

Into the Lion's Den

by

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**To Stacey Jo,
who made the magic flow through its proper course.**

**To Higashi,
who encouraged me to work with her good advise.**

To my family and their incredible patience.

Chapter 1

September 25th, 2001
Buenos Aires

"You owe me big time, Vero. Big time." The light brown, almost blond boy sighed when he saw the big bakery truck parked at the door, the driver already upset that he was coming in time and not ten minutes earlier as the man would have preferred. "Hi, Mr. Fernández. I'll get it open in two minutes."

"About time, blondie. Hurry up. I'm freezing out here!" the delivery man scoffed through his chewing gum.

"Just a second. I'll get the alarm off," Guntram sighed as he unlocked the employee's entrance and quickly typed the security code. "Ready."

"Can you give me a hand, boy? My back is giving me troubles today."

"Yes, no problem."

"Great. Grab those trays with the croissants and then the bags with the bread. I'll take care of the cakes," the man jovially said, glad that Guntram had agreed to do most of his work.

"Don't run away because I have to check the things. Martin counts up to the last piece of bread and charges me if something is missing."

"Yeah, he's quite an asshole. Believes he's better than the rest of us because he's the super clever manager. Hope they kick him out or at least make him eat his University books."

"Hey, I go there too. I want to be one of those assholes in the banks," Guntram joked and picked up a large bag filled with crispy baguettes.

"No way! You couldn't fire your mother like those assholes would."

"That's because I have no mother."

"Shit! Sorry kid. I didn't mean it."

"That's OK. Don't sweat on it. It's been years ago," Guntram replied softly but sadly smiling. "Nothing left over? I could have breakfast."

"Some donuts from yesterday. Still tasty and almost fresh. If I would have known it was you today, I would have brought something good along."

"Last minute change of plans," Guntram shrugged at the delivery man. "Wait a few minutes and I can get you a coffee to go."

"No, thanks. I have more deliveries to do. Bye, kid."

"Good-bye. See you in three days."

Ten minutes to eight, Guntram had the tables ready, the coffee machine cleaned, as the night shift had not done it, the cakes artistically set in the refrigerator—but he preferred that Martina would slice them—the lights on and was waiting for his colleagues and the first customers. One of the waiters, Luis, rushed in, nearly tripping over the chairs, thinking that he was already late.

"Hey, it took me half an hour to put everything in place!" Guntram protested while he was setting the cups on the boards, still hot from the dishwasher.

"Shit!" he cursed, rubbing his pained knee. "Thought the Asshole was here."

"No, Verónica called in sick last night."

"And he went to play the gynaecologist?"

"Don't be vulgar. She's a lady." Guntram growled deeply upset that his co-worker was so rude.

"Fuck Guntram. She's a little vixen like many others around here. Look at you. Two big tears and you're playing the slave for her. Bet she's still getting all the good tips from your side. Welcome to the real life, not the posh school you were going. You have to grow a thicker skin. No one says 'please' and 'thank you' like you do. A lady? *Pleeeeaasee!*"

"I'm doing a favour for her. That's the minimum any man would do in any case."

"Smarten up Guntram. From where I come from, you'd better have the dagger out before your neighbour does. You're no longer in St. George's with the mighty princes."

"Still, it doesn't give you the right to be rude to her."

"Grow up and get your feet on the ground because none of your fancy friends give a shit about you. You have

no money or connections and the best you could get was this job.”

“I think you should better start to work because there is a customer at your table,” Guntram answered back while he set the porcelain cups on the board with more strength than necessary.

The rest of the morning was uneventful, with the exception of Verónica coming to work at 9:30 and telling Guntram that “he was a saint for filling in for her; a real sweet”. She started to get her apron neatly done under his baffled stare as the girl seemed to be in perfectly good health when last night she was coughing like Marguerite Gautier.

“If you would fuck her at least!” Luis whispered when he passed by Guntram's side while the lad was busy organizing his tray and earned a really dirty look from the fair boy.

Verónica saw immediately the strange foreigner that had come twice in a row, always sitting on Guntram's side and leaving very good tips; more than twenty dollars for a twenty-five dollar order. “Guti, can I have the guy over there?” She batted her long eyelashes to add more realism to her plea.

“Sure. I have my hands full with seven grannies having tea at table thirty-four,” Guntram shrugged as he continued to pile cups and small dishes filled with amoretti biscuits over his tray for the aforementioned table.

“Thanks, you're an angel!” She flashed him a smile and went to the foreigner's table swagging her hips.

“Thanks, you're an angel.” Luis imitated her false light voice. “Can you take the trash out for me too?”

“Shut up! I'm trying to work,” he mumbled, cursing softly as he had forgotten if the granny with the green pullover wanted orange or strawberry jam with her toasts.

“On top, she crapped you with the old ladies! That was *her* table. Those witches don't leave a single cent and drive you nuts. I bet they're retired schoolteachers.”

“Are you finished?”

“Yeah.”

“Wise ass,” Guntram mumbled again as this was turning out to be a really bad day and he had still six more hours to survive.

The old ladies and the two other businessmen he served didn't trouble him much and when he was back at the counter asking for the bill for table number twenty-eight, Verónica loudly set her tray over the wooden surface.

“Fucking asshole!” she half shouted, her head pointing toward the tall, dark haired man, sitting in his area and looking completely displeased in a rather unnerving way.

“What's up?”

“After serving him for two days, that asshole decided to speak only fucking French! Already sent me back with my orders twice. I don't understand a fucking word he says. I gave him what he ordered yesterday.”

“Calm down Verónica. I'll ask him what he wants and then you can bring it to him and come back to his good graces.”

“He's a fucking gay, Guntram! That's gross!”

“Verónica, we are in Santa Fé Avenue in case you didn't notice. The largest concentration of them in all Buenos Aires. I have no problems with them as long as they're polite.”

“Good luck with the twerp. You'll need it!”

Guntram gulped as he hated to speak French. His deceased parents had been French and he could speak it as his nanny had been an old French lady who had taught him, but he had forgotten it over the years, mostly because of the sad memories the words brought back to his mind.

“*Bonjour Monsieur, Qu'est-ce que vous désirez?*” He said very curtly as he was somewhat irked with the way the stranger's dark eyes were looking at him, making him feel vulnerable and exposed.

“*Cette sottise que vous avez par collègue m'a apporté du café au lait alors j'avais demandé de l'eau minéral, du thé et deux croissants. Est-ce que vous écrivez le menu en français, mais vous ne parlez pas la langue?*”

“*Je vous demande pardon. Je vous apporte ce que vous voulez, Monsieur.*” Guntram replied trying to look professional but very upset with the man's impoliteness; the customer was always right, but it didn't give him the right to insult people.

“*D'accord, mais n'envoyez plus cette petite idiot!*”

“Bien sûr, Monsieur,” was Guntram's reply grinding his teeth.

The man didn't miss a single movement from Guntram as he placed the ordered croissants, the teapot, the cup and opened the mineral water to pour it in the glass. The boy felt as if he were making the test for the Michelin Guide as the dark eyes were inquisitive, never missing a wrong move or a mistake, making him very nervous.

“*Vous n'êtes pas Français? Votre accent pourrait être Français mais vous parlez comme un étudiant de*

l'Alliance Française." The man stated.

"Mon père était Français mais j'habite en Argentine depuis longtemps. Je n'ai jamais été en France."

"I'm Russian but lived many years in Paris as my mother was an emigrant child from the Revolution. We moved back to Odessa when I turned ten and my father got a position in the Party's committee. If you feel more comfortable, I can speak English."

"I hope everything is to your liking now, sir. I have to return to work," Guntram said hurriedly, as the need to escape was very strong and his heart was beating quickly.

"You also speak English very accurately, unlike those waiters here who think that "coffee, tea, marmalade and red wine," are enough as to write "bilingual" in their resumes."

"I went to a private school. I have to work. I'm sorry," the boy blurted out, clutching his tray to escape to the well known safety of the counter and tables filled with old ladies drinking tea.

"Juan, I take five minutes, is that OK?" He asked the cashier who only nodded, as Guntram rushed to the books area, to the Arts Section to take a deep breath and calm down. 'Was this guy hitting on me? It looks like. Nah. I'm not gay and who would be so crazy as to hit on me? Yes Guntram, you're so desirable that you're still a virgin and telling yourself that you're waiting for that "special person in your life," when in fact no girl ever offered you—or answered to—anything. This year for sure you take home the "Cretin of the Year" Award. Fefo is right. You need to get laid to chase the ghosts away.' Still nervous, Guntram mechanically took out of his pocket a small piece of paper and a pencil, and went over to one of the reading tables where he quickly began to draw the contours of a dog one of the ladies had in a basket. After finishing the sketch, he felt more relaxed and ready to face the remaining part of the day. He made a ball with the paper and threw it into the basket.

* * *

At the end of his shift, Guntram felt very tired and only wanted to come home to get rid of his waiter's uniform, eat something and study a little before going to school from six to eleven. He folded his apron and left it on his shelf before grabbing his old jacket and putting it on, and checking if his keys were there. He greeted the boys from the night shift and walked toward the main entrance, crossing the library area because he always liked to see the old theatre transformed into a vast, well illuminated and filled with thousands of volumes book store. The bar was the former scenario and the book store comprised the foyer and sitting areas. As usual, he briefly stood by the Arts section to look at the impressive book about Leonardo's drawings but the price, seventy-five dollars, was completely out of scale for him.

"One of my favourites, pity they don't auction anything from him," the Russian said, making Guntram jump in surprise. "Do you like it?"

"Very much. It's so deceptively simple but complex at the same time. You can copy it but you will never master the inner beauty it has," Guntram whispered, blushing as the man obviously thought that he was a boring dork or a nerd.

"Have you ever been to Italy?"

"Never, it's too far away."

"It's only a fourteen hour flight, but what you see there remains with you for the rest of your life."

"It's too far away for my budget, sir. Excuse me."

"My name is Constantin Ivanovich Repin," the man introduced himself, cutting Guntram's escape by extending his right hand.

"Guntram de Lisle." The boy shook the hand shyly but the man kept it long clasped as he looked again into the boy's deep blue eyes, making him blush and look down.

"We do know each other but you don't remember me," Repin said. "We were introduced at Martina de Alvear's birthday party a few weeks ago. You were with her son," Guntram looked at him dumbfounded. "The Russian collector? The same who wanted to buy some of your pieces? Didn't your friend tell you about me?"

"There must be a mistake. I sell nothing. I'm no painter."

"This can't be true! I saw one of your landscapes in Christies' when I was buying some properties there. Luciana Dollenberg sold me several of your drawings when I visited her house, La Candelaria."

"Sir, I know no Mrs. Luciana Dollenberg, only Juan and Pablo Dollenberg who have a property of that name."

"Didn't you draw this dog? It's the same hand that made the ones I have at home."

"How did you get it?"

"You threw it away. A real pity. He looks like the real little pest it is. Coming back to my original question, who's your manager?"

"Manager? I'm no artist! In fact, I don't paint at all. I only draw with pencil and ink and that's a hobby. I don't know who could have told you that I was one. I study Economics."

"You have a great talent. Bigger than many consecrated artists I've seen or even sponsored."

"This is a mistake, sir. I'm sorry," Guntram said and dashed for the door as the man stood there, looking at him.

"Did the dove run away, boss?" A large, mountain size man rumbled in Russian. "Definitively you have no luck at all with this one," he chuckled, visibly entertained by the show and the bad moment his superior was having.

"No, but my chances are improving, Ivan Ivanovich."

"Sure, he speaks to you and runs away."

"He knows I'm after him, now."

"It won't help you. I bet a thousand dollars that you could flash a million dollars at this one's face and he wouldn't look at you. You'd better try with a colours box."

"That's why I like him so much and he has to be mine."

