to recover the platypus, even if it meant to speak with Carsten or defy Slobodan and run back to London. He was sure that he could do it. He had enough money in his account to buy a air plane ticket. He needed Pelayo's friendship.

\* \* \*

"Hello Carsten." Marcial stammered, still very afraid of him.

"It's you." The man immediately recognised the soft voice on his mobile phone and laid against a wall, trying to digest his shock in the middle of Picadilly.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I need a favour from you. I wanted to buy an airline ticket to go back to London for Pelayo, but in the airline company, the employees told me that they needed my passport and I don't have it with me. I think I left it at your house."

"Yes, you did. I have it with me." Carsten answered not truly believing that after all his plan was working.

"Could you send it by post? I'll pay for it. I have some money saved. I need to get my platypus back." Carsten heard Marcial's plead and his boy sounded very sad.

"Are you all right, Marcial?"

"I don't know. I need my platypus. My mother gave it to me. I'll fly to London the minute I get my passport."

"No, don't come. It's dangerous for you to be on your own. You could get lost. I will bring it to you. Peter told me where you're. I'll be there tomorrow or the day after."

"You can't come. Slobodan is very jealous and will kill me if he sees you near me. He hit me because one of his men sent me to serve a man without his consent. I needed stitches, but I'm fine and he promised he would never do it again." Marcial confessed the words coming out of his mouth in an unstoppable flood.

"Did he hit you?" Carsten shouted horrified as he realised that the bloody trasgu had been right the whole time and he had wasted an enormous amount of time and his love was in a dangerous place, all because of his selfishness and stubbornness.

"It was an accident. He punched me and my head hit the wall. I really need to get my platypus, please, I beg you, give me back my passport!! Without him, I don't know what to do!"

"If you didn't have your passport, how could you leave England?"

"By train. A friend of his lend me a passport but I don't know where it's."

"All right. Do nothing more, do you understand me?"

"Will you give it back?"

"I'll go for you to Madrid."

"Do you know where's Pelayo?" Marcial said truly desperated.

"He's out, somewhere. He went home to pick up something."

"Home?" Marcial asked full of hope this time.

"Yes, home. Where else?".

"You don't need to come. I'll get him on my own. Thank you!" Marcial cried happier like he had never been before. He was going to meet his friend. "I should have known that he would come back home!

Good

bye and I love you." He said before he turned his mobile off.

"Wait!..." But Marcial was gone once more. "Bugger!" Carsten cried exasperated hitting the mobile against the wall. 'Why couldn't he wait for a second!? Bugger!' He cursed as he decided to go home and get the crazy trasgu, his papers and run to Heathrow. In the middle of the walk, he stopped dead on his tracks. "Shit!! He thinks the demon is "back home". This is why he doesn't need his papers! Fuck!" He realised. "Where the fuck is home for a demon?"

\* \* \*

Marcial was exultant, joyful. Pelayo was home; back in his own village, La Riera. That was the best place on earth and he could go there without problems. He only needed to get a jacket and go to the bus station. One ticket to Gijón and from there, he would find a way to get to Covadonga as tourists were always going there.

He went to his closet and took his jacket, the same he had brought from London and the one that Carsten

had given him so long ago. He softly caressed the dark blue wool because he knew that Asturias in November was very cold, much more than Madrid.

He went the stairs down, slightly surprised that the penthouse was empty. He opened the door and took the elevator down, putting his jacket on.

"Good morning, sir." Xavier, the doorman greeted him.

"Hello Xavier. I'm going home."

"That's a good idea. Those foreigners are not good for a decent kid like you."

"How can I get to the bus station?"

"You have to take the metro to Méndez Alvaro and there it's." The man answered, surprised that the boy didn't know something so basic.

"Are there buses to Asturias?"

"Sure, but it's a long trip."

"I know. Good bye and thank you." He said hurriedly as he had seen Bagrat and the Gypsy coming from around the corner, too busy with their mobile phones to see him. He turned around and quickly walked away, under the astonished look of the doorman, crossing the street almost jumping among the cars.

"Move!" The gypsy growled at the doorman standing in his path.

"Good morning, Sir." Xavier said sarcastically, only getting some grunts as both men brushed him aside, going directly towards the elevator.

\* \* \*

'The demon should know,' was Carsten's hope as he had no idea where his little elf could have escaped looking for "home". Perhaps Asturias.

"There you are! He's gone. He called me and asked about you and I told him you were at home and he ran as if the devil himself were after him. Well, in a way he's." Carsten mumbled.

"Explain yourself human." The trasgu sighed as this man was impossible to understand most of the time.

"Marcial phoned me when I was going to the bakery to buy you those buns you like so much. He wanted his passport so he could come here and pick up the platypus. I offered to go to Madrid with the thing, but he said that the mobster was jealous of mw and would kill me if he sees me."

"An eventuality that might well happen, human."

"What?? Never mind, my elf said that he had hit him and that he needed stitches!"

"I'm killing that bastard if he dares to lay a hand on my child!" The demon roared, his green eyes shinning in a way that Carsten had never seen before, convincing him that the safest option was to be on the demon's good side.

"Where is home? I fear he's in great danger, demon!"

"About time you listen to me! Take me now to Asturias. I know where he might have gone."

"Jump in the bloody briefcase!"

"And don't forget the blanket and bed for the platypus. It's very cold there and probably snowing."

'For a warrior, you're certainly a sissy,' Carsten thought but kept his mouth shut as the demon had already showed him several times his lousy temper and how highly destructive he was towards the furniture and china.

## **Chapter 28**

Bagrat knew that something was wrong the minute he entered the flat and didn't hear the boy coming to greet him -and inspect if he had something sweet with him, 'just like a child'.

"Bagrat the boy is not here! We only left him alone for 10 minutes!" The Gypsy shouted nervously as he was sure that the Georgian would blame them if something happened to the little moron.

"He can't be too far away. Perhaps he went to the park."

"Let's get him before the boss notices he's gone!" The Gypsy said checking his weapon under Bagrat reprobatory glance. 'Amateurs, all of them amateurs. Never show your piece unless you are going to use

it.'

\* \* \*

Carsten was furious with the woman at the airline counter. She certainly had a seat for the flight to Madrid, scheduled at 18:05, but she couldn't be sure if the plane was going to take off at all due to an Air Traffic Controllers strike in Barajas Airport.

"Sir, I can't tell you when we would be able to fly to Madrid. The airport is practically closed."

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"No, IATA recommends that we avoid that destination till the situation is back to normal."

"Where can I get a private flight?"

"Excuse me?"

"Private jet. You pay, they fly you there." He slowly explained for the stupid cow -smiling like the Barbie doll- standing in front of him. 'Does she think that her stupid little blue hat is going to boost her brains?'

"We don't have any information about that, sir. You should ask the information desk down the corridor, but I'm afraid you will have to go to Luton."

"Thank you." He said, blanching when a well long shadow extended over her shoulder. "I will go there, right now!" He shouted the last part, leaving the counter as fast as he could, hoping that the trasgu would be sensible enough as to jump back into his briefcase.

The high-pitched cry from the stewardess proved him, once more, that medieval knights were not necessarily gentlemen and that trasgus had no self restrain when it came to beautiful blondes with generous and ample bosoms.

\* \* \*

Marcial stood undecided in front of the complex subway map, uncertain of what to do. All the foreign smells and the people rushing past him, confused him more, the street artist playing the saxophone nearly deafening him and increasing his headache. 'Look for the place you're in and identify the colour of your station, then look for the one where you want to go. Put a hand on each one and look for the way across the lines to get there. Always start with the colour you're in and follow it through.' Marcial

remembered Pelayo's advise, but he was too nervous to think clearly. 'If you're lost, ask the Royal Guards, they will know and help you.'

He saw a policeman standing on the other end of the subway station and approached him, gathering some courage to speak as his years in the Reformatory had taught Marcial to be suspicious of policemen, social workers and lawyers.

"Good day. Excuse me sir, can I ask you something?" He asked very nervously and flushing when the officer looked at him very seriously.

"Good afternoon."

"I want to go to the bus station, to Gijón. Do you know how to get there...? From here, I mean." He blurted with a shaken voice.

The policeman looked at the boy in front of him thinking that either he was pulling his legs or he was high because that made no sense at all. He immediately looked at the boy's eyes to check if his pupils were dilated, but they seemed to be fine and he didn't have the look of a junkie, dressed with a coat worth two or three months of his salary, well cleaned and groomed.

"What?"

"I need to go back to Asturias. I'm lost in here. Do you know how to get to the bus station? Maybe the train would help too."

"Are you lost? What's your name? Do you know where you live?" He asked shocked, thinking that maybe someone wanted to make a joke on him.

"I know where I was staying but I want to go home. To La Riera, near Covadonga."

"Do you have an ID with you?"

"No, nothing."

"There you are, Marcial! We were really worried about you!" The Gypsy shouted from the other side of the hall, with Bagrat coming right after him. "Xavier, the doorman told us you wanted to go again to Asturias! You shouldn't do that! You will only worry Slobodan."

"Do you know this young gentleman? The policeman asked the two very well mannered men, with very

expensive suits and raincoats.

"Of course. His name is Marcial Fernández Martínez and he lives with our employer." The Gypsy said, lifting his right eyebrow so the policeman would get the idea. "He's a mental patient and suffers from anterograde amnesia, this is why we have to be with him all the time. He can get lost very easily as he forgets the things we say within minutes. Car accident when he was a child." The Gypsy explained as Bagrat took the boy by the arm in a firm grip, making him flinch a little.

"Do you know these men?"

"Yes, he's Bagrat. He takes care of me." Marcial admitted as the Gypsy shrugged. "But I want to go back to Asturias, sir. Can you help me?"

"Marcial, there's nothing for you in Asturias. How many times do I have to tell you, my boy?" The Gypsy said using his more amiable tone.

"My platypus Pelayo is there." Marcial confessed, feeling more and more anxious when the policeman had troubles to control his snort.

"Sure, the platypus is in your bedroom. Come now, it's almost tea time and Bagrat got you apple cake this morning."

"I don't want to go with you!"

"Come on, Marcial be reasonable. You know this happens if you don't take your medications." The Gypsy continued with his best tone for the little children and the lunatics.

"If this young man doesn't want to come with you, then I will have to take him to the station to identify him. He says he has no ID."

"I have it with me." Bagrat growled. "He loses everything, and his credit cards too. I'm his bodyguard." He opened his wallet and showed to the policeman Marcial's ID.

"In that case..." The officer was uncertain as the boy had truly looked afraid when he had seen the big foreigner ape and the weasel next to him.

"Let me show you something, officer." The Gypsy said peevish. "Marcial, in which train station are you now?"

"Train station? This is no train station." He answered nervously.

"You're right, tell me the name of the train station."

"It's a metro station!"

"Yes, the name boy." The Gypsy urged him, perfectly aware that Marcial didn't work well under pressure.

Marcial's mind went blank. "The one near the park where we live."

"And the park's name?"

"I don't know. I have it written somewhere."

"You see, officer? He's like that the whole time. It's very fortunate that his cousin decided to take him in and look after him. Otherwise, he would be in an institution. He's a very rich and important businessman."

"Which cousin? I have no family! My grandmother died two years ago!" He cried desperate as the policeman looked at the two gentlemen in charge of this poor lunatic boy. He was well dressed and seemed to be well looked after.

"Next time, you should consider to buy him a name tag with name, address and phone number, like those the soldiers have." The man said sympathetically.

"Of course we will, officer. Thank you very much for your assistance." The Gypsy intoned ceremoniously. "Come home, Marcial. Slobodan might worry if you're not there when he returns from work."

\* \* \*

Bagrat was very upset with the boy and locked him in his bedroom till the boss would decide what to do with him. Running away and going to a policeman! What was he thinking? Did he want a bullet in his head for being a snitch? He felt bad when he heard the muffled sobs through the closed door, but he knew this was for the best. Now, he would have to convince that idiotic Spanish to keep his mouth closed in front of the others.

\* \* \*

After many troubles and fights, Carsten got nothing out of the private jet companies. An Air Controllers Strike was something akin to a hurricane or a volcano explosion. You could do nothing. Only sit and wait for the mighty air controllers to end the strike at their convenience... and buy something for feeding the more than annoyed trasgu.

\* \* \*

When Slobodan returned home, a small hell was waiting for him. His angel had been crying the whole day, locked in his room and the Gypsy was shouting like crazy that the boy had escaped and gone to the police to tell everything. Bagrat's version was different; the boy for some unknown reason believed that his platypus was again back in his house and had ran to get it, asking the policeman the way to go to Asturias by metro.

"Angel, stop now. I don't need this on top." Slobodan softly said, caressing the blond bangs. "What were you thinking? You can't go alone in the subway and you know it. You need someone to lead you."

"I was going home. Pelayo is there. Carsten said he's gone home and I wanted to get him!"

The mention of the Dutch and the demon's name ignited the Georgian's fury. He had just given away 75 millions and a brilliant career in his organization for this boy and the little ungrateful could only think about his former lover and that demon? "You stay here with me! I forbid you to go anywhere without me! Do you hear me?" He roared.

"I need Pelayo with me!! Don't you understand it? He's everything I have!!"

"I'm your everything!! You're mine. Mine! You won't go outside this house without me!"

"Carsten was never that mean to me! He understood why I needed Pelayo and let him live at our house. He was very kind to me and I left him for you. Oh God, I hurt him and he never deserved it! Oh God, I loved him and never realised it."

Slobodan couldn't dominate himself any longer and he launched himself against his small lover, punching his stomach hard several times, leaving him on the floor, struggling to regain his breathing and to diminish the pain of the brutal blows. The Georgian was horrified of what he had done and couldn't stand the view any longer, leaving the bedroom and slamming the door behind him.

\* \* \*

The middle aged Georgian never felt so old and dirty in his life as when he had hit Marcial; the only good thing he ever had and 'I used him as a punching bag.' He slowly slid towards the floor, his back supported by Marcial bedroom's door, and hit several times his head against the thick wood, cursing his own idiocy and jealousy at hearing the muffled sobs coming from the other side.

"It's my fault, it's all my fault. I have to take him away from here so he forgets that bloody man, or I have to kill him so he can't steal my love once more."

"Boss, is he OK?" A very concerned Bagrat asked, seeing his superior utterly defeated and desperate for the first time in more than a decade of working together.

"I hit him again." Slobodan confessed very ashamed. "He said that he loved him."

"Boss, I won't tell you what to do, but you can't punch him. He's half your size and we don't know if he understands half of what we say. Do you think it's wise to have him around?"

"You're right Bagrat, you're damn right. He's not fit to be here. He will never be one of us and can't live among us." He replied very slowly, making the older man's heart cringe with fear.

\* \* \*

"My love. I'm terribly sorry. You know I love you too much and that you say that you love someone else drives me crazy. Come on, little one, forgive me, please." Slobodan pleaded the next morning, sitting over the bed and caressing again the boy.

Marcial was too afraid of the man to fight with him and chose to curl up like a small ball, trying to occupy the less possible space, causing Slobodan's guilt to further increase. "Please, my angel, come out of the bed. You have to eat and drink something. Bagrat told me you had nothing since yesterday's breakfast. I swear I will never hit you again."

"Do you promise?"

"I do, my love. Come here, let me hug you so you feel protected again."

Marcial knew better than disobeying a bigger and stronger man. George Althorpe had taught him particularly well that lesson, so he buried his face in Slobodan's chest, praying that the man couldn't read his thoughts. He needed to get to Asturias.

\* \* \*

Almost two days after his talk with the clever desk information girls -nearly losing his patience and hope in mankind after several discussions with many incompetent employees- Carsten was able to hire a jet from London to Bordeaux, asking the hotel in Madrid to please send the demon's packed sword to the four stars hotel they had already reserved in Covadonga. Driving the car for more than six hours with a brooding demon had also been a test for his frayed nerves and he was more than happy when he parked carelessly in front of Marcial's home the hired Land Rover.

The house stood over a small hill, far away from the main part of the town, painted in white, with two floors, with a tiled roof that needed an urgent fixing, a small wooden balcony over the second floor, very old and crumbled windows and the most breathtaking views over the mountains and forest. Carsten couldn't believe how little the town was, only a few standing -and inhabited houses, no more than 20-, small and narrow streets that abruptly transformed into mountain paths, a very old church and a market square.

"Look under the second tile on your left. The key must be there."

Carsten heard the muffled voice coming from inside the briefcase.