* * *

Guntram was exhausted the next morning as he had been almost unable to sleep with concern. Who was this man and from where had he gotten the idea that he was willing to sell anything? He was only drawing for poor children. Nothing more. He didn't have any of the things artists were supposed to have, like canvases, oil paintings, brushes and all what a long—and expensive—list it could include. My only thing is a box of pencils and some inks left over from Federico's painting set in the school. To make his life harder, his best friend decided to drop by his flat and stay for dinner. At least he had the good graces to bring some turnovers to eat along with a salad Guntram had made.

"Federico, today a Russian was at my workplace. He says he knows me from your mother's birthday and wants to buy some paintings from me. Do you know anything about it? The name is Repin."

"Repin? I know an Oblomov, who's a very rich, heck, filthy rich Russian with some oil, mining and transport companies. He was at my mother's because she was presenting a new law about gold digging in the South, but stay away from him. He's not good at all."

"Why?"

"Lots of money. In the big league. Billionaire. What could he want from a poor guy like you?"

"Thank you Fefo, most obliged."

"The guy is an art collector... Picasso, Miró, Gauguin, and all that shit. My mother is sucking up to him since she met him. I think she's seriously considering spreading her legs for him."

"That 'shit'? Damn Fefo, I'd kill to see one of those in live. Don't speak about your mother like that."

"Pumpkin, my mother despises you and I still don't know why you defend her."

"OK, let's don't talk about Mommy Dear. She gives me the creeps, that's for sure," Federico seemed to nod and mumbled "likewise" but Guntram would not join him in his self compassion journey. "Fefo, do you know something about him buying my drawings? I'm cash short these days..."

"You don't want to sell to him. That secretary of his is gay, I'm sure, and he wants to buy from you since he saw you at my mother's birthday party. He wants to screw around, Guti. Nothing else. You're no artist! You draw well, but truly boring... besides, you and a Russian? Do you even know how two men fuck?"

"I'm not going to bed with him!" Guntram protested, "I just wanted to know if you knew something about him."

"Ever been with another boy, Guti? Interested? Should I show you?" Fefo asked blowing kisses toward his long time roommate.

"Leave me alone! Fuck!"

"Well, if you want. Your bed is small but if you go on all fours, we can manage. Girls like it a lot despite their complaints."

"Fefo, you're disgusting," Guntram said when the other made a lascivious gesture with his tongue, "I'm having dinner."

“Come Guntram, show me how you can swallow in one go with the turnover. The stronger you suck, the better.”

“Shut up or get out!”

“It hurts a little when you get a shaft like mine in, but the secret is lots of lubricant, a good previous suck, relaxing and going along with the ride. If you don't like it, which I doubt because once you have tried a superb quality cock as mine, you can say that you're straight. Not before. Wanna give it a try?”

Guntram didn't know how to understand the last sentence as the previous joking tone had disappeared and his friend was looking at him seriously and straight into his blue eyes. He held his breath for a minute as he was truly lost but the idea was ridiculous, so he laughed. “Sure... first tell me where you plan to get the great shaft you spoke about?”

The other feigned an offended look and answered, “In the sex shop. Only the best for you my love, and some leather straps too.”

“And we go to the barn, among the haystacks,” Guntram chuckled.

“You're a pervert!” Fefo said falsely shocked, “besides you get the hay everywhere and in. Not good. I know what I'm speaking about.”

“OK, Fefo, too much information. Go home, now.”

“You don't know what you're missing. One of the best in all Buenos Aires.”

“I can live in blessed ignorance. Now, let's change the subject because my stomach already churns badly.”

“Sure, I'm going on Saturday to Pacha with the guys from the school. Do you want to come with us?”

“Nah, I have to work till 5 p.m. and later study for the mid-term tests. Math is hard.”

“Don't complain. You chose Economics and Social Work at the same time.”

“Yeah, but my money is on Economics; Social Work is more like a hobby. I doubt I could finish that one.”

“I don't know why you waste your time there. It's poor people around! If you finish it, you'll get—with lots of luck—a penniless job for hearing some loser's problems the whole day.”

“They're not losers. Their luck sucks which is a different story. Many want out but they need help, or a push to get out of there.”

“Sure, Mahatma Gandhi.”

“Don't be mean to me. Father Patricio does his best for them and I like to help him.”

“Wait till you run to confess to him and tell him that you have a Russian boyfriend. He's gonna make you eat the censor.” Federico smirked.

“What? I have no boyfriend! Idiot! I was only asking you.”

“Would be good for you. This Oblomov has plenty of money and lots of girls around.”

“Did you just not say he was gay? Or better, you, in your infinite wisdom thought that he was gay?”

“The secretary, that already sounds gay. A tall one, dark eyes, very serious bird, silent like Lurch. That's the one he wants to buy from you. Don't know his name.”

“Repin and he's not that tall. Perhaps 6 feet.”

“That's already much taller than you,” Fefo snorted.

“I'm 5 feet 9!”

“Wow inflationary theory applies to size, midget. You're 5 feet 6. By the way, do you have something to sell?”

“No, nothing,” Guntram confessed very embarrassed as drawing over kraft paper couldn't be considered as “selling material”.

“Then, don't worry about him any longer, unless you want something else,” Federico winked under Guntram's disapproving gaze.

* * *

Three days after the first encounter with the “Russian Secretary Collector”, Guntram had totally forgotten the man because he was very busy with his own work. Tomorrow was his free day and he expected to visit the slum he used to go since he was fifteen-years-old. Too focused on drying several beer glasses with a towel, he missed Verónica coming to him and hitting the counter fretfully with her small hand.

“Earth to Guntram! The Asshole is back!”

“Which one?”

“The foreigner. That French guy! He wants you! Can you believe he sent me away? ME?”

"OK, I'll serve him. Can you finish the glasses here?"

"Do I look like the cleaning lady? Martin told you to do it."

"Exactly. Troublesome customers are your problem today. Not mine. My left wrist is sprained thanks to someone we both know, dropped a full beer crate over it," Guntram replied rather hotly.

"All right. I'll do it!"

"Thank you."

"Either you lash them or they are very nasty, Guntram. Keep her under control or next you'll be paying her rent too," Luis laughed at their exchange, while Guntram was looking for his own tray and apron from under the counter. Verónica gave him the finger before taking the towel and started to dry. "Don't worry, princess, you'll always get one from the Second Division League. Vacheron is too much for you. You're more the 'made in China' type of watch."

"Fuck you!" She roared as Guntram sighed, still not understanding why Luis and Verónica were always fighting for the most stupid things like a customer. He was only two hours from finishing his shift.

"*Bonsoir monsieur.*"

"Hello Guntram. What happened to your left hand?" Repin asked while his head slightly indicated the elastic bandage around Guntram's wrist.

"Nothing, stupid labour accident. It happens. It's only sprained. Should not move it or carry heavy weights for a week or two. What can I bring you?" He whispered, feeling again very uncomfortable at the close examination he was being subjected to.

"Your hands are your biggest capital. You should take care of them. Have you given some thought to what I told you?"

"I have nothing that could interest you."

"Don't you paint any longer?"

"Yes, I do but I'm no artist. I draw over old newspapers and kraft paper."

"What I saw were some watercolours."

"Yes, from my school time, made on the school's paper, long time ago. Good paper of that weight is very expensive."

"It's a waste and a shame that you do nothing with your talent. Two merchants think that you show great promise."

"What can I bring you, sir?" Guntram blurted out.

"Straight coffee and water," the man barked, infuriated that he had been dismissed so rudely.

Several minutes later, Guntram came back with the coffee and served the water, the Russian completely ignored him, busy with a mobile phone. Guntram stood by him.

"It's all right. You can go," he said absently.

"I'm sorry if I was rude to you. It wasn't my intention, sir. I don't understand why anyone had the courage to sell something from me but if you like it, I can give you some of my drawings, for free of course. They're worthless, really," Guntram mumbled ashamed and afraid at his own audacity of speaking with a customer.

The Russian left his phone over the table and looked for a long time at the boy, almost fidgeting in his place. "They're very good, no matter what you think. To be honest, the first time I saw them, I thought they were made by a seasoned artist and never by a boy. I take your offer but I insist on paying you."

"I will be robbing you, sir," Guntram admitted.

"Then, I'll set the price, if that eases your conscience," Repin decided and folded his hands over the table, his jacquard jacket slightly rising and showing the white cuffs of his shirt and his watch.

"All right," the boy mumbled, realising that Luis was not joking when he had said Vacheron. That one was a real one and not a made in Paraguay copy. "If you want we could meet tomorrow as it's my free day so I can give you what I have and you can choose what you like."

"All right, as it's Saturday I can take you out for dinner."

"No, that's not good. I can't."

"All right. Tell me what you would prefer, Guntram," the Russian chuckled finding the boy's reaction totally adorable as he was blushing and thinking hard for a solution.

"There's another big bar, fifty metres from here. It's called *Au Printemps*, but the light is not so good. If you want you can pass my flat and check what you like. It would be more comfortable. Are you free tomorrow, so I can select what is not too bad?"

"Of course, tomorrow at 10 a.m.?"

"All right, but I have to leave at 11 p.m, as I have another engagement. I'll write you down my address and phone number."

"Fine," Constantin growled as he was very displeased that he was shown to the door before even entering.

"Good afternoon," a big man rumbled, with the same Russian accent, standing next to Repin but not sitting until the other made a small gesture with his head.

"Guntram, this is Ivan Ivanovich, my right hand. Get him the same," he only said while the boy ran away to fulfill his order.

"Quite a long chat, boss. Almost there," Oblomov chuckled.

"I'm there, he invited me to his own home," he replied under the astonished look of the other man.

"Never would have guessed. He doesn't look the type."

"To see his work, what a dirty mind you have!"

"Indeed."

"This one is like a Château Lafite 1771. You have to palate it, smell the cork. If you rush it in your throat, you'd ruin the taste and the incredible feeling. He's exactly what I always wanted to have. The house in London will be perfect for him."

Chapter 2

“Guntram, if you're only showing him your work, tell me again why do you need me?”

“For moral support. For Christ's sake George, you're my neighbour... and, you know, the other.”

“OK, and why exactly do you think that one gay man will kick another out? The minute he sees me, boom! He has to steal you from me. It doesn't work like that, my boy. Besides, no man with such a good taste and clothes would throw you to your bed to rape you.”

“All right, go away, but leave Lola here,” Guntram exclaimed with a victim's face.

“Sure, my poodle will defend your virginity,” George snorted, shaking his head.

“Please?”

“All right. I'll chaperone your virtue and I hope this guy gets it soon because you're starting to worry me, Guti. You're almost nineteen and nothing so far!”

“I want it to be with a special girl, not humping one in an alley.”

“Sure,” George shrugged sarcastically.

“I'll sweep your place.”

“Don't worry, Guti. I won't let a foreigner to take you away. My friends, is another matter.”

“Be quiet, will you?” Guntram pleaded as he settled in order the twenty something drawings he had found that were made on good quality paper. The rest of his works had been put together and packed in a large cardboard box, standing by the door. “At least, I made a long overdue cleaning.” The bell rang and Guntram felt more nervous than before, with butterflies fluttering in his stomach.

The Russian certainly knew how to leave his people's name in style, George thought, feeling an incredible desire to watch “Dr. Zhivago” for the fifteenth time. Repin was tall, proudly standing, casually dressed with corduroy light brown trousers, light blue shirt, a brown tailored jacket—according to George's expert eye—silk scarf and a simple but luxurious raincoat. He stood by the door frame waiting for Guntram to allow him in, but the boy was so nervous that he forgot his manners, something that Constantin found endearing.

“Standing won't do dear,” George interfered, quickly catching the fleeting look of adoration the Russian had given his young friend when he had seen him. ‘Someone has really the kicks for somebody’, he thought.

“I'm sorry. Where are my manners? Mr. Repin, may I introduce you to Jorge Martínez de los Ríos. He's my neighbour.”

“How do you do?”

“Hello,” George said shaking his hand. “Guntram I have to walk Lola now, the poor animal is about to explode,” he informed in a firm way to the very pale boy. “I'll be back home in twenty minutes, call me if you want to have breakfast with me. Good-bye, sir.”