"First, no one leaves a key under a stone and second, it's obvious Marcial is not here. We should go back to Madrid or Oviedo, to look for someone who can help us, demon." Carsten huffed, very tired with the demon's constant critics over his driving skills, his road choice, the little food they had served him at the restaurant and a long list of complaints.

"Open the damn door. I'm freezing and I want to be near the fire!"

Carsten sighed. "That happens when you're 1.468 years old. You should start to consider to stay at home, demon."

"I'm 1.328 years old, you boor!!" The trasgu roared, offended at the not so subtle hint. "People says I'm in very good shape for my age!"

"Sure, old demons and witches." Carsten chortled.

"In fact, the last witch I saw was Marcial's grandmother and she didn't appreciate me. In the good old times, those women were incredibly beautiful and very accommodative to us, if you get my meaning." Pelayo's voice said again as Carsten found the key and fought with the door hinges to get it open.

"Don't want to know. I only hope the local police doesn't arrest me for burglary. I can imagine myself telling the judge, the demon who used to live here told me to open the door." He mumbled, entering the

place to escape from the dense snow falling since they had arrived.

"Stop whining like an old lady! It's really tiresome." The trasgu said, recovering his old form and standing over what seemed to be the living and dinning room. "That's very considerate from the boys; they left some wood for us."

"Where's the heating system?" Carsten asked.

"There." The trasgu showed the moron the chimney. "Light the fire, human."

"There's no heater?" The Dutch asked in shock.

"What for? Put some wood in, there's some coal left, and tomorrow you can buy some more. The fire will make the house warm in no time."

"I cant' believe it." Carsten mumbled, still in shock and taking a good look at the primitive place he had been thrown into. The single room had a large wooden table, some chairs, a rocking chair, a big cabinet full of faïence and a stairwell to the second floor, rustic curtains and an old stove used for cooking.

"There's a bathroom and running hot water, human." The trasgu said sarcastically. "I take you don't know how to light a fire. I'll do it. Watch and learn. You never know when you could need it."

"Never, I hope." Carsten said dejectedly and going to sit to one of the wooden chairs. When he was about to dust it, he noticed that everything was very cleaned and ordered. "This is very strange, wasn't the house abandoned for 3 years?"

"No, human. Marcial was kind enough as to let Lugan and Rodrigo to live here. It's good to have a warm place to stay during the storms. They must be gone somewhere." The trasgu told him, busy with the tinder and some dry leaves.

"Don't do that! I hate it!" He shouted back and then the nervousness took him over. "Who are Lugan and Rodrigo or should I say what are Lugan and Rodrigo?"

"You learn much faster since you're with me, human. Lugan and Rodrigo are two dear friends of mine and share my fate."

"Right. Two more demons to the party," he mumbled. "I'm going back to the hotel. I don't want that some hot brained guy calls the police and I'm detained. I'll be back in the morning."

"All right but before you come and not too early, go to one of those great markets and buy some beer for us. People always give us cider as they make it at home and we grow tired of it. Different kinds if possible and one from your own land. Nothing like that to meet other cultures."

"Five bottles?" Carsten asked not truly believing the demon's audacity. First an Ipad, books and now he was sent to buy beer?

"Bottles? Do you think we are women? Crates. Four or five with 20 bottles inside and bear in mind that I've said bottles, not cans."

"Sure. We can't have a keg, can we?"

"Pity. By the way, it would be very nice if you bring us a real ham; one of those made from acorn-fed pig. A full leg. Don't worry, we can slice it, and don't forget my sword, too." The goblin added the last sentence as he sensed that the human wanted to bring them a vacuum sealed pack.

"Good. Do you want olives and potato chips too?" He asked very sweetly, one millimetre from the explosion.

"Hold the chips, only the olives and bread. We're very simple in our pleasures. This modern things are not for us, human."

"Excellent." He said through greeted teeth.

"Take the platypus along with you, human and cover it well."

"What for? You stay here warm and with your buddies!"

"It's so cute when you take care of me!" The trasgu mocked him.

"Fuck you all!" Carsten roared under the demon's laughter, going to the door with long strides to be nearly hit by the heavy door when it burst open and a cold draft passed through him. Dazed, he closed the door and went to his own car, cursing the day the demon decided to move with him. When he was putting the keys in the ignition, his blood froze as he heard a roaring laughter coming out of the house.

"Gremlins' party time, it seems. Better buy the leg and not the shoulder. Maybe those two are as touchy as the other one, platypus." He commented with the animal poking his head out of the open briefcase.

\* \* \*

Confinement was driving Marcial mad. Slobodan had forbade him to go out and Bagrat simply ordered him to stay in his room and watch TV or read a book. Slobodan turned out everything his friend had told him he would be. A violent man who couldn't control his passions. "I don't doubt he loves you, but he's not good for you. He will make your life miserable. You need someone who can gently lead you and teach you. Someone ready to cope with all your virtues and miseries. You don't love him also. You're only dazzled by his good looks and attentions. Please, have a little more brains than a laundry girl by the river, boy," Pelayo had said to him countless times.

He needed to escape but he didn't know how.

\* \* \*

Buying beer, ham, olives and bread -I got a bloody shopping list from that demon'- had not represented a problem at all. The highlander standing in front of him with a hunting rifle might be one.

"Who are you and what do you want here?" The old man asked pointing his gun at him.

"My name is Carsten de Vries and I'm waiting for Marcial Fernández Martínez. He's in Madrid but we agreed to meet here."

"He's gone since two years or more. Why would he be back?"

"I have something from him and I want to give it back. Could you point that thing somewhere else, please?" He said very nervously.

"We don't like foreigners and much less around Marcial." The man growled, now aiming at his head.

"I know. Marcial worked for me in London. I have his platypus with me, in the car. Look if you want. He forgot it there and wants to get it back."

"So?"

"I'm nothing like this George Althorpe. He's dead by the way."

"How?"

"Cut himself several times." Carsten answered vaguely, turning pale at the memory of the coroner's report, courtesy of Southwood. "Hit his head against the wall many times and finally he cut his throat open in an Asylum. Pelayo saw to it."

"That demon fulfilled his oath." The old man said, lowering his weapon.

"Are you Don Saturnino? You have a satchel with a star embroidered. Marcial told me about you."

"Almost. Saturnino died a year ago and left me his satchel. I'm Jesús de Todos los Santos. Come to my house. It's cold out here. Where are you from?"

"The Netherlands. Wait, have you seen Pelayo too?"

"I?? Never!!! My children would put me in the old folks home and sell my lands if I were to see it! I'm perfectly sane!"

"I see. I have some beer from my own country. Do you want to give it a try?" Carsten sighed as he opted for the "Beer Diplomacy" approach. Perhaps the demon was right; 'after all he was getting straight the whole mess with Jansen and Co. I would have never guessed.'

\* \* \*

"Hey, Marcial. Still around here?" Georg surprised the boy sulking around the dinning table. For the man it was a golden opportunity to catch him alone, with Slobodan and Bagrat busy somewhere else.

"Yes, Slobodan told me to stay here."

"Pretty boring, uh? I have to work too."

"I'll go to my room."

"Can you do me a favour kid? I'll do another for you."

"No, Slobodan doesn't want that I touch other men or women." Marcial answered very seriously. "It drives him mad and then, he hits me. I don't want it any longer."

"No, no, no. I'm not into boys. I like girls and I have a girlfriend in London. You know her, Lisa Mun. She works at that company you were working too."

"Do you know Lisa?" Marcial was very shocked. "How is she?"

"Fine. Sends her regards." Georg lied. "She told me many things about you; that you can see things that

other people don't. I saw it in the races and that night with the Colombians."

"Which Colombians? I know some Ecuadorians but no Colombians at all."

"Don't worry, they're history. Look, I need a favour from you, well, its not for me only. It's for Lisa too."

"What?"

"I want to leave to marry her but I need some information before I go. Something to trade with the authorities, do you get my meaning?"

"Are you an illegal?"

"What?? No."

"Then why do you need to trade with the authorities? Take your passport to the Civil Registry and they will give you a date for the marriage. It's simple. Paco did it in one morning and married a Dominican lady. Pity she went away after she got her papers."

"No, not that kind of deal boy!" Georg said very frustrated. "Another kind. With the police and the DA. I give them something about Slobodan's business and they give me a new identity. A fresh new start." He lied because the information would be given to Korsakhov's people, dying to take over Slobodan's territory.

"I know nothing and you're the first person to say that I'm an idiot."

"I'll help you in whatever you want. The Gypsy said that you were planning to escape to Asturias. I could help you, pay your ticket and all that."

"The ticket is not the problem; it's how to get to the bus station. Slobodan doesn't let me set a foot out of this house on my own."

"You wouldn't be alone. You would be with me and I can take you to the bus station and put you in the bus back home. It's very simple what you have to do. Just fetch something from Slobodan."

\* \* \*

"Human!! Don't be a stranger!! Come here and meet my friends!" A slightly more than usual happy trasgu opened the door for Carsten, when he was trying to use the key at Marcial's house. The minute the

tall man entered the room he regretted to have left the beer and food alone with the demons. By the general look of the house, they had been partying for a long time.

"Couldn't you get a dish to throw the pitted olives?" Carsten growled still dazing at the two figures sitting by the fire with no more light around them. "What's wrong with the power?"

"Nothing. We prefer that way. More comfy."

"Sure..."

"Let me introduce you to my friends. The one at your left is Lugan de Traslasierra, our commanding officer and the other is Rodrigo de la Cerda, our blacksmith." Pelayo said ceremoniously, his bony finger pointing first to a very large, muscular, dangerously looking and ugly demon, dressed very similarly like he, but carrying a long dagger across his belt and another demon, shorter, beefy with very dark hairs all smiles and laughs, with mischievous eyes.

"Good afternoon gentlemen." Carsten greeted them as politely as he could, knowing that these demons demanded the highest respect from humans as they considered themselves superiors. To deal with one goblin was one thing, but three -and with one looking so deadly as the Lugan- was something very different.

"Hello Human, do you have a name?" The chunky one asked. "The beer from your land is most excellent. What is its name?"

"Noordwijk, it's in Groningen." He answered. "It's a very small town, built over water." He added to catch their attentions.

"Built over water?" Lugan asked in disbelief.

"Almost. On land we took from the sea."

"You should tell us about this wonder. Pelayo has been telling us about his trips over the past years. Most impressive, I must say. Come, foreigner, you can sit by the fire with us." Lugan said as one chair flew across the room to land next to the shorter demon.

'Better don't forget those two, no, those three are demons,' Carsten thought gulping and going to take his place in front of the fire in the middle of old, powerful, nasty and whimsical goblins. The old stories of the travellers meeting them in the crossroads, forced to entertain them till the morning just to save their lives, came to his mind.

\* \* \*

"It's very easy Marcial. There's a small device that Slobodan's carries with him always. It's like a pocket calculator but it always shows a series of numbers, no buttons. Those numbers change permanently.

"Yes, I know what it's. Its a password generator. Carsten had one too. You read the code which is automatically generated and you can remotely access your databases with your computer. Mr. Slobodan has many restaurants."

"Clever boy, that's what it's." Georg praised Marcial. Those codes were his salvation and way out of the Order as they allowed the Komture entrance to their main databases so they could report about their dealings. Only the Commanders had those items and defended them with their lives. The Russians would pay very well for one. "Do you think you could get it from Slobodan's pocket and bring it to me?"

"He doesn't have it in his pocket. It's in his safe box."

"Shit!"

"I can give you the password if you swear to take me to Asturias."

\* \* \*

"So, human. Your story is very nice but you forgot to tell us the most important part." Lugan chuckled, strongly patting Carsten's shoulder to the point of the man bending over himself with the blow. The demons were already inebriated, exactly as Pelayo had told him they would be. Rowdy drunks.

"What? I told you everything I know about polders! I'm not an engineer!" Carsten huffed, his mind somewhat dazed with the cider the demons had insisted on him trying.

"The Meigas. Do you have them in London?"

"What? There is not such thing there!"

"Meigas are witches and of course there are! Your man servant brought one to our flat. Good tits! Nice detail from him."

"What? Did Jelle bring a woman to my house??"

"Don't be so disagreeable. Women are not so bad, if you know how to ride them!" Rodrigo laughed, making the others burst into laughter. "Why do you hate women? I don't deny that Marcial has his charm, but nothing compares to a fine woman who can give you children."

"First, I don't hate women. I hate mother and my sister and that's different and I can't stand children. They make everything dirty."

"In vino veritas, right human?" Pelayo smirked.

"Shut up, demon." Carsten growled, making the others laugh louder if possible. "Which witch?"

"The medium that your servant invited to your house to "make contact with the mystical presence residing in your house," meaning me! Lugan, my friend, you should have seen that that pair of..."

"What? There are no witches any longer. That's in your imagination. Old women tales!"

"Pity, those Sabbaths were really good for us. Do you remember that one, the red haired?"

"Sabbaths?" Carsten asked incredulously and not willing to have a real answer.

"Several women coming to the forest, a nice fire, a good sacrifice to us and many of them were so drunk that you could take them in all the ways you could imagine. Wonderful times for us!" Lugan chuckled.

"So human, tell me. Do you think you could send us some witches? Fairies are not nice to us and Xanas1 smell like fish."

"I know no one. Sorry. Do you like women? Don't you prefer demoness or something like that?"

"In our patrol were no women, human, so there are no female trasgus. We're alone in this world..." Rodrigo sighed dejectedly.

"The humans who are able to see us are rare, very rare. When we choose to reveal to one of you, it takes a lot of energy for us." Pelayo explained.

"But you were practically all the time with Marcial."

"Marcial can see us even if don't want. Marcial is a rare breed indeed." Rodrigo said.

"And a cutie... almost as good as a woman!" Lugan winked his eye to Carsten. "Do you say he's coming

here? Perhaps he could do me a favour or two. He was always such a willing boy."

Carsten in his half drunken state, jumped from his chair and his hand took the big demon's dirty casing, a freezing feeling spreading through his bone towards his heart. But the man didn't care, too furious he was at what the monster was suggesting. "If you touch a single hair of him, demon, you're dead! Do you hear me?" He shouted.

All the demons laughed uncontrollably. "We are dead, human," Lugan stated. "You can do nothing to us. Look over there." He finished, his hand waving over a basket of fruits, turning them ripe and putrid in an instant. "We are Death. All these centuries of servitude, have given us more power than the ancient gods ever had. They're gone but we remain here. Bear always that in your mind, human."

"Lugan, leave the boy alone or you'll find my sword on your throat." Pelayo said, satisfied with the human's reaction. Perhaps he still could be a suitable husband for Marcial. "Human, remove your hand before you rot all over because of gangrene."

Carsten let the shirt go and looked at his fingertips, unearthly blackened. "But you help people, you clean houses and bring water." He stammered, his heart pierced with true fear after the demons had finally dropped their amiable masks.

"If we want, human, if we want. Perhaps at the beginning we were forced to do it, but not now." Lugan growled, his eyes shining. "Be nice to us if you want to become our son in law."

"Besides, I always liked a clean house." Pelayo interfered, throwing an assassin's look at his friend.

"Son in law?" Carsten stuttered in disbelief.

"Is this human an imbecile, Pelayo?" Lugan asked, while Rodrigo chuckled. "He wants to marry Marcial and he asks such a basic thing?"

"He's more idiotic than you think, Lugan. Nevertheless his heart is true." Pelayo sighed. "Humans nowadays know nothing about us or them, so let them be. They're happier that way."

"Human, hear me well. If you believe for a minute that you can have Marcial all for yourself, think it over. Pelayo is his guardian and will never go away and we are his brothers. You will have to live with all of us if you want the young one." Rodrigo decided to give the human the simplest explanation as he indeed was truly a brute. "He will be soon here and you will have to prove that you're worthy of him."

\* \* \*

Marcial was assaulted by doubts. The small grey square box laying on his tiny palm, was very important for Slobodan as he was always taking care of it, carrying it around and checking if he had it with him. He didn't know what to do. Obviously, Georg wanted to hurt Slobodan but he wanted to escape from him too. He was torn between his love for the mobster and his own survival instincts. Looking once more around the elegant bedroom, he slid the machine inside his coat's pocket, ready to leave.

"Do you have it?"

"Yes, but I will not give it to you. You want to hurt Slobodan. I'll trade it myself with him. This thing for letting me go home." Marcial announced firmly. "I won't tell that it was your idea. Go away before he comes back."