Guntram looked lost when his friend went away, with the white dog merrily jumping and barking around him. He gulped and closed the door and softly asked the man to sit at his small table. “Would you like a coffee or something to drink?” he asked, looking really miserable and embarrassed.

“No, thank you. May I see the pictures?”

“Yes, of course. Sorry,” Guntram blurted, and extended the portfolio before sitting in front of his visitor.

Repin was completely silent and absorbed for more than forty-five minutes as he slowly looked at the drawings from people, animals and houses made with pencils, charcoal and watercolours and ink. He separated them into three piles, considering carefully each one of his decisions.

“Did you never study with a real teacher?”

“No, only at the school. I was an intern student and couldn't leave on my own. Painting always relaxed me.”

“Your drawing is completely classical in structure and technique. These children seem to come from Bronzino's hand or even Raphael, but the subjects are modern in their composition. There's certainly an evolution from what I liked first and what you have now. Before, I only saw a fantastic use of the technique, a very good illustrator, but now I'm starting to see something from the artist himself. I don't understand why you don't study Art or even Art History if you're so talented.”

“I like Economics and helping people. Drawing is useless.”

“Drawing is useless? Art is useless?” Repin roared making Guntram flinch.

“Not Art, my things. I would love to see the real ones, not the copies or the books,” he whispered, feeling

completely afraid at the fury the man was radiating and the tension in his back, like a panther waiting for the right moment to jump. "I mean, I have no money. All what I make goes to the flat and to pay my schooling. I don't want to touch what is left from the trustee fund my father settled for my education. I can't afford to play the rebel artist. Heck! I can't pay for the materials as they're imported and very expensive. An oil tube costs exactly as three days food. No way. Besides, I don't understand Modern Art or even like it too much. Can you imagine me when someone comes along with a chair painted in orange with the back glued to the feet and the feet over the seat? I would tell the artist to get a good carpenter to fix it," Guntram explained, looking very ashamed to confess his own tight economical situation.

"What artists do now is not unalterable. Art reflects a moment and a defined society. It permanently evolves. What you don't like now, doesn't necessarily mean that your own creation can't be appreciated. I have sponsored many artists from Russia and Europe. I have established several scholarships for students in many prestigious universities, but I have never seen so far anyone who has your expertise and security while drawing. If you can get that a man like Oblomov, who has zero interest in painting, falling into a trance while looking at your work, then it's not a question of a particular man liking it, but that there's something behind it. Those children over there—I'm sure they're little spoiled brats—are almost hypnotic in their beauty, but then you see those studies of hands and you can feel a worker's strength, the roughness and the blood running through those veins."

"They're from Carlos. He picks up papers and iron to sell. He has 4 children to feed," Guntram whispered completely inhibited at the praises he had heard. "Damn! Is it 11:00 already?" He remembered his appointment.

"11:15"

"I'm sorry, I have to run. You can stay if you want. I'll be back in a few minutes. Make yourself at home," he blurted while he picked up the heavy box, grimacing at the effort of using his left hand.

"Wait, let me help you, you can't use your hand," Repin said.

"Mr. Repin, I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Constantin. And it's no problem. That's not too heavy. What do you have in there?"

"Trash. I have to give it to Carlos. He must be waiting for me and the police kick him out if he stays for too long in one place," Guntram said pushing the elevator button.

A horrible idea was forming in Repin's brain. 'It can't be. He wouldn't do that. If he does it, it's to kill him... No, I couldn't kill my angel, he needs to be taught and led. He's so beautiful, almost ethereal.'

A man in his mid-fifties, dressed like a beggar and carrying a small cart was waiting for Guntram. "Hi Carlos, sorry I'm late."

"No problem. Is that all the paper you have?"

"Yes, seven kilos, I guess."

"Great! Thank you. Will you come by later?"

"Sure," Guntram shrugged to Constantin's horror. Unable to stand it any longer he asked none too gently "What does this man carry?"

"My drawings, the last ones, but they're done in kraft paper or newspapers. Nothing good really. He can sell it."

"How much does he get?"

"Around three pesos per kilo."

"Tell him that I will give him 100 pesos for the box," Constantin sighed.

"That's a lot of money!"

"Just tell him!" The Russian barked, forcing Guntram to obey him immediately.

Carlos was more than happy to get 100 pesos for the paper and accepted gladly. Out of nowhere, a big and very tall man appeared and took the box from the poor man's hands before he would approach Constantin, who ordered him something in Russian. The man paid the amount and quickly disappeared with the box under his arm. Guntram was shocked as Constantin pushed him toward the foyer.

"I have lunch with an arts dealer who wants to sell me a collection in the afternoon. Get your coat and come with me," he simply ordered, his patience finished after the sacrilege he had been forced to witness.

"I can't, I promised to go and help at the parish."

"If you need to change your clothes, do it now. It's informal," Constantin said, disregarding what the boy had said, too upset that the boy had just sent all his work to the recycling bin.

"I'm afraid I can't accompany you, sir."

"It's not open for discussion. Come, it's in my house and you can look at the small collection I have there."

Nothing big, but good for Latin American painters. I wanted to buy some Argentinean painters. Now move, and get your portfolio with all the things you showed me, but keep the piles as I have organized them. Come, now," he finished the sentence with an imperious gesture.

For a minute, Guntram thought that he should slam the door in the rude bastard's face but the temptation to see real artworks and someone's private collection was too strong. 'I hope Father Patricio understands', he thought while he closed the door and undressed to get his "working interviews outfit"; the grey wool trousers, the light blue jersey, white shirt and striped blue tie. He quickly combed his hair again and put the drawings together. 'At least, it's a free lunch and show.'

* * *

The big Mercedes was the same type that many very rich parents used to drive to the school and this one had a chauffeur and another car following it. It was something for embassies. The driver quickly opened the door and took the portfolio from his hands before he could get in. Constantin said something in Russian to the man before entering and waiting for him to close the door behind him.

'He looks absolutely delicious with a little polish, decent clothes and grooming, I will have to kill many to keep them away from him. He's just perfect.' The Russian thought after a quick but thorough examination of Guntram.

The car led them to the main entrance to the Kavanagh building, and the private lift took them to one of the last floors, with a huge living room with great windows and a big terrace overlooking the Plaza San Martín and the railroads.

"It's a magnificent property, sir."

"Thank you. Would you like to take a look at the paintings? Nacho will come in an hour; we'll have lunch and go to his gallery. It's not far away."

But Guntram was not hearing him any longer as he had seen a Frida Kahlo portrait and was almost running to admire it. "The one next to it is a Siqueiros. I got them a few years ago. I'm after one Rivera I saw in New York, but sadly the owner does not want to part with it."

Guntram could only gape at the colours, his voice lost forever. "That one over there... is a Tamayo?"

"Yes, very well. You said you didn't like Modern Art."

"This is different. Those are real geniuses. Those paints seemed to be alive and breathe."

"Then you don't have a problem with Modern Art, only with bad artists. I was imaging so," Constantin softly said. "One of my favourites is Sargeant, do you know him?"

"Yes, he paints people's souls. I like the one with the three girls and the big vase. The light comes from within them," Guntram whispered as he noticed the man was standing very close to him.

"You have something in your hair, let me," Constantin stated, with his eyes deeply locked with Guntram's. His hand took a small leaf from the light brown hair, the fingers caressing in a slow move the bang they were cleaning and quickly discarding it to the floor. "Perfect, just perfect," Constantin said in a raspy voice, his eyes intensively focused on the slightly quivering boy. Pleased with the effect he was having on the youth—looking at him in a trance—he smiled wolfishly and touched with his fingertips the delicate skin before him, enjoying the deep breath the boy took when his hand reached his cheek.

"I have many more. Come, I'll show you where they are and then you can explore at your pleasure, Guntram. This is your home, now."

Chapter 3

"Mr. Repin, the people from the mining committee are here, waiting for you at the library," Oblomov interrupted the long explanation Constantin was giving Guntram about how he had acquired the two huge Antonio Berni that were hanging over one of the main corridor's walls.

"I don't make business on Saturdays, you know that, Ivan Ivanovich."

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you, Constantin Ivanovich but that Alvear woman is very insistent and she brought along two other CEO's from that small processing plant."

"Impossible woman!" Constantin cursed, making Guntram smile softly, much more relaxed than before.

"I know. Her son and I are best friends. The Senator can be very imposing," Guntram mildly defended Oblomov who was looking very contrite at his superior's barely concealed fury.

"All right, if she's the mother of one of your friends, I'll see her. The minute the art dealer is here, you will interrupt us and get rid of her, Ivan."

"Yes boss, I'll take care of the negotiations."

Constantin went with long strides toward the library, still crossed that a pleasant moment with his angel, who had proved to be a good listener and fairly educated boy, had been ruined by a witch desperately seeking to get some money out of him. 'If they try again to raise the price, they're dead. I have enough of these good for nothing. Lintorff told me that this country was going to be a good opportunity once they start to revolt? This is impossible. I should remain in Spain or Venezuela, not here. His people should start to hurry if he wants that I put money in here. The only good thing so far is Guntram."

* * *

"So boy, do you like it here?" Oblomov asked after carefully inspecting the boy.

"Mr. Repin has a wonderful collection; worthy of a museum. I've never seen anything like that before."

"Wait till the guy from today comes. Two banks and a big building company are in real financial troubles. They want to get some cash and offer to sell their collections. Over fifty pieces at a closed price. Thirteen million dollars for the whole lot. It's a reduction of forty percent. They wanted to sell them to the local museums but they had no money at all and going to an auctioneer was out of the question as everybody would have found out that they're in real trouble. So they come here with several experts, but boss decides if he likes it or not. All Argentinean painters, XIX and XX century and from your good ones."

"Is he planning to take the works out of the country?" Guntram asked sadly as the pieces would be definitively lost for the people.

"I don't know, perhaps. I think first he wants to distribute around the estates he bought here what he like less and take what he truly likes to Europe. It's not a safe place to have an art collection here. You can't tell how stable the country is."

"Military coups are finished since a long time ago, Mr. Ivan Ivanovich."

"If you're going to be formal and use my patronymic, it's only Ivan Ivanovich or Mr. Oblomov. If Mr. Repin allows you to call him by his Christian name, then you can call me Ivan."

"Are you Mr. Oblomov? I thought, Mr. Repin was your secretary..." Guntram asked totally lost and dumbfounded.

"No, I'm his right hand. Secretary sounds too gay for my taste. I represent him and lead many of his businesses but he's the boss, believe me. We know each other for more than twenty years. Since we were in the Moscow University. We both graduated in Civil Engineering and I specialized myself in pipelines while he studied Chemistry. I married one of his cousins, Tatiana Gregorievna Arseniev. You certainly look very young, how old are you?"

"I'll be nineteen next October," Guntram answered.

"You do understand that boss is after you, do you?"

"He likes my drawings and wants to have them. He's going to let me see this collection as a payment."

"Not really, you can look at the collection and I wouldn't be surprised if he lets you chose something from there. He likes your art and you for yourself also. Do you understand me now, Guntram?"

"You mean he's... he's after me?"

"Took you some time to realise but it's for the best. You truly are a green one, aren't you?"

"I'm not gay!"

"Have you tried it?"

"Of course not! It's wrong to do that! It's forbidden too!"

"Boss is going to have a lot of fun with you," Oblomov smirked. "You look like a decent kid, not the plaything type. Might be a good change for once."

"Tell Mr. Repin that I thank him for his invitation, but I'm going home."

"Hey, kid, no need to run. It's not as if he's going to rape you under the Botero!" Oblomov laughed at Guntram's shocked expression. "It's only lunch and a show. If he makes any advance toward you, just tell him you're not interested. You won't be the first one who sends him to Hell!" He chuckled. "He likes you a lot as I have never seen him chasing a boy so intently, but he also likes a lot your work and perhaps only wants to remain friends with you, if the other is not possible. I only want that you understand the whole situation. You look like a good kid, my own son's age, nothing like the crazy and uptight artists believing they're the hottest, cleverest and most cultivated things on Earth, he normally hangs with. Those have neither talent nor the wit to realise they don't have it."