Georg didn't think it twice and fast as ever, his fist connected with Marcial's jaw, throwing him to the floor. He heavily settled over the boy's hips, using his weight to trap the frail body. The man's hands immediately closed over his throat, choking him as he shook the head against the wooden floor. As suddenly as he had started, he stopped. "Where is it? Tell me!!" He growled as he put a razor blade out of his jacket. "I can give you a lot of pain, boy. Talk now!"

"I don't have it!"

"Yes, you do little bitch." Without any warning, he started to bend the youth's fingers till one of them snapped making him howl in pain as he had never known a feeling like the hot fire spreading all over his hand and arm. "Talk now!! Do you want another?"

"No!! You want to hurt Sloba!!"

"So be it, bitch!" He said, opening the razorblade and pointing it towards the boy's throat. "Wait, you can't be that idiot, can you?" Georg smirked as he violently punched the boy so he would remain still during his search of the pockets.

"Yes, you're more stupid than I thought." He mumbled when he found the thing. "Hope Slobodan finishes you quickly, whore."

"Don't bet on it. I'm going to take my time with you." A well known voice said in Georgian. "Leave my boy alone and return what you took."

"Never!!" Georg turned around, shooting Slobodan in the chest, making the man fall to the floor. Not bothering to check if his enemy was dead, Georg dashed to the open door and ran, to the stairs, knocking

Yoseb down in his escape.

Marcial cried like an animal in agony and crawled towards the body sprawled on the floor, burning his face on the chest and bursting into tears as he shook the inert great shape. "Get a doctor, now!!" He cried to Yoseb standing next to him and looking everything coldly.

"Why? He won't need it and don't make such a scene out of nothing!"

"Call a doctor, he's dying. Georg shot him!!"

"I can take you to the hospital if you want. I mean, your left fingers are probably broken. What did Georg want from you?"

"How can you say that? Call someone!! Slobodan is hurt!!"

"What did he want from you? I need to know it."

"A password generator, the one that Slobodan has the whole time. He told me he needed it to trade with the Authorities so he could marry my friend Lisa!! He promised to take me back to my land if I gave it to him, but I didn't want because he wanted to hurt Slobodan!! Get him a doctor, please!"

"No, he has a hard head."

"He's right, Marcial." Slobodan said putting the sobbing boy away from his chest. "Damn 38, it hurts like shit at short range. You, are in deep shit and I'll settle the score with you after you go to the hospital. Bagrat!!! Take him to the hospital, now!" He said to a terrified Marcial, more for his pride's sake than out of real anger. His angel had tried to defend him to the best of his more than limited resources and had cried for him. There was no doubts that he loved him despite his harsh words a few nights ago.

Marcial was on the brink of a collapse. The man had shot Slobodan and he had fell to the floor!! He should be dead!! "How?" He croaked from the floor as the man stood up and removed his wet and wrinkled jacket.

"Bulletproof vest, dear. Bulletproof vest. The best friend you'll ever have in this world." Slobodan smirked. "Bagrat, move now, not tomorrow!" He shouted to a bewildered bodyguard who reacted and carelessly took the boy by the arm and lifted him from the floor where he was still gaping at his lover.

"Come boy, we need to bandage this." Bagrat intoned softly. "Should I finish him off?"

"No, let the Russians do it. Saves us trouble. As for the little whore of his, let her be for the time being." Slobodan commented as he removed the heavy vest and threw it over a chair. "Have to get a new one. See to it, Yoseb."

Bagrat was undecided; his boss didn't seem disgruntled with the boy but he had done something very bad; betraying, if only for a moment. Although he had regretted his actions and had refused to give the strange looking box to that traitor, people had died for less and he didn't want to do it. Everything was on the tapes, but one could never know when Slobodan was on a killing spree mood. "Which hospital boss?" He asked with an ashen face.

"That clinic around the corner!! The one we went when he hit the head! Are you senile?"

"No, boss. Just checking your preferences." Bagrat answered very relieved.

"Get the fuck out!" Slobodan barked as he had enough of idiots for a day. Bagrat didn't wait for a second invitation and dragged the shocked boy with him.

Yoseb couldn't understand a thing. The boy had handed on a silver tray the codes and his boss was doing nothing? Their lives and their families survival were at stake! "Boss if he has the password generator, this whole chapter is good as dead!" Yoseb shouted. "We have to get him before the Russians or the Authorities do!"

"I was expecting his betrayal for a long time, Yoseb. Too ambitious for his own sake. Its a fake password generator what he has. The good one is safe with me. I'm sorry to have robbed you the opportunity to kill him with your own hands, but I wanted to see how desperate the Russians were and how much they know about our operational methods. The minute they try to use it, they will have access to false data."

"Boss, you're going to give me a heart attack!!" Yoseb chuckled utterly relieved. "The Russians are almost as imaginative as Goran and his people." He laughed.

"Remember that well because from now on, you're the Komtur of this land, Yoseb. Loyalty and respect are crucial in our world." Slobodan gravely intoned as he took out of his pocket a small pen drive and gave it to the man. "So help you God, my friend, if you're not up to their expectations."

\* \* \*

'I wouldn't like to be a policeman in this land. On top of the normal drunks, you have to deal with the drunk goblins,' Carsten briefly thought as his hotel room had been once more taken over by three

demons demanding wine from La Rioja, fabada, real meat and almond cake for dinner. 'Now, I see why in all European folklore, the only ones who come with a removal instructions handbook larger than their exploits, are the trasgus.'

Time to dial the room service... and leave a good tip for the cleaning ladies in the morning.

\* \* \*

It was almost midnight when Bagrat brought the boy home, after taking him to the hospital, giving a confused explanation on how he had broken two fingers in a fall, getting a X-ray for his hand, doing his best to control the boy and his fear of doctors and finally taking him to eat some pizza in a restaurant. He hoped that his boss would be calmer by now and wouldn't hurt the boy too much for his mistake.

Slobodan was working in his studio and sternly looked at the terrified boy.

"Leave us Bagrat." He only said and the man was forced to obey, doing his best to ignore the pleading eyes begging him to stay. He closed the door but didn't go further away as he was afraid that his boss would lose his head and hurt the child more than necessary.

\* \* \*

"Come over here, Marcial." The huge man asked very softly as his angel was almost trembling with fear. "I'm not upset with you. You made a mistake but you wanted to fix it before it went too far away. I saw everything you did on the security recordings. Be glad we have them so I could interfere before Georg would have truly hurt you."

"I thought he had killed you!"

"No, he didn't. I'm convinced now that my decision about your future is the best for both of us, my love. I can't force you to lead this kind of life. Because of your love for me, I've decided that we're going to go to a place far away in November. I'm going to take you to a forest full of tall trees so you can rest and be at peace, my love. There's a deep lake around."

"Really?"

"Yes, my love. Why do you want to escape so much from me? Don't you love me any more?"

"I love you but you hit me and I'm afraid that you will kill me, like George tried to do. I still dream about him. I want to go home; to Pelayo."

"Marcial, If I hit you, it was because I'm under considerable stress with all the decisions I've made. I swear that everything will be different for you. Come here and give me a kiss." Slobodan said as he moved his chair away from his desk motioning his angel to sit on his lap. "Come, dear. I mean no harm to you." He whispered very softly and Marcial knew that Slobodan truly wanted to change and needed him more than ever to become a better man. He should find a way to overcome his fear because his Sloba also deserved to be happy.

\* \* \*

Bagrat was undecided. The phrase left no doubts: "I'm going to take you to a forest full of tall trees so you can rest and be at peace, my love." The boss had enough of the boy, that was very clear and was doing the only honest thing to do. Dispose of the boy in the less painful way, instead of selling him or putting him to work in the clubs.

The boy didn't deserve it. Talking with one policeman wasn't enough to send him to the other side. What could he tell? He knew about nothing. The best he could do would be telling the lotto winner numbers.

He felt responsible for Marcial.

He would help him to get back to his own land.

It wasn't really his fault that that slime of Georg had duped and used him.

## **Chapter 29**

"Come boy, you're going home today." Bagrat urged the still sleeping Marcial five days after the incident with Georg. "Get dressed. I'm going to take you to the bus station and from there you'll travel to Cangas de Onís. You should know the way from there."

"Really? Will I see Pelayo again?"