"I don't want this. Let me pass."

"All right, but consider at least a grant from him. You could be something good. If you already, well not you, that Dollenberg woman, got three-thousand dollars out of me for that landscape and two-thousand more for several drawings of ballerinas, you're good."

"How much did you pay? Are you out of your mind?"

"She's a good dealer and the husband didn't want to sell. Had to pay, but it's nothing. My wife adored those girls and put them in her studio and I made some points at home, if you get my meaning. Cheaper than going to Tiffany's or Harry Winston's," Oblomov retorted with an irked voice at his judgement being so loudly and rudely challenged.

"This is too much. I'm going home."

"No, you're going nowhere. Calm down, he will not touch a single hair from you, unless you want. Have lunch with him and the marchand, visit his gallery, and then, if he makes any move or insinuates anything, tell him clearly 'no'."

"Do you think?"

"Of course. Now, show me what you gave the boss. Perhaps I could convince him to sell me something more for my wife. She ordered me to bring her more, this time for her Aunt Maria Ingratievna."

"Do you have a picture of your wife with you?" Guntram asked, surprising Oblomov.

"Yes, one with her wedding dress and another with her and my son when he was seven."

"If you want to give me a copy, I can try to make her portrait from them in pencil and ink. Free of charge, of course. I already feel very bad that someone charged you so much money."

"We are leaving in three days."

"More than enough time. Do you have some white paper so I could make a preliminary sketch?"

* * *

"Where is the boy now?"

"On the terrace. I left him there with paper and two pencils," Oblomov answered innocently.

"Why is he there?"

"He was very nervous after I explained him a few truths. Now he knows what you're expecting from him. Told him that if he doesn't want, you still want to be friends with him. You'll have to play dove boss, if you want to catch this one."

"Remind me to kill you if something goes wrong."

"Why? If you play fair with this one, you'll save a lot of troubles and achieve results faster. He's a nice kid, totally innocent and naïve. He offered to paint my wife's portrait for free because he feels bad that I paid so much for his things."

"You look very happy about it."

"Of course. I've just saved twenty-five-thousand dollars, boss."

"Only twenty-five-thousand? Do you still wonder why Tatiana is furious with you? A mistress makes more in

a week than she!” Constantin chuckled. “My cousin’s patience has a limit and the minute she goes to a lawyer, you’re literally dead. Perhaps that portrait will make you save much more than twenty-five grand.”

“Yes, boss.”

“One thing more. Guntram is off limits for any of you. Is that understood? No one but me touches a single hair from him or says a word out of place.”

“Very clear, boss. I’ll tell the men.”

* * *

Constantin stood for a long time at the terrace entrance looking at the boy absorbed in his work, only taking brief glances at the two small photos placed on the table in front of him. The midday sun made his hair lighter than it was and his frown and deep concentration made him look younger.

The butler took him out of his reverie by announcing that the Arts dealer had arrived and was waiting in the library. Sighing, and still unnoticed by Guntram, he took the portfolio from the coffee table and went to speak with the man.

* * *

Guntram was more than fed up with the art dealer’s haughty ways, informing everyone what they should do as if the Russians were ignorant. As it was not his fight, he decided to keep quiet and eat his dish because no one had ever asked him anything.

“I’m still intrigued by these drawings you showed me. Do you say the artist is Argentinean? The landscapes can only be from la Pampa and many of the birds you showed me are from here, but his style is more continental.”

“He was born in France if I’m correct but I could be mistaken. All his production was locally made. It was quite a surprise to discover him. Do you think he’s good?”

“Technically, he’s excellent. Although he’s naïve, I couldn’t place him in that category as his drawing is more appropriate for the XIX century. A real pity he was never discovered.” The barely contained laughter from Oblomov, told Guntram that something was amiss. “How much did you pay for the drawings if it’s not too much to ask?”

“For the drawings nothing so far. There’s another box—which I haven’t checked so far—and that costed me one-hundred pesos,” Constantin said, making Guntram blanch.

“I can’t believe it! You’re joking with me. Those drawings could be valued much more. I could easily sell those landscapes for more than one-thousand pesos apiece. If you’re interested in selling them, I know several people who would like to buy. Good painters with such level of attention to detail and economy of resources at the same time, are very rare these days.”

“No, I don’t want to sell. In fact I’m trying to buy some more from him but the artist is terribly temperamental.”

“Don’t tell me about it! This is why I deal only with consecrated and dead artists.” He laughed.

“Should I send him to school?”

“To school, Mr. Repin?”

“Yes, school or a private teacher. He’s not exactly naïve; he’s very young and still has to study a career.”

“You must be joking! Those paintings are made by a well trained hand!”

“I don’t deny he has training and I was also shocked when I found out that it was made by a sixteen-year-old and those you just saw by an eighteen-year-old. You even saw Guntram working a few moments ago.”

“Did you paint them all by yourself?” The man asked in disbelief to a boy slouching in his high chair.

“If you mean the black portfolio with the Darth Vader’s sticker on the left angle, yes, they’re mine, but they’re a present for Mr. Repin. He liked my other ones.”

“Do you study at the Prilidiano Pueyrredon School?”

“No. It’s a hobby, nothing else.”

“You should study and come back in five years, and I’ll see what I can do for you. I want to see what you were doing just now.”

“Just a sketch for later.”

“If it’s not too much to ask, Mr. Repin, do you have a compass?” The dealer asked after he inspected for a long time the drawings Guntram had to fetch from the terrace.

"We should ask the butler if he can get us one. Why?"

"I want to try something with this young man, if you will allow me."

"As long as you don't torture him with the compass. He's just out from high school," Repin laughed.

* * *

After lunch, the art dealer insisted on checking Guntram's abilities, and gave him a piece of paper and a pencil. "Make a point in the centre and draw a circle around it."

"What do I win?" Guntram asked jokingly.

"An ice cream," Repin answered dryly, making Guntram flinch.

Thinking that it was a waste of good paper, as this one was certainly 100g weight, not the usual rubbish he was using. He took the pencil and when he was going to make the point, the man repeated. "In the centre, please," Guntram had a lot of trouble to suppress the grin almost escaping from his face. He made the point and a 12 cm radius circle around it. That was very easy as he was always doing it for his geometry class because he had lost his compass and didn't want to buy another.

The man took a ruler and traced the diagonal to check if it was well centred but "he missed by 2 mm," he said very relieved and proceed to check the circle. "It's perfect. I can't believe it," he said shocked.

"You missed with the diagonal. It's not well achieved. Try again and you'll see its fine. Boy, where were you when I had to draw all my blueprints? You would have saved me many headaches," Oblomov said as Repin was looking in disbelief.

"So, will you pay for the ice cream, Ivan Ivanovich? But I'll tell you something, it wasn't a fair bet. I used to do this all the time in school for Geometry. I lost my compass in the sixth grade and didn't want to buy another."

"Guntram, this is serious," Repin scolded him. "Michelangelo won the Sistine Chapel commission only by showing that he was able to do what you just did. It's almost impossible to do it."

The boy looked embarrassed and decided to focus his attention on the carpet, biting his lower lip, like a scolded child.

"I must congratulate you for your good eye, Mr. Repin. This young man shows indeed great promise if he decides to study."

"He only needs to be convinced or encouraged in the right way."

* * *

"Come Guntram, dine with me at home. It's almost time and I would like to speak with you," Constantin said, after spending the whole afternoon at the gallery and deciding to acquire the lot for 11.5 million to be paid in cash in two days time. Guntram was still dazed because of the quality of the paints he had seen and the casual tone employed by Constantin to deal with such an amount of money.

"I think it's better if I go home now. It's getting later and I have to work tomorrow," he answered, afraid of where it would all lead him.

"I insist. My driver will take you home after dinner. We should speak about your future."

Back at Repin's place, Guntram noticed that Oblomov was nowhere to be seen and only a young maid served the dinner and quickly disappeared into the kitchen. Although it was not a "romantic set" in the boy's mind, he couldn't feel more than apprehensive at the table for two, with some champagne and a light dinner.

"I've been thinking a lot about you, Guntram."

The youth gulped as that was the world famous phrase for starting declarations and he had no idea of how to get out of this mess. "Constantin..."

"Let me tell what I want before you start to protest," he silenced the boy in a rather dry way. "I was thinking hard in how to pay for your pieces as you let me set the price. First, I thought in a check for the equivalent of what this man valued your job, but now I think that would be a huge mistake. It's not that I think you would spend it, no. You'd probably put the money in the bank and save it till you finish your career or give it to the poor people like you did with your work. I've never seen such a waste of talent. Literally to the trash. I don't want to open that box because, I'll be very upset when I find out that you threw such beauties or worse, gave them to some brute to be sold per kilo."

"I can't keep all that paper at home... and he has a family to feed," Guntram defended himself feebly, unused to being in the middle of a fight.

"Be quiet. I simply don't understand why you don't want to do anything with your talent. It's very rare and

unique. I saw you working today and your speed and accuracy is remarkable. My cousin never looked so beautiful in her life and in a way, it strangely fits her. She's an unselfish woman, quiet and loving her children and home. A real treasure as a wife. I don't understand how you have captured it if you have never seen her."

"Mr. Oblomov told me several things about her and he showed me more photos he has in his phone. I imagined the rest, this is why I want him to check the preliminary draw before I make it in chalks or pencil and ink. I'm not decided yet."

"So I have decided to take you for a month or two to Europe. To London, where I live, Paris and Italy so you really see all what you have been copying over the years. If you don't want to become an artist after this trip, then I'll let you be. If you want to be one, I'm willing to pay for your education in England, at the University of London in Birbeck or at the University College London. Art History if you want security and encourage your career as your approach is so classical. You can't deny the world the opportunity to see your vision of it."

"I can't accept. It's too much."

"It's nothing compared to the crime it would be to waste such talent."

"Sir, I can't accept it. I will be cheating you."

"It's my decision and I will not complain about it. I pay more than two hundred fifty scholarships per year. One more, won't kill my finances and for once I will be sure that my money is well invested. You can repay me with your pieces if that makes you happy. You have no idea how much pleasure your paintings give me. I can't stop to look at them. I keep them framed in my office and in my private jet so I can watch and enjoy them, Guntram."

"It's too much," Guntram whispered.

"Why? You can attend in the morning the classes at the UCL and take private lessons with a good teacher. I know most of the merchants there and they know me. I'm sure you will not fail, once you're known."

"I can't deliver what you want from me. I don't want to do what you want of me."

"Do you have the courage to tell me that you don't like to paint?"

"Not that, the other thing."

"Well, you'd better enlighten me because it seems that you are more aware of my interests than myself."

"I don't know how to say this, but I think you misunderstood me."

"How so?"

"I don't like to do it with men."

"This is based on your broad experience?"

"I have no experience at all! Well, not with men and I don't want to have it!"

"With women?" Constantin asked as he put another piece of meat into his mouth as Guntram blushed at the blunt question, fired as it would be the most normal thing in the world.

"This is none of your business, sir!"

"Zero or close to zero if I see correctly," he shrugged making Guntram blush deeper, a gesture that Constantin didn't miss. "Zero," he concluded as he took a sip of his wine.

"I can't see how all this can be related."

"It's not related. I was offering a scholarship and you brought up your sexual preferences. Did I insinuate myself in any way?"

Guntram paled and felt like dying of shame. "No, never but I thought that..."

"That you can't paint well so I want to shag you in bed?"

"More or less."

"Well, no. Not in the way you think."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I think you're a talented artist. That you happen to be a very cute boy and it's true that I like boys more than girls, is irrelevant. You're not my type. Even if you would decide to play on my field, you would be looking for a stable, committed and long term relationship and I can't provide that. With me you can have an adventure, and a very good one, but nothing else. I'm not the type that falls in love forever. I admit that I would take great pleasure in taking you to my bed and teaching you a few things, but in the morning you would be crying and willing to stay and I can't give you that. I can't stand it. We can be friends and I would like to be your mentor, but we could never be lovers."

"I understand, sir," Guntram whispered, not truly comprehending why he felt so utterly sad. 'Rejection is horrible, even if you were looking for it, Guntram.'

"My offer of this trip is purely business. I'm not going to run after you in Florence or declare my love by the Arno River. I have several companies to run and I will be busy most of the time. I was thinking to give you a guide or

ask you if you wanted to bring a friend along,” Constantin finally chose his strategy; take the boy to his field and then isolate him till he would jump to his bed on his own accord. 'Yes, curiosity killed the cat,' he thought as he saw the disappointed look in Guntram's eyes 'He's crystal in his reactions, nothing fake or premeditated, generous and kind. He's going to be incredible in bed.'

“I'm sorry if I offended you with my assumptions, Mr. Repin.”

“Don't worry, I'm glad the young ones still consider me game,” he said jovially

“You're too kind.”

“Do you want to come in December? Christmas is a very nice season there and I can take a few days off from my obligations,” he pressed the issue.

“I don't know. I have to work and I don't know if I could take holidays. Perhaps fifteen days but never a month,” Guntram answered feeling torn between his desire to go and his good sense telling him to refuse it.

“Take fifteen days, then. Only London and Paris to start. If you want to see more, then you can travel to Italy.”

“I would love to see Florence and Perugia, where most of Perugino is, but my boss will not let me and I can't afford to lose my job,” Guntram said undecided.

“We're buying several companies there. You speak English, Spanish and French. Zakharov—the one in charge of the Argentinean chapter—will find a position for you. It's an opportunity you can't miss,” 'And it's better that you're out of this pathetic country if Konrad does what he wants to do around December.'

“I don't know.”

“Say yes. It leaves me a very bad after taste that you have given me so much and don't let me do a very small thing for you.”

“It's not a small thing, it's one of my biggest dreams to see all that,” Guntram whispered almost convinced of the most ridiculous idea he had heard in his life.

“If you don't do crazy things when you're twenty, then you do them when you're sixty and then, it looks pathetic,” Constantin tempted him.

“I need some time to think about it.”

'Typical Libra, but he's mine, I see it in his eyes.' “Yes, of course, it's a big decision. It will change your life, I'm sure of that.”

* * *

“Guntram is 1:30 a.m. Go to bed now. I will not repeat it any longer,” a very amused Constantin shook the boy from his fourth drawing in pencil, finally achieving the concept he wanted.

“So late? I didn't realise. I go away now.”

“I sent my driver to bed at 12 a.m. before he would strike on me. You can stay in the guest room down the corridor.”

“I don't want to bother you. I'll take the bus.”

“No, you stay here. It's not a bother at all. The room is ready for you and you can show your drawings to Oblomov in the morning.”

“I didn't mean this to happen. People say that I space out when I draw. It used to happen to me in the school.”

“Space out? I would say that you move to another galaxy. You spoke with me for twenty minutes and then, you focused on her eyes and the world ceased to exist,” Constantin laughed. “Go to bed.”

When they reached the guest room, Constantin opened easily the door and entered while Guntram stayed by the door frame, uncertain of his next move, staring with big eyes the modern looking room, with a big bed, a desk and chair and a comfortable chaise longue by the window, in brown and beige shades. The Russian turned around and passed by the door. “Good night, he whispered, sleep well,” and his hand softly caressed Guntram's face and he shyly smiled back unused to this demonstration of affection, but not truly wanting the hand to go away. Without realising what he was doing, both his hands took the larger one and returned the caress, his lips briefly touching it.

“Good night, Guntram,” Constantin smiled back with a soft light in his eyes.

“Good night, Constantin,” the boy blushed not truly believing what he had just done.

'Now, I have you where I want you, my angel. It's just a matter of time before you're truly mine.’”

* * *

"Good morning boss!" Oblomov shouted at 11 a.m. when he found Constantin having breakfast alone in the terrace. "Dove flew away already?"

"Still sleeping, he was up till 2 AM"

Oblomov chuckled. "Haven't lost your touch, boss. He must be exhausted."

"Drawing your wife. She looks much better than she ever did."

"*Nada?*" He asked in disbelief. The boy sleeping under the same roof as his boss and his virtue was untouched? Impossible.

"I told you, he's a rare wine. At this point a tumble or two won't be enough for me. He's everything I dreamed of and more. I want him permanently in my bed and drawing next to me. He agreed to come to Europe in December."

"Well, it's better than nothing. We are not falling for him, are we?"

"Perhaps it's time to settle down. I'm sick of changing lovers and of their permanent whining or childish behaviour. The ones that Mikhail prepares are simply boring with all their training. This one is perfect for me. He has a classical beauty and a symmetrical face, doesn't whore himself around, he's talented, a little too shy perhaps—but we can't have everything, can we?—discreet, quiet, well-educated, from an old family, totally innocent and kind. I couldn't ask for more."

"He's a decent kid, Constantin," Oblomov used his Christian name, something very rare and only reserved for the "solemn occasions". "What will happen to him if you tire of him? This one looks like the type of having one or two relationships in all his life. Do you even know if he wants you?"

"He does but needs time to get used to the idea. He's afraid of sex, but willing to learn. I saw it in his eyes. I don't think I will get tired of this one. I've decided to send him to the new house in London."

"That you would stop whoring around would be very good. Nothing like a stable lover. It gives you more focus and peace of mind but do you want to put him in that house? Olga Fedorovna will not be pleased and you know what they say... 'Hell hath no fury like a scorned woman,' boss."

"She'll get over it. She has the house in Paris and another in Manhattan only for her use. The one in London is mine and I do what I please with it."

"Boss, women look the other way if you have an adventure. They simply don't care, but the moment the adventure becomes something serious, hell gets loose. She considers that mansion as her own. She's already planning to move there for a month or two per year, like all her girlfriends do."

"She'll get over in the next Paris Fashion Week."

"Boss, hear me out. The boy will be happy in a nice flat in Chelsea or Kensington. He's not flamboyant or anything like that. You can visit him there all what you want."

"No, that's my decision. I'm getting tired of her constant demands. Due to our arrangement, I have given her ample space."

"Too much in my opinion. Do you know that von Kleist told me she has opened an account with one of his fellow members on the Island of Man? He tells there is three hundred fifty million pounds in there, half of what she got from you for the sale of Petroland. That's not good boss. She's after something if she starts to put her money into the enemy's territory."

"I trust Lintorff to honour our pact if necessary. The minute she tries something against me, I'll go for the divorce express option. Her services are no longer needed as she should have realised seven years ago. Besides, he's not a paid boy toy who can be put in a flat and visit whenever you want some fun. He comes from two noble families, he's not an alley cat."

"Two noble families that happen to be members of the Order and one of them provided several consorts for the Lintorffs."

"Yes, it's a well known fact: If you want a blonde, cute, unable to make trouble, prince or princess, go to the Guttenberg Sachsen. Their highest contribution to European history was their wineries in Franken area and nothing else. Married to everybody, never getting into anybody's power schemes. In a way, that's already a considerable feat. Do you know that Peter the Great had one mistress from that family? My grandfather used to tell me the story. If you want a good looking wife, go to them, they're not as crazy or powerful as the Wittelsbach, but they will not create too many troubles; their brains prevent them to do it. Clever man, I should have listened to him, and perhaps I will now."

"He looks like a sensible lad. Down to Earth but Olga is not. She's looking for an excuse to declare war on you."

"Let her do it."

"She won't go after your throat but after the boy's. Be careful boss."

"I will. Are you, by any chance starting to like him?"

"Not in the way you think, boss. I like him because he's not prissy or looking for trouble. A real working boy and paints really well. Those sketches are something else," Oblomov chuckled.

"Lenin would die again if he were to hear you. The working class represented by the grandchild of the Vicomte de Marignac?"

"The irony of life. Should he not be up? Doesn't he have to go to work?"

"Yes, but I let him be. He's not going to last long in that place, but you're right. He should be up and working," Constantin chuckled visibly amused and relaxed.

* * *

The sunlight bathed Guntram's face and the brown bangs of his hair looked almost dark blond with some red strikes shinning. He looked very young and totally oblivious to everything. 'When was the last time that anyone felt safe as too sleep near me? He looks like a small child and completely trusts me. He has to be mine by reason or force.' Constantin thought as he was mesmerized looking at the chest slowly rising and falling. He approached the bed and sat on one side, softly shaking Guntram awake.

"Wake up, it's time for breakfast," he said kindly, devouring the boy with his eyes just for a second before he opened his eyes and returned to his normal blank face.

Guntram seemed to be a little disoriented about the place but he shyly smiled when he saw Constantin. "Good morning. Sorry, I overslept. What time is it?"

"Good morning. Around 11 a.m., I would say."

"So late? I'm dead. The manager will kill me and later resurrect me to make me finish the shift! I'm sorry but I have to go to work," he said, jumping out of the bed and nearly tripping with the too long pyjama trousers.

"Some people still dream about not studying for a school test but it seems you dream about your boss," Constantin chuckled.

"You would also dream about him if he were your boss," he said in a hurry before disappearing into the bathroom. The Russian stood up and left the room to meet Oblomov, who was sitting at the dinning table and having a coffee while he checked his computer.

"Is he up?"

"On the brink of a heart attack because he's late for work."

"Are those people still existing boss?" The giant chortled.

"It seems," Constantin replied, sitting in front of him and starting to look into his own laptop.

"I'm sorry to disturb you Constantin, but I wanted to say good-bye before I leave," Guntram said timidly from the door without entering the dinning room.

"Come, have something for breakfast with us. You're already late."

"No, thank you. I go to work now or he will make me double the shift for a whole week."

"Is that legal?" Constantin asked while Oblomov smirked.

"In a twenty percent unemployment country, yes it is."

"Come to have dinner with me when you're finished. Oblomov still has to choose what he likes best."

"Impressive job, boy. What are you going to use? Watercolours?"

"No, pastels. I have paper for that, Ivan Ivanovich."

"Your working day is lost, boy. Stay here and finish your work. No one will bother you."

"I can't, I'll finish it in the night. I think I could have it ready for Tuesday if you leave on Wednesday."

"Thank you, Guntram. Do you need a lift? My chauffeur is doing nothing at the moment."

"No, thank you. I'll take the bus. Good-bye, Constantin."

"At seven here, Guntram," he only said, boring holes with his gaze into the lad's face.

* * *

Martin, the manager, went ballistic when he saw Guntram coming in so late. "You start at 9:00 and do you dare to show your sorry face at 11:30? You're recovering those extra hours. Today you go at 8:00 and be glad I don't fire you!" he shouted before leaving the bar counter and returning to his office.

Guntram sighed and picked up a rag and started to dry glasses and fill the small complimentary dishes. "Till

eight? That's sound like four hours more to me," Luis mumbled. "Motherfucker. See what you get for being the Employee of the Month? Nothing. Only shit."

"Could have been worse."

"Sure!"

At eight, Guntram was almost dead on his feet after working nonstop the whole day, with only one brief break to eat a sandwich standing in the kitchen. His left wrist was throbbing as he had had to fill in for Verónica because she had left at 2:00 with Martin to an unknown destination. He felt like dying when he saw a well known dark and tall Russian man, sitting at a table in his side. Constantin looked very upset.

"Good evening sir. What can I bring you?" he asked very mortified.

"I believe I've said at seven, Guntram. I don't like to be kept waiting."

"I'm very sorry I couldn't cancel the appointment because I don't have your phone number or e-mail. I didn't know how to warn you."

"In that case, you can still make it up to me. Leave your apron and we go," Constantin replied partly appeased.

"I can't leave right now. I still have to work. I'm sorry."