"I guess so. Go home boy. Boss is furious with you and nothing good can come out of it. Remember Georg."

Marcial nodded, still terrified, leaving his bed to look for his clothes.

\* \* \*

Slobodan looked at the man in front of him. One of Goran's men but not highly placed as he didn't have any ring or tattoo to identify him. Very young and nervous because he most certainly knew in front of whom he was.

"So?"

"Everything is ready. We leave tomorrow by land. I will accompany you all through the South of France. From the border with Italy, another man, will be with you."

"Is it necessary? I can go by myself."

"Goran insists. He says I can deal better with the authorities if there's a problem, Komtur."

"I'm not such any longer."

"Yes, sire."

"All right, tomorrow at noon I will meet you where we agreed."

The Georgian slouched in his chair when the man left. He had never been so tired in his life and full of longing. 'I'm going to miss it. Everyday. I hope Yoseb success in his job. Marcial deserves much better than what I can give him as Komtur.'

\* \* \*

True to his word, Bagrat had helped him to get to the bus station, giving him the ticket and telling him that he should remain in the bus all the time and gave him a wade of notes and a hug. "Take care, little one and don't tell the others about your gift. Do me a favour; stay away from the human beings, will you?"

"Thank you Bagrat. I hope you're happy with your wife and children. The seaside is very beautiful too." Marcial said, returning the bear hug, leaving the man confused but full of hope that there would be a happy ending for him too. Bagrat took a deep breath in and walked to the bus station exit to catch a taxi to the Chamartín Train Station.

\* \* \*

The flat was empty except for the maids who had told him that his angel had left in the morning with Bagrat, probably to the park or to the public library. Slobodan took his mobile phone and called Marcial but he heard the distant ringing of the phone coming from his own studio. "Damn, he forgot it again. This boy is impossible!" He cursed, now calling Bagrat. 'Why would he be out for so long? He hates open spaces.'

However, a mechanical voice told him that "the number you want to reach is offline or unreachable," spreading all his fears like fire over his soul.

\* \* \*

Very late in the afternoon, a starving Marcial, descended from the bus at the small stop in Cangas de Onís. The local bus to Covadonga should arrive in the next two hours if he remembered well and then, he should take a walk for 7 kilometres through his forest. He buttoned his coat up to his neck as it was becoming very cold and it looked like it was about to snow. He thought about eating something before the long wait and walk. "This the last time I could do it all by myself, not sharing the dish," he chuckled, very glad that he was going to recover his glutton friend very soon.

\* \* \*

Yoseb cursed as his first job as Komtur was to find the blasted boy and that traitor of Bagrat, the order coming from Goran "the butcher" himself, almost accusing him of being responsible for the boy's disappearance. 'It's not my fault you screw it up with the other one,' he thought venomously as he checked the coordinates the man had given him over Bagrat's mobile phone: Chamartín Train Station 11:35.

"Boss, we can discard kidnapping because no one would have taken the boy and ran with the train."

"What if he sold the boy to our enemies?"

"Why? He has no value as you're out."

"No one knows it. Only us."

"Do you think the Colombians, maybe?"

"No, it's not their style. They would have called with their demands or to tell where to find the body."

"Boss, what if the boy ran away? There are trains to the north of the country there. Not even a week ago

he was trying to go back to his homeland. It's stupid but logical."

"He can't take the bus by himself!"

"What if Bagrat helped him?"

"Why would he do that? He wouldn't be so stupid as to go against me!"

"He likes the boy a lot... Not in that way, boss!" He corrected himself hurriedly at the assassin's look Slobodan was throwing at him. "In a fatherly way and I saw him defending the boy from you in the club. I wouldn't have dared to get in the middle of a fight with you."

Slobodan seemed to think for a long while Yoseb looked at him. "Bagrat deserted his post. Find him and execute him for treason if his reasons are not good enough for you, Yoseb. I will take care of the boy by myself. You should not divert resources in this. I suffice myself to get him back."

"As you wish, boss."

"You're the boss now. Good luck."

"You will always be our Komtur, no matter what. I wish you the best, boss."

\* \* \*

Carsten sighed once more. From successful businessman to beer crates carrier for three drunken, hungry, nasty and vulgar demons, he darkly thought as he piled up the boxes in the back of the rented Land Rover. "That story about trasgus cleaning is a complete falsehood." He spoke aloud, making the woman packing her groceries inside her car at the supermarket's parking lot, look at him in shock. "The worse is that they drink like crazy and don't get even tipsy." He clarified in Spanish but she only threw an incensed look at him, slamming her car's door and quickly going to the driver's seat.

"What's the problem with all of them? They die to hear what you're telling and then, become upset if you explain it. All crazy cows." He growled, closing the door and deciding to go back to his hotel in Covadonga. 'Anyway, the demons will come for dinner. Damned nocturnal creatures!'

\* \* \*

Slobodan was fortunate enough as to catch the last flight to Oviedo and he would arrive at 20:35, more than enough time to get a car and go for the boy, probably sitting in his own house, waiting for a

demonic platypus -probably still in London- to show up. Nevertheless, he always preferred to be on the safe side.

"Gypsy, tell one of your men in Ribadeo to go to Oviedo and get me a car and some equipment," he curtly ordered.

\* \* \*

It was very late -almost 21:30- when the bus left Marcial in the street that led to the great Basilica of Covadonga and he slowly walked towards his old restaurant. Perhaps Don Julián had seen one of the inhabitants of La Riera in the city who could give him a lift.

\* \* \*

Lugan was the first to realise that something was not right. Something had changed in the air and he elbowed Pelayo, entertained with his story of how he had met a nice lady in Ravenna. "Human, go to Marcial's house. You're needed there."

"What? It's snowing!"

"Move your legs, human!" Pelayo shouted vulgarly, grabbing his sword from the table while the others readied their weapons.

"What's wrong with you all?"

"Go to the house and take care of your mate, human. We will take care of the forest!"

"What?" Carsten asked incredulously, looking in awe the happy drinkers now turned into dangerous soldiers, their faces showing their hunger for the killing.

"No one enters into our forest without our permission, human. Take the vessel with you. Marcial will like to have it back."

\* \* \*

Marcial thanked his former boss as he had agreed to take him with the car to his old house. Standing in front of the door, he looked for the key under the tile and opened the door. The house was not exactly as he had left it. The chimney was filled with ashes and the furniture in disarray. Some dishes were left abandoned in the kitchen sink, along with several empty beer bottles. 'Lugan and Rodrigo are still as

messy as always, but I wonder from where had they gotten so many bottles. Normally people gives them no more than a bottle of cider. I hope they had done nothing bad this time.' He thought as he started to collect the bottles to put them back in the crates. 'Heineken? Grolsch? Amstel? La Trappe Quadrupel? That's not their typical taste. They're happy if they get a Mahou. I wish Pelayo were here, but he must be out with the others, hunting or into some mischief. I'll clean here and go to bed. I can't do anything else.' He expertly set the fire and went the stairs up, hoping that the house would soon be warm.

His small bedroom was exactly as he had left it. He took some sheets and covers from the empty closet and made his bed but decided to sleep with his clothes on as it was still too cold and he was too tired to do anything more.

\* \* \*

Carsten parked the Land Rover, his heart pounding inside his chest, the minute he saw the smoke coming out of the chimney. He opened the door with the second key he had found and the crackling fire warmed his soul more than ever. His little elf was here. He bit his lips to prevent the laughter to escape from his throat as he had never felt so nervous in his life. He climbed the steps one by one, trying to soften his steps afraid to wake up the obviously sleeping boy.

Marcial was sleeping in his bed, exactly as Carsten remembered him; curled in a small ball to protect himself from the cold. The man remembered that he had left the toy in the car and went the stairs down to fetch it.

Kneeling on the side of the bed, his hand trembled lightly before touching the blond bangs in the semi-darkened room. The firelight came in through the stairs, bathing everything with an eerie glow. His eyes traced Marcial's well known form over the bed and stopped over the almost faded bruise in his left cheek. Very carefully he touched the boy's forehead and softly called his name.

The youth opened his eyes and gasped, not truly believing that Carsten was there, clutching his platypus. "I believe this is yours... my love." He gulped, truly embarrassed to be speechless when there was so much he wanted to tell and to ask for forgiveness.