"What a lousy service we have in here!" A well known voice yelled from a nearby table, making Guntram flinch, sigh and close his eyes. To have Federico Martiarena Alvear and his group of friends was 'the cherry on top of the ice cream' he thought. "I'm sorry Mr. Repin, I have to work," he said hurriedly and dashed to the table filled with three boys and two girls.

"Good evening ladies. Fefo don't do that when I'm with a customer. He could complain to Martin," he scolded his friend mildly.

"Guntram, I didn't know you were interested in trying some new experiences," Fefo quipped sarcastically. "Did you break your hand with your clumsy ministrations and need someone to replace it?"

Guntram was speechless and gaping at him. They had thrown rude words at each other on several occasions, but never something of this calibre: a personal insult. "When you're ready to order, I'll be back," he fired back, throwing at him a glance of pure hatred, making Federico freeze for a minute.

"The ladies want a cappuccino and we, coffee."

"Great, I'll bring it in a minute," Guntram mumbled before going back to the counter to ask for the beverages.

The brief exchange didn't go unnoticed for Constantin even if he couldn't understand a word in Spanish. The punk who had refused so many times to introduce him to his angel was there and meddling in his affairs once more. It was time to get the boy out of this environment. He stood up from his chair and directed decidedly his steps toward the counter where Luis was offering himself to carry the tray. "You can't do anything more with your left hand. Leave the posh assholes to me. I hate their kind."

"Guntram, it's enough for today. Your shift finished four hours ago and you have work to do at home," Constantin interrupted the hushed conversation.

"Constantin, I need this job. I can't leave right now. If I do, I'll be fired instantly."

"How much do you make in this joint?" the Russian asked with his most derogative voice.

"I beg you pardon? That's private information," Guntram replied astonished at the other's lack of etiquette for asking such a question.

"Around \$975 plus tips?" Guntram gaped at the man like an idiot. "My information is correct, then. A scholarship in my foundation is around £2,000 per month plus lodging. So far, Oblomov has paid more than \$5,000 for your drawings, but you haven't seen a single cent of that money. I would say that you're losing money with this job. You're carrying weights with your left hand when the doctor forbade you to do so, risking your only capital; your hands."

"Excuse me sir, £2,000 is like \$3,000?" Luis intervened and Constantin nodded briefly, partly irritated at the older boy's intrusion. "You should get your head examined, Guntram. I know this is your first job and that's why you put up with all the shit from that fascist dwarf called Martin, the friendly slut called Verónica and what many others put you through. Kick their asses too and send them to Hell now and then. I have more than seven years in this shit of a profession because I'm too stupid and illiterate to get something better, but you don't have to cope with it. Get a job in a bank or sit under a tree and make portraits of the tourists! You will be making much more than here. One of my cousins plays the hippy in *Plaza Francia* every weekend since 1986 and gets over \$2,000 per month for two days work in a week! Does he have talent? No way, it's rubbish what he draws but the gringos pay because he knows how to rub their egos. He charges them \$50 for each picture and they pay gladly because, at home, they would have to pay

\$100 for the same crap.”

“Sir, that has been the best lecture on modern arts and economy I’ve heard in many years,” Constantin chuckled.

“Thank you. Go away, Guntram. Finish your thing and tomorrow come to work or don’t. Who cares? See if Martin has the balls to fire you and face the hassle of looking for a replacement who can speak two languages, the old ladies love for \$975. The world is full of shitty jobs, if you want another one, Guti.”

“Perhaps I could offer you a ‘shitty job’ myself, Mr... call my assistant tomorrow. He will find something according to your abilities. We are planning on overtaking several companies in the energy sector,” Constantin said, handing him a card with his name and Zakharov’s number.

“Luis Canclini. Thank you,” he replied, very surprised at the Russian’s self confidence.

“We go now, Guntram,” Constantin said, steering the boy by the arm out of the place, his patience over.

The dumbfounded boy stood in the middle of the busy street looking at Constantin in disbelief. “Do you want to dine somewhere or do you prefer my home?”

“I’m going to my own flat, thank you. I have a monster headache,” Guntram said slowly, doing his best to be polite before he would shout and tell the man to piss off for the way he had put him out of his own workplace.

“That’s for not eating since yesterday. We dine at my place. You don’t look fit enough as to go out tonight.”

“Mr. Repin, I’m sorry if I didn’t go back to your house today, but I have a life of my own. Tomorrow, I’ll offer my excuses to Martin.”

“For what? The car is here. Get in,” Constantin growled, starting to lose his cool once more, when he saw the big Mercedes stopping in front of them and one of his bodyguards opening the door for him, Guntram looked at him as if he were crazy, but the Russian only pushed him in and said something in his language to the guard.

The boy sat inside the car, furiously, his eyes throwing daggers at Constantin, unimpressed at the display. “Mr. Repin, tell your driver to let me out on the next corner.”

“We dine and discuss about your future tonight. You can stay at home or my driver will take you to your flat later.”

“Your behaviour is outrageous, sir. There’s nothing to discuss for us.”

“I beg to differ, Guntram. This man, Canclini, was right in every word he said. Clever boy, if I might say. Could work fine for us.”

“Did you really mean it? About a job offer?”

“Of course. The sooner you learn that all my words are true, the better for you. I never bluff or make a threat or promise that I’m not ready to fulfill.”

“He has only a High School degree.”

“Like yourself. Did I ask you for any kind of credentials when I saw your work? No. I looked at your talent and I want that you’re properly trained to fulfill your potential to its maximum.”

“I’m no artist. I almost flunk the arts class in school,” Guntram confessed, embarrassed and feeling miserable.

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to paint for that teacher. We didn’t get along since the first day. She was too chaotic and criticizing me for being too restrained and scholastic. So I sent her to hell till the Headmaster found about my little rebellion and forced me to paint in front of her so she would grade my work. I got four out of ten possible points and I refused to present anything for the International Baccalaureate in Arts because I didn’t like the examiner. I went for Chemistry and Physics before going for Arts, just to avoid the stress of an exhibition, doing what they considered to be Art. Do you really think I’m an artist? Are they not supposed to die to show their things? This is only a hobby for me.”

“You still have a long way before you turn into a temperamental artist. Take Xavier Teixeira, one of the many I’ve sponsored over the years. He studied in Paris with several others. When their scholarship was finished, the foundation organised a collective exhibition for the students. The vernissage night, an American representative from a large oil company, who by the way had many businesses with me, wanted to buy a painting from him. He was not a bad artist but average. Nothing out of the ordinary. The minute he heard that this Texan was there, he shouted that his art would never be sold to a filthy capitalist killing children in Iraq.”

“That must have been bad for you,” Guntram said sympathetically.

“It even gets better. With a cutter he destroyed all his paints before the security guards could have done something!”

“That’s a lot of temper.”

"Yes, it was a big scandal. It was in every French newspaper and not *Le Figaro* or *Le Monde* kind. It was a horrible blow for our foundation's credibility and for all the other artists in that exhibition. None of them got good critics or anything because the press was focused on "Xavier, le Rouge". Three months later, he organized a new exhibition in a big gallery and had no problems to sell everything to filthy capitalists doing worse things. He used us to get publicity, without caring about his companions. I think none of them has done anything worth mentioning in the past years."

"That was bad. Where's he now?"

"Floating in the Seine." "He retired, I think. We are almost there."

"I really can't stay. I have to work tomorrow and start tonight the painting."

"Come upstairs with me. I have something for you."

"What is it?" Guntram asked with true curiosity, his previous anger forgotten with the story.

"Surprise," Constantin retorted making the boy smile like a very young child.

* * *

Guntram was speechless when he saw the huge pencil box. At the beginning he thought it was a pencil box but after a closer examination he realised that those were pastels in the form of pencils. "I've never seen something like this before," he said in awe, reverently caressing the polished wooden surface.

"They're made in England. I'm told that the quality is very similar to those looking like chalk, but less dirty," Constantin explained to him gently.

"They're very beautiful. Where did you get them?"

"London. I ordered one of my secretaries to look for them when I saw you working last night. She sent them along with some papers for me this afternoon."

"Are they really for me?"

"Try them and finish Oblomov's wife's portrait. He was very impressed with what he saw this morning and it's not easy to impress him."

"She has very nice features. Her bone structure is very harmonious. She will be still beautiful when she grows older."

"Perhaps. Let's have dinner, shall we? You must be starving."

"I don't want to impose myself any further. I should go home."

"Nonsense, this is your home now and I want that you explain to me later what were you thinking when you threw away that box."

* * *

For the second night, Guntram slept by Constantin's flat, only wondering why the maid had not removed the pyjamas from the previous night. Too tired to think and with his wrist still throbbing, he did his best to ignore the pain and sleep.

* * *

Very early in the morning—as he didn't want to miss his work again—Guntram woke up and redressed with yesterday's clothes, thinking that he should pass briefly by his flat to shower and change before going to work. Today, he was supposed to be there at 8 a.m. and it was only 6:30 a.m. Unsure of what to do, he went to the kitchen to see if there was someone from the service up to leave a message for Constantin.

"Good morning, sir," a maid greeted him in good English, surprising him a bit.

"Good morning. Do you know if I could leave a note for Mr. Repin? I have to go to work, but I don't want to disturb him."

"Mr. Repin is up since half an hour ago. His secretary, Mr. Zakharov is working with him in the library. He told me to inform him the minute you were up to have breakfast with you. I'll be right back, sir," she said so fast that Guntram couldn't stop her before she rushed toward the library, through the large corridor. Sighing, he resigned to another delay in his schedule, but this time he would be firm as the man couldn't manipulate his life in the way he was doing it.

"Mr. Repin asks you to join him in the dinning room," the maid informed him, curtly bowing her head and vanishing direction to the kitchen.

"Wait! Could you get me some aspirin please? My wrist is giving me some troubles."

"Right away, sir."

Feeling unhappy at this new turn of events, Guntram suppressed a frustrated sigh and went to the dinning room as ordered, still wondering why the man was up working so early, and how on earth could you get a secretary at such an ungodly hour. He stood in front of the closed door and softly knocked to hear Constantin's voice saying "come in"

"Good morning, Guntram. Sit down. Do you know Zakharov?"

"How do you do, sir?" The boy asked to the old Russian sitting at the table, who only bowed his head in response.

"Sit down now," Constantin repeated this time more sharply than before, making Guntram feel as if he were again in the Headmaster's presence.

"I only wanted to thank you and say good-bye. I start at 8 a.m. today and I still have to pass by my house..."

"Have breakfast and then we will see," Constantin only said, turning and resuming his previous conversation with the man in Russian. Undecided about the best course of action, Guntram sat where Constantin had told him to and immediately, a different maid served him a coffee and asked him if he wanted eggs for breakfast.

"No, just bread, thank you."

"Here is your aspirin, sir," the first maid returned with the pill and a glass of water.

"Do you have a headache again, Guntram?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

"Then, why the aspirin? Do you have a heart condition?" Constantin joked.

"No, just some pain in the left wrist," Guntram answered puzzled at the question but remembering that the man had studied Chemistry.

"The same that the doctor told you to keep immobilized for two weeks and you use for carrying the tray?"

Guntram blushed when he answered that it was the same but today he would not use it as the staff was larger during the week and he could stay behind the counter.

"Drying glasses and rotating it? Zakharov what would you think if I have a pure blood horse with a sprained ankle and I put it on a mill so he rests from the horse-tracks fatigues?"

"That you're a fool, sir."

"Indeed. We have the same problem with this young man. He has just been offered a scholarship for painting, but he insists on working for less than \$1,000 in a restaurant where he already sprained his left hand."

"That's very daft in my opinion. He will stress the right hand more just to replace the other and why is he not wearing a rigid plastic splint?"

"I don't know. Perhaps the local doctors have found a new healing method that we're not aware of," Constantin pondered in a very sarcastic way. "Guntram, call your work and said that you're not going today. A doctor will see it in the afternoon."

"I can't do that!"

"Are there not labour laws in this country? Labour injuries are a real problem if you're an employer," the old man lectured the youth.

"Don't tell me about it, Zakharov," Constantin sighed.

"I have to work to make a living!" Guntram protested.

"Finish your breakfast. The chauffeur will take you to your house to pick up some clothes if you want. You're staying here, till your hand gets better."

"With all due respect, Mr. Repin, you're not my father and you can't order me around," Guntram said, truly pissed off with the man.

"I'm aware that I'm not your father nor intend to be. It's criminal how you're wasting your talent and a good opportunity. Finish that portrait, if you can, between today and tomorrow, here. You have the materials and can use the terrace. It's sunny and warm. I want to see if you're able to do it or is it that you know you can't?"

"I have nothing to prove to you, sir," Guntram said seriously and Zakharov couldn't help to admire the youth's guts to oppose to Constantin so openly.

"I see. Perhaps I overestimated your abilities."

"Most probably, sir. I'm no artist at all or intend to be one."

"My mistake. Go to work, Guntram," Constantin said in a false light tone, one that Zakharov knew that forbade nothing good for the boy.

"Good-bye, Mr. Repin. I wish you a safe journey home."

"Thank you. Good-bye," Repin dismissed him.

* * *

Guntram arrived just in time to get a good scolding from Martin for leaving yesterday after eight.

"You said till 8 p.m. and I left at 8:20. I don't see the problem," Guntram's retort surprised the man as the boy was like a small mouse, doing his work quietly and without complaints. A real loser.

"You go home when I say so."

"Really? You're forcing me to work when another worker dropped a full beer crate on my hand and the doctor clearly told me to take a leave for five working days."

"Are you a trade unionist now? I have no place for such people!"

"No, but I'll present the papers to the insurance company by myself and they will force you to give me my leave."

"Of course I'll give you a leave. A permanent one. If you work here, it's because the owner is good friends with that woman, not because you're good at it. Now, get out of here and do something useful for a change!"

"I leave at 4 p.m. today, when my shift ends."

"You leave when I tell so. If you leave at 4 p.m. don't bother to come tomorrow."

"We'll see."

At 4:30 Guntram finished to charge the last table he had been serving and folded his apron and placed it under the counter."

"Where are you going?" Martin barked seeing the boy putting his jacket on.

"Home. I'm finished for today."

"You're forever finished if you cross that door."

"Is it not somewhat extreme? Are you going to work tomorrow in my place or are you going to ask Verónica to finally move her ass somewhere else besides that sorry cellar you always take her?"

"You're fired!" Martin shouted and several customers turned their heads at them.

"Good, send me the telegram and have the money ready for tomorrow," Guntram said without losing his cold demeanour. "Let me remind you, the money for the lay off is double because I'm injured while working and I'll denounce you to the Labour Ministry. I'm sick of people like you, pushing those who are weaker."

Guntram walked the five blocks to his home totally furious that he had finally discussed with Martin and lost his job. Tomorrow he would start to look for another one and it would be hard as Martin would certainly not write a recommendation letter for him. He passed by George's shop, where he was working with a customer and Guntram only waved his hand.

"Wait Gutí!" George shouted, almost running out of his shop.

"Hi, George. I'm going home."

"You look like shit, dear. Everything fine with the Russian?"

"What? No, yes. It's not with him. I was just fired from my job for fighting with my boss."

"Come in and tell everything."

"You are with a customer."

"Who? Hilda? She's a friend more than a customer. In with you!"

"I want to go home. It's been a long weekend. I need to relax and finish something for the Siberian asshole." Guntram excused himself, decided to make the Russian eat his own words. He could make a portrait with his own pastels in less than two days, and he needed to work to ease the tension down or he would shoot the next Czar.

"OK, if you prefer that way, but I'm having dinner with you tonight. You disappeared for two nights with the Doctor Zhivago. I have to hear the whole story."

"I did nothing! Just slept at his house. He's not interested in me. Look George, come for dinner, if you want, but don't expect too much."

* * *

Guntram had finished the first sketch of what was going to be the portrait of a woman in her mid twenties,

with the heavy wedding dress changed into something more ethereal and in a pale colour as he was fascinated by her dark hairs and soulful black eyes. 'She looks like I've always imagined the girl from Eugene Onegin, Tatiana.'

He stood up and went to look for his pastels and a large light blue paper that he was saving for a grand occasion and decided to drop the University for the day. He had a very clear image of what he wanted to paint.

The annoying bell chiming took him back to earth and he softly cursed as he was almost finished with the last details around the two roses he had draw partly hidden on the back. "Coming!" He shouted, leaving his work over the table.

"I don't know what's wrong with you, but you're truly crazy, Guntram," Federico exploded. "Martin called my mother to tell her that you insulted him and he had to fire you!"

"Yes, we had a disagreement."

"Disagreement? He fired you and you threatened him with going to the Labour Ministry! How could you do it after he accepted you for this job?"

"Thank you for your support, Federico. If you want, I'll write an apology letter to your mother. You see, I had enough of working my ass for free. He never offered to pay for a bloody box of painkillers."

"Guntram, you can't lose a job! What are you going to do?"

"Live on what I get for my lay off and look for another job. Simple as that."

"It doesn't work like this. Do you know how difficult is to get anything here?"

"I know. I'll ask around. Patricio's father was the CEO of a bank. He offered me a job a few months ago as a clerk. I can ask him if there's still something available. Waiting tables is not the dream of my life, you know?"

"Guntram, are you all right? First you hang around a well known rich gay, and don't deny it because I saw it and I know him. Saw him at several parties. He's very discreet, but always goes home with a good looking model or something like that. Now, you fight with your boss and get fired and what are you doing exactly now? Painting!"

"Constantin is not interested in me. He told me so. And I took a day off... for painting. Is that so strange? All of you fuck around, do nothing, study nothing, work nothing and its perfectly fine. The day the nice and stupid Guntram decides to take a break, it's a fucking disaster!"

"You're into something bad, Guntram. I can smell it. My mother tells that this guy is filthy rich! He's the figurehead of a rich Russian owning one of the largest conglomerates of oil, mining and transport in the former Soviet Union. Oblomov has billions and the fucking secretary commands everything!"

"Tell mommy dear that she should be nicer to the secretary because he has a lot of influence and dislikes your mother very much."

"Whatever! This is not good for you. Forget what he has told you because he only wants a good fuck and that will be all."

"I'm not fucking with him," Guntram protested.

"It's a matter of time. How dumb can you be? You'd probably sleep by his house and share his bed because it was too late to come home and he has no other place to put you", Federico said ironically.

"Fefo, if you're not going to be helpful, let me finish my work, OK?"

"Are you throwing me out?"

"Yes, good night."

"Asshole!" Federico yelled, yanking the door open just to bump into George, his dog and a huge steaming pot in his hands. "You fucking pervert! Happy now? You have convinced him to whore himself to a Russian!" he roared.

'You would have preferred that it would have been you instead of Dr. Zhivago.' George thought but said nothing, only moving aside so the furious boy could leave the place. "Your friend certainly has a temper. Now, tell me about the last part, the whoring around, Guntram. That sounds promising."

Guntram sighed as he knew that shaking George off would be more difficult than throwing his former room mate out.

* * *

Guntram was doubtful, a state of mind that was becoming more and more usual during the past days, as he stood in the park in front of the Kavanagh building. He had the painting carefully folded and tied with a ribbon and only wanted to leave it, avoiding Constantin and his more than foreseeable fury when he would find out that he had done exactly what the Russian had told him to do, after he had nearly sent him to hell. With any luck, Constantin would be busy as it was a Tuesday morning and he had many businesses to run.

He waited for the lights to change in front of the crosswalk, watching how many pedestrians simply risked their lives just to cross a few seconds before the cars would stop. 'We like to live on the edge, no doubt about it.' Guntram thought nervously. He crossed the street, and with an outward decided face, he walked toward the door man standing at the entrance.

"Good morning, I wanted to leave something for the penthouse in the fourteenth floor. Can you take it?"

The man just looked at him incredulously. "It's a painting for Mr. Ivan Oblomov. He works with the owner, Mr. Constantin Repin," Guntram said very sheepishly, locking his gaze on the marble floor.

"Wait a minute, I'll ask," the doorman said, but a man in a dark suit, a foreigner by his aspect, stopped him with one gesture.

"I work for Mr. Oblomov," he said in perfect English. "Are you Guntram de Lisle by any chance?"

"I am. Could you give this to Mr. Oblomov? It's a portrait I promised him."

"He's waiting for you upstairs, sir. Follow me, please."

"It's not really necessary to inconvenience him."

"Please," the man abruptly cut all Guntram's protests, showing him with the nod of his head, the way to one of the private lifts.

Guntram was left in the living room with the Tamayo painting he had admired so much. Not willing to sit, as he had not been invited to do so, he stood by the closed terrace overlooking the city.

"Please, excuse me for my delay," Oblomov said jovially, offering his hand. "Three local bankers. Is there any local tradition to make people go away?"

"Thank you for seeing me without an appointment, Mr. Oblomov," Guntram shook the hand, choking a laugh. "No, I'm afraid you don't shake off a banker very easily. You might try to put a broomstick behind the door. It keeps the witches away," Guntram smiled.

"Call me Ivan and probably the banker would ask me if I want stocks from cleaning company, but I'll keep it in mind; if it helps against witches might do the same for bankers," he chuckled. "Constantin Ivanovich is busy now with some politicians, but I'm sure he would like to see you later."

"I only wanted to leave you this, Ivan Ivanovich," Guntram said extending the tin tube.

Oblomov gasped in admiration at the portrait of his wife, looking exactly as he remembered her from her wedding day, so many years and troubles ago. The paint showed a woman of a serene and composed beauty with eyes that swallowed people's soul. "It's her, no doubt. The first time I saw my wife, when I was a young graduate travelling to Paris for the first time, I thought that if you saw yourself reflected in those eyes, you couldn't help to fall in love with her, and I did."

"I'm glad you like it."

"Like it? I don't know if I will give it to her or keep it for me. It's her. How could you do it? You have never seen her in your life."

"It's how you spoke about her, the pictures you had from her and the videos too. Everything was there."

"We don't see each other much. She lives in Paris with our son and I'm mostly in St. Petersburg or Moscow. Our relationship is strained at the moment," he confessed.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be, it's not your fault. Thank you very much. I know you want no money for this, but I would like to give you something in exchange."

"You owe me nothing, sir. Really. I have to go now."

"Stay for lunch, please. You don't work there any longer."

"How do you know?"

"That boy, the one who worked with you, told Zakharov when he had his interview yesterday evening. He will start as the office boy. He was very happy with his new salary. Constantin is glad that you saw reason finally. If you would see a doctor now, that would be the final proof that you're sane."

"No, thank you. I had a disagreement with my manager and it was coming all the way."

"I won five hundred Euros to Constantin. He said you wouldn't be able to do the portrait because you were so afraid of it. Do we share boy?"

"No thank you, it's your capital."

"Speaking of which you should take my offer Guntram. I paid good money to that woman. You're jobless now, take \$3,000 for this."

"It's a gift, Ivan."

"What If I give you a commission? Make one of my wife and my son when he was seven. He's an ugly teenager nowadays so it's not worth painting him."

"That's a lot of money, I will be robbing you."

"Nonsense. My tailor robs me. Come on boy, take it and make a good job. I could use it to mend my relations with my mother-in-law. Terrible woman."

"I don't want to abuse you."

"If you get my mother-in-law off of my neck for a month or two, then this will be the best money ever spent in my whole life. If she doesn't like it, I'll give her your phone number and my revenge will be legendary," he chuckled, sensing that he had won the battle. "Yes, gentle moves and he goes wherever you want. Boss should know it by now."

"Can I return the money if she doesn't like it?" Guntram joked lightly.

"No, you endure her, all by yourself and take the heat away from me. A good investment too. Stay for lunch boy. You can work at the terrace with the pencils you forgot. We eat at 1:00," he ordered mildly, but leaving no room for further discussions and left the room.