"I love you, Carsten. I didn't know it then but I'm sure now. I want to sleep with you every night and that you hold me. I want to take care of you even if you think you don't need me." Marcial simply said.

"I need you more than anyone else. You make me feel alive and you make the world look like a good place to be."

"I didn't mean to hurt you. I was confused and I loved Slobodan with my soul but he's not for me."

Marcial said, expecting Carsten to explode and curse him but nothing happened.

"I know. I should have heard you more; tried to understand what you were telling me. I prejudged you and my pride didn't let me see how wrong I was."

"You're an intelligent man, Carsten. You only needed to see more around you." Marcial softly said. "Can you forgive me for leaving you?"

"Yes." Carsten croaked. "Can you forgive me for belittling you and your beliefs?"

"Yes, stay with me tonight." Marcial answered moving against the wall so the tall man could lay next to him.

"Here, take your pet. I have enough of it." Carsten said as he removed his shoes and went under the covers, his large arms intertwining the boy's waist and pulling him against his chest. Marcial buried his face, truly happy in a long time, against the animal's back and smelled its familiar scent.

"Carsten, did you bathe my platypus with almond soap?"

"Plus a new perfume for it. Almond essence with some green apple. It smells too much."

"I hope he likes it." Marcial whispered, very nervous because Pelayo was very touchy when it came to soaps and perfumes.

"He choose it, now sleep. Saw it on the internet." Carsten mumbled leaving Marcial puzzled and wondering what his lover had meant.

## **Chapter 30**

The cold metal point pressing against his forehead told Carsten that nothing good could come out of it. He opened his eyes to find them locked with the darkest and evil eyes he had seen in his life. The man in front of him was the picture of cold fury. Not so tall as he was, but large enough and obviously trained in a military way by his stance.

"Don't make a sound. Don't want him to be afraid because of you." Slobodan whispered gesturing with his weapon to leave the bed. "If he wakes up, I'll shoot you right here."

Carsten removed himself from Marcial's plastered body with all the gentleness he could muster. He

didn't want his little elf to be hurt any further by this monster and a fight in front of him would be very damaging for his battered psyche. He put on his shoes and covered Marcial with the blankets, enjoying for the last time the soft whimper he used to make whenever Carsten was leaving the bed. 'God, how I missed him. I'm glad I will not miss him any longer.' He thought as he was certain of the Georgian's intentions towards him.

The Dutchman went the stairs down with the omnipresent gun pressed against his ribs and opened the door as the other man indicated him to follow the small path behind the house. "You stole my angel for a second time and you'll pay dearly for that."

"He doesn't love you. You hit him and make his life miserable." Carsten answered heatedly, not knowing from where the courage –or foolishness- had come to answer back a well known murderer pointing a weapon at him.

"I'll take him far away and keep him away from this shit. Walk faster!" Slobodan replied, brutally pushing his enemy.

Both men continued to walk till they reached an opening in the dense forest. The morning mist along with piercing breeze increased the strange and heavy silence around them. No bird was singing or even the crackling sound of the foliage could be heard. The forest seemed to be dead. 'Strange,' Carsten thought, 'death is part of life. It shouldn't matter at all.'

"Kneel down."

"What for?"

"So I don't miss and leave you agonizing for several hours." Slobodan smirked. "Down!"

"No." Carsten said and jumped over his enemy, taking advantage of his momentary shock at his rebellion, successfully knocking them both to the ground. 'I won't go without a fight, that's what my father told me.'

Carsten managed to give two strong blows to Slobodan but his fighting technique were good for a pub or a college fight but could never match the skills of a man trained since his infancy to fight and kill almost mechanically.

Slobodan easily threw the man out of him, making him lose his balance with two well aimed blows at his stomach and sides. Not giving him time to recover he jumped on top of his back and squeezed his throat hard to make him lose consciousness. Nothing would have pleased him than killing his enemy

with his own hands but strangling always took more than six minutes of compressing the throat and fighting with the victim's convulsions. With one more brutal blow to Carsten's skull, leaving him dazed, Slobodan stood up and recovered his weapon and pointed towards the Dutchman's head.

The sickening metallic clunk of the slide of a gun forced Carsten to realise that it was the end for him. He gulped and closed his eyes sending his last thoughts to Marcial, "I hope he's happy."

The hissing sound of a sword, along with two dry thumps -as if something had hit the ground, one louder than the other- stopped his heart for the longest second in his all life. Fearfully, he turned around, as his hands instantly clutched the wet leaves in order to dominate the horror and help him to suffocate the cry at the vision of the dead body laying in front of him. He heard two demonic laughter fading in the distance while he saw by the corner of his eyes two blurry forms scurrying away. He sat, panting with his gaze fixed upon the dead man's shoes.

"Now you know why the middle is the sharpest part. Never draw a sword if you don't plan to use it. Go back to Marcial and take him away from here." The trasgu calmly said as he cleaned the edge with the end of his shirt, the blood disappearing the minute it touched the cloth.

"You beheaded a man!!" Carsten shouted, still terrified from Slobodan's threats, the fight but looking with morbid fascination at the body. For a second, his mind wondered how the head could have flown so far away or how much force the demon standing in front of him had used to accomplish such a feat.

"Would not be the first, but I must be getting older, my right shoulder hurts a bit." Pelayo shrugged. "Should have done this long time ago."

"What are you planning to do when Marcial finds it out? He loved that miserable!"

"I plan to do nothing. You bury him. I'm a mystical creature, a product of his imagination, created to fulfil the void created by a deep isolation environment. Therefore, I can't shovel as good as a human can."

"Marcial doesn't love me. He only likes me. He tells it now because he thinks that's what I want to hear." Carsten said dejectedly, his doubts assaulting him once more.

"What can he know about love? He escaped from this slime he tells he loves too. He's like a child with better or worse days. He will learn to love you and will be happy with you. You will have to be patient. That's all I care about. Take him away, before the others might come here, looking for their leader. Four feet deep will be sufficient. No one comes to this forsaken place and certainly no one will miss him."

"Why do you care so much about Marcial?"

"His family and my people have a long time connection. In a way, you could say that he's one of my offsprings. Consider me as an unofficial godfather to him."

"Will you come along too?"

"I like my forest to leave it again. Love and take good care of him or I will after your throat this time. He's a rare treasure for the humans."

"He will miss you and I will miss to have the platypus around." Carsten said, not really understanding why he had done it.

"Do me one last favour. Take my fibula and my cross to Our Lady's Sanctuary, the one in Covadonga. They are under a tile by the chimney. Leave the objects at her feet. Thank her for giving you the boy and then, you two should drink from the stream that runs below the cave. It will bless your union and make it permanent. We started to recover our land from that point. It's highly sacred for Asturs. Let our Lady to decide my fate."

"I will do it. Farewell Pelayo." The man said, using the demon's name for the first time.

"Adios Carsten." The demon answered, as the human had certainly earned the privilege to be called by his name; he was no longer a simple human; he was now a man.

\* \* \*

Still panting from the effort and exhaustion produced by digging, his nerves almost destroyed, Carsten went back to his little elf, still wondering what the trasgu had meant by he was "one of his offsprings" Was he a long lost descendant from Pelayo when he was still human? Was he somehow partly one of this creatures? He was not any longer sure that Marcial was human despite his form. This way he had to anticipate things before they would happen, his slender body, his character and ability to see the occult.

The boy was inside the house, totally shocked that Carsten was there, unable to remember when he had left the house. "Come Marcial, we have to go to a shrine in Covadonga."

"Why? You're not catholic. You're a protestant."

"I was brought up Calvinist, yes, but it doesn't matter any more. Pelayo told me to take his brooch and cross there. He wants that I give them to the Virgin."

"I don't believe you! Pelayo would never speak with you! You don't believe in him!"

"I've just spend the last two hours cleaning your trasgu's mess, so I dare say, I have enough proof that he exists and can truly affect the material world!!"

"Did he break something valuable this time?" Marcial asked truly sad. "I hope it wasn't your car again."

"What?? He was the one who...??" He asked incensed, but he forced himself to calm down as Marcial had flinched at his shouting. "No, nothing valuable. It's over. We have to go now."

"I don't know. Pelayo will come for me in any minute. He told me to wait for him here. He's upset with me because I left Madrid on my own."

"Don't worry about him. He's back to where he belongs. Come my love. Take your platypus along."

"I have to wait for him." Marcial replied stubbornly.

"We will meet him in the Sanctuary, by the river." Carsten lied, deciding to avoid a fight and trusting that Marcial's lack of medication for the past weeks would do the rest.

"All right." Marcial answered happy, going to pick up his platypus and put it in his satchel. "Can you really see Pelayo?"

"Of course," Carsten admitted feeling very uncomfortable under Marcial's scrutinizing gaze. "Do you need a proof? Should I describe him or what?"

"He carries something in his right hand. What's is it?"

'Crazy but not stupid.' "It's a bronze ring with a lion's head. I think it's a royal seal, but I don't believe it. He tends to exaggerate his own value at the court." Carsten sighed. 'Welcome yourself to the land of the lunatics,' Carsten thought, finally accepting that the trasgu was now a part of his life.

"That's true. It matches his black eyes."

"His face is blackened, the eyes are green like emeralds and you could tell him to keep his things in order. To be a magical creature or whatever, doesn't give him the right to throw his hat wherever he wants. I'm sick of finding his muddy boots in my library. He should clean them if he wants to live with us... and regarding that sword, he should sharpen it in the afternoon, not in the middle of the night. Next time you see him, tell it."

"You can truly see him!!" Marcial shouted very happy as Carsten inwardly thanked the purgatory he had lived with the trasgu loose in his house for almost two months.

"He told me where you were and led me here. He wants me to take you with me and protect you."

"If you can see him, then your heart is pure. I'll go with you." The boy decided.

Seeing a happy beheading demon or whatever Pelayo was, was not in Carsten's list of merits for achieving sainthood, but if this was enough for Marcial to accept and come willingly back to him, it was all right by him. "Come my dear, we have to take his things to the Virgin as I promised I would. Do you know under which chimney stone he hid them?"

Marcial ran to the basket full with wood, to move it aside and lift an old set of bricks, to discover a big hole with a package made with a piece of an old cloth. 'How did it get there? I thought those things were still in London. Better don't ask, you don't want to know the answer, Carsten'

"His sword is missing, Carsten!! I hope I didn't lose it! He will be very upset with me!!"

"No, he carries it along, my love."

\* \* \*

The Virgin's Sanctuary was placed on a small grotto overlooking a small stream at the foot of the Covadonga Monastery. Carsten, being a Calvinist, had not much regard for the Virgin, but Marcial was kneeling down when he approached towards the figure, protected with iron bars.

"Marcial, I have no idea of what is the tradition here. Take Pelayo's things and put them at her feet, as he told me to do. I don't know what he expects to achieve by that." Carsten whispered, getting out the heavy bronze cross and brooch from his coat's pocket. The boy only nodded and advanced just to the iron gate and placed the items as near the Madonna's feet as he could. He knelt down again and started to pray, making Carsten somewhat uncomfortable to be in front of such display of idolatry.

For a minute, he thought that the place was exactly what the Romans would have chosen to make a temple for Diana; a grotto over a small stream, difficult to reach, on a mountain, in the middle of a dense forest. The perfect place to practice Eleusinian mysteries, but that was impossible. According to one of Marcial's earlier stories, those demons were Christian warriors punished for shedding blood at Diana's temple... Perhaps they had done something more besides killing Muslims; something like destroying the heathen symbols and upsetting the goddess. Pelayo would have never admitted that the place -where his

sacred lady stood now- was before a worshiping emplacement for long forgotten gods, perhaps transformed into the new ones over the centuries.

When the boy turned around after he finished his prayers, Carsten took him by the elbow and led him to a small rugged path stretching towards the water.

“Why do you want to go there Carsten?”

“I don't know any longer,” he admitted tiredly. “Pelayo said we both should drink from there. I hope I don't get an infection from this water.”

“If you drink from there, you will marry within a year. Everybody knows it. The girls used to come here to find a husband.”

“Who knows which one is the real tradition behind that one. Just oblige Pelayo, please.” Carsten growled, not believing that now he was thrown into the middle of a semi pagan ritual from these barbaric lands. His mother would have had a heart attack if she would have seen her only son taking the waters in some sort of a heathen marriage ceremony or at least to achieve long term fidelity between him and Marcial.

Carsten wasn't sure about his own beliefs any longer. Everything that he had been taught to consider idolatry and suitable for the under developed, simplistic and peasant-like minds was now modelling his own life in ways he couldn't control or predict. Marcial seemed to be comfortable with this world, but he wasn't. The boy seemed to naturally trust that no matter what was happening, it was good and his lot in life was to accept those occurrences. One of his teachers had once described faith as the power to believe what was unbelievable through reason and logic. 'My months with Pelayo that those are only human musings, nothing more; nothing unalterable and eternal as I used to believe.'

The Dutch extended his arm to help Marcial to go down the last carved steps, full with moss and wet from earlier morning rain, slippery and dangerous. The boy took his hand and effortlessly jumped the last two steps towards the stream, full with pebbles and arborescent ferns. Carsten felt an immense joy at watching the youth and felt grateful for having such a beautiful creature at his side. 'Whoever gave him to me, saved my life,' he briefly thought. 'Pelayo was right, he's perfect for me and with time, he will learn to love me.'

Marcial had his feet in the small stream, and immediately turned towards Carsten and flashed him a beautiful smile. “With time, I could love you too. I felt my heart rush when I saw you again.”

“Then, we both will be blessed for ever.” Carsten whispered, coming nearer and crouching down to gather some water using his hands as cup, approaching them to Marcial's lips, who drank and repeated

the same gesture for the older man to drink from his tiny

Carsten would have kissed Marcial in that moment, but the noise of two approaching old women prevented him to do it, so he settled for smiling back at the boy, lost again in his blue eyes.

"Something shines over there." Marcial pointed out.

"That's the sun's reflection on the stones or the water."

"No, it's red. Let me see." Marcial answered walking through the water to put his arm in the cold water to retrieve Pelayo's fibula and walked around some more, till he found the bronze cross, looking more like a solar symbol than a Christian cross, in Carsten's view.

"Do you think our Lady is crossed with him? She didn't take the offering."

"I don't know. Honestly. We did exactly as he told us."

"Pelayo told me that once the Lady would have forgiven him, she would lift the curse Diana put on him and he would be free to choose if he wanted to rest or continue in this earth, helping other people."

"Take his things Marcial, who knows if he needs them again. They will be ruined if we let them in the water. I don't want troubles with him, specially after he promised to leave my computers alone. We have to take you somewhere you can change your clothes. You'll catch your death all wet as you're."

"Do you think he will come with us again?" Marcial asked full of hope.

"I don't know. I have the platypus in the car, with all its things. It's up to him, now."

## Epilogue

Back in his library-studio, Carsten couldn't help to feel the tiredness and soreness from the past weeks ordeal hit him with full force. He sighed as he collapsed on his leather armchair not even having the strength to switch on his computer, distractly looking at the falling rain over the Thames.

'Fortunately, that thing is away forever,' he pondered, as he had not seen it in the Airport of Bordeaux, the plane or in the Rolls Royce. 'Released from his curse... but what about the rest of us who had to suffer him?' He felt sorry for Marcial, who had been silently seeking with his eyes the goblin's long slouched figure for the whole time since they had left his small house in Asturias. 'Makes you ponder if there's

really a Heaven after this life.'

"Hi, you're there!" Carsten heard Marcial's voice merrily saying from the kitchen and his heart nearly stopped.

"Yes, you're right.... I forgot my jersey in the table!!! Thanks for bringing it along. Thank God that my head is glued to my body, if not I would lose it too. You look much better know."

'No, it can't be!!' Carsten thought helplessly, straining his ears, not truly believing what he was hearing.

"Yes, I understand you perfectly well. A Sailor Moon Action Figure is too girlish for you... Yes, you're right. Women don't want knights in shinning armours any longer. Lisa knows what to do with Georg. He's very nasty, you know? She's an intelligent woman. Very independent and doesn't need your help to tame him. Do you want to stay for dinner?" Marcial's voice confirmed his biggest fears.

'It could be much worse. He could have bought a dog that soiled my home and destroyed my slippers.' Carsten made the supreme effort to cheer himself up as undoubtedly the trasgu had returned and was camping around his kitchen and in one of the guest rooms. 'At least, this one generally picks up his trash. I would hate to have Rodrigo or Lugan around.'

*Finis*