Guntram stood there, undecided because he had to go get his check from Martin, then to the University and start to print his CV to hand over to different employment agencies. A woman, elegantly dressed like a secretary lightly coughed at his side, holding a well known wooden box and a leather portfolio. "Good morning, Mr. de Lisle. My name is María Cristina Achaval and I'm the personal assistant for Mr. Oblomov in Argentina. He asked me to give you this and show you the terrace," She said, obviously obfuscated that she had to address a simple waiter when the butler or one of the maids would have been more than sufficient.

"Thank you, madam," Guntram answered meekly as his escape route had been blocked by a very tall blonde, reminding him of his best friend's mother.

"Follow me, please."

* * *

"Give me a good reason for not killing you, Ivan."

"You love me more than you dare to admit and envy my intelligence secretly. Look, only a ten minute talk and he's sitting peacefully, drawing and has accepted a commission and money from me. Ordering will not help with this one. I suspect he can be quite a stubborn mule... and you still owe me five hundred Euros, boss."

"You're too ugly to be lovable, Ivan Ivanovich," he chortled, getting the money out of his wallet. "I hope you have paid him more than this."

"Three thousand dollars, boss. This one from my wife is very nice indeed."

"Are you starting to appreciate art?"

"No way, I said it looks really good. Tatiana will be pleased and leave me alone for some months."

"So he stays for lunch?"

"It seems so. I think he got a tea and is working with the pencils you gave him and a pad. According to one of the men, he looked at it in awe for almost twenty minutes. Your finances can be glad if he's like that."

"Not if he wants a Tamayo for his birthday."

* * *

Contrary to his expectations, the lunch was not only for Constantin—who greeted him briefly—and Oblomov, but two State Secretaries, a very well known banker and two industrials, desperately seeking cash from Constantin... and a lot of cash in Guntram's opinion. He kept his gaze fixed on his dish, almost not touching the food or drinking the wine, so embarrassed he felt to be there. Oblomov tried to engage him in a conversation but he couldn't utter more than five words in a sentence, so he soon lost interest and dedicated all his attention to the politicians and a mining project in Patagonia.

Guntram thought that he could escape when the lunch finished at 2:00, but it was a short lived hope as Oblomov told him to wait for him in his office.

He was surprised to see Constantin coming instead of Oblomov and he stood up very nervously.

"Hello Guntram, I'm glad you followed my advice."

"Please Mr. Repin, I don't want to discuss this with you."

“Why?”

“My reasons are mine.”

“Why are you so formal? Did you not quit your work and finish the portrait? I was not expecting you could finish it and I must admit that it's good. Oblomov is satisfied too. Now, would you drop the rebel teenager act and discuss business with me?”

“We have no business to discuss, sir. I only brought the painting.”

“Why don't you accept a scholarship from my foundation? We have more than one thousand five hundred applications each year and we grant two hundred only and most of them will turn into mediocre artists. I think you show a lot of potential but for some reason you're afraid of painting. Why is that?”

“I have to make a living. I don't have much space to play the artist. I can't afford to lose money or time.”

“Why? Going to Europe now would only cost you a month or two in your life. If we consider a life expectancy of seventy-five, then is less than 0.2% of your life. Not much to decide if you would like to do it or not. I can't understand why you prefer the grey life of an accountant or the parish prude when you could be a good artist. If you're looking for security in your life, study Art History and become an expert and live from that. Do you have any idea how much an art commissar in London or an arts dealer makes? Much more than a poor clerk in a bank. However I don't think that money is the issue here. It's something much deeper.”

“I truly don't want to speak about it.”

“That's not very reasonable, Guntram. Satisfy my curiosity and I'll leave you alone.”

“Painting is the problem,” Guntram mumbled.

“I was under the impression that you liked it.”

“Too much... I fall into it and everything ceases to exist... The last time my father was in Argentina, I was seven years old and he had brought me a pencil case. I was with him at his flat and we were together. He was speaking very upset over the phone with someone, I don't know who, in French and he asked me to sit and draw something to carry with him. I did it and I lost track. I never knew when he left the house to take his plane back to Paris. The nanny told me he had kissed me and took my drawings with him, but I didn't realise. He was dead one week after and I couldn't say good-bye to him.”

“How did he die?”

“Suicide, jumped out of a window.”

“Perhaps he didn't want to say good-bye to you and wanted that his last image of you would have been his son doing what he loved most. It's not your fault what he did. He might have serious reasons to do it.”

“Yes it was. My mother died in childbirth and I think he blamed me for it. He never said a thing, but he missed my mother a lot and was always speaking about her. He was convinced that I was going to be an artist as I was always crying to get pencils or paper and drawing everywhere, if you get my meaning.”

“This is why you're so afraid to paint?”

“Don't you get it? I missed the chance to kiss my father good-bye!”

“Have you never considered that his last memory of you was one of a happy child, doing what he loved best? That's no reason to deny yourself to do what you love best. Why do you punish yourself for this? You didn't force him to do it.”

“I know,” Guntram said absently and sad at the same time.

“Take my offer and come to Europe just for a month. Come with me tomorrow if you want. We're going back to London. There's enough room in the plane.”

“I can't do that. I can't just go away!”

“Why? You're jobless and to wait for a month to start to look for another job, if you come back, or work with Zakharov is not much.”

“I have to finish this term at school! I have a house!”

“All right, when do you finish your tests?”

“Mid-December.” Guntram said not truly believing that he had more or less given his accord to the trip and perhaps to accept a total stranger's support, based on who knows what. “Is not that you have much more to choose from, Guntram?”

“Then, come from mid-December onwards. Maria Ulanovna will arrange the details. I'll send her over, now.”

“I...”

“Good day to you Guntram,” Constantin finished the conversation, leaving the room back to his office.

“What do I do now?” was all what Guntram could think about.

"Well Sir, you have to complete and sign these forms for you scholarship application. I assume it would be valid from November onwards and the payments will be initially done in the account you provided us," the middle aged secretary explained a still dazed Guntram once more

"Should I not give you a copy of my school records?"

"It would be nice if you could send them by mail to me. In regard of the capability tests, the Lara Arseniev Trustee Fund uses, Mr. Repin says that is enough with the material at his disposal."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Repin asks if you want to accompany him this afternoon to the new Latin American Arts Museum. He has an appointment with the General Director and the owner, Mme. Achaval will go also."

"I know the owner. His third son was one class ahead of mine. I'm not sure if he remembers me. I was several times at his birthday parties."

"Well, in that case it shouldn't be a problem for you to come. If you want to go home and change into cocktail attire you should hurry. Mr. Repin leaves at 6:15 p.m."

"Thank you, but I should go to the university, really."

"Not everyday you get to meet the Director of one of the most important museums in Latin America, it's a very good opportunity and if you allow me to say it, Art is not ten percent inspiration and ninety percent work. Art is ten percent inspiration, forty percent public relations and fifty percent work." The old lady smiled.

"I'll be back at 6:15 just because I don't want to insult Mr. Repin."

* * *

The banker's office was on the top floor of the Museum overlooking the blue flowered trees. After insistently looking at Guntram, Bronstein laughed when he heard his name, finally remembering the shy boy who used to come to his middle son's birthday parties with a lawyer or a teacher from the school; that young noble French, the Vicomte of somewhere.

"I remember you clearly. You're Mariano's friend from the school, Guntram. Do you know, Mr. Repin that I paid unbeknownst—the first stages of his artistic career?"

"How so? Guntram says he never planned to study arts."

"Mariano, my son, was in the same class and they became friends at school when they were ten or twelve. At some point, my wife tells me that my son wants good quality temperas, oils, watercolours and papers when he was only interested in football and girls. "Buy it," I told her, not caring at all. Then, my son brought his grades home and he had a nine in Arts when the most he was making was a six and I know that my son can't draw even if you put him in front of a firing squad. It was very strange, but I said nothing. Next semester, he comes home with a ten and I say, "Mariana, this is impossible," and I asked for his Art portfolio and all the works were accurately done so I asked my son "who has done it?" "Nobody," after pressing a lot, I found out that those two had an arrangement. Guntram was making his homework—and for several more in the class—in exchange for drawing materials and the teachers never found it out! I forbid my son to do it again, but I think this young man changed his style and continued with this over the years. The teachers never caught him."

"I'm sorry for the delusion, Mr. Bronstein. I didn't realise at the time it was wrong to do it."

"No, it's all right. I was also doing such trades in school, like everybody else," he chuckled.

"We all start like this," Repin chuckled. "I hope he starts to sign his own work now and doesn't make the other students homework. We should count his pencils when he comes home to see what he has been doing."

"That's a good idea, trust me," Bronstein mirrored the Russian's laughter to immediately switch back to seriousness and continue with the conversation. "Regarding of your proposal, we have studied the list of artworks you're willing to lend us and it's most impressive, but the cost is too high. We can't cover them with the sales tickets. Just the insurance is around one percent of their value."

"Then, I'll take them to Europe and Russia. After all, some of them were on loan in your collection."

"Times are hard for us. Recession is slowly killing us. The best I could do it a three percent yearly on the appraisal."

"Such amount does not even cover the risk of leaving the paints here."

"We would be paying the insurance on the side."

"Depends on which company you want to use."

"The one you name, Mr. Repin."

"Will my paintings be a part of the permanent collection for the next five years?"

"Extendible for another five years if they do well."

"I'm sure they will. Frida Kahlo and Botero are very sought after artists. Our lawyers will arrange the papers. I don't like the paintings to be in a bank's vault. Art is to be enjoyed not to be locked away."

"I'm grateful that the pieces remain here. When Nacho told me that a Russian collector was buying everything I feared the worst. I would have tried to acquire them myself, but they wanted cash rather urgently."

"I spent all my money for cigarettes for this year. Should be nice till 2002," Constantin chuckled. "It's been a pleasure meeting you Mr. Bronstein," Constantin said, rising from his chair, with Guntram mirroring his actions, and extending his right hand.

"Likewise, Mr. Repin. Perhaps we will meet again at an auction in New York."

"Perhaps."

"I wondered if our main expert could give you a tour?"

"That's most thoughtful of you, thank you."

* * *

"So you were already selling at such an early age?" Constantin unable to contain the laughter any longer. "Do you say you have no future in the Arts market?"

"Only as a forger," Guntram mumbled, still embarrassed.

"Normally students trade cigarettes and alcohol, but you wanted pencils?"

"My box was almost empty and my lawyer was giving me a small allowance per month."

"But the whole set, oil, watercolours, tempera, paper... you forgot the canvases."

"No, those were included in the painting set for the Art classes, ten per year. I traded with several other boys." Guntram confessed.

"It seems you had a factory there. How many customers?"

"In the last year, it was the whole class; seventeen in total, plus five Art Diplomas at the International Baccalaureate."

"You said you hated the examiner's views."

"If you want Pollock, I can make Pollock. If you like Van Arp or Deschamps, I can do it too... but honestly decorating a bloody toilet with Renaissance figures painted in acrylics is too much for my taste. That idiotic woman never realised that I've done everything even if there were several paintings from me (good ones) from the children at the slums. There she said that it was too traditional and boring."

"Did she say exactly boring?"

"No, the full critics was "very academic and traditional, it's like a return to basics. Most shocking," elegant way to say "boring" The only good teacher I had was Ms. Sanders in the last year. She had been working at Christie's London and immediately realised that we were a bunch of yokels, armed with brushes and gave us an Arts History course."

"Return to basics doesn't mean boring and academic is not a bad word, Guntram. Enjoy what you do and the rest will come by itself."

"Why don't you paint?" Guntram asked, shocking Constantin

"No one ever asked me that before. Because I realise I have no talent at all for that. I'm an engineer and a businessman, but I enjoy enormously every time I look at something beautiful. I had the fortune to have enough money as to indulge myself in buying what I love. It's selfish, I know. If I support artists is just to return to Art just a fraction of what I've received in exchange. Have you ever seen a Monet at short distance? I have one in London, it's just a forest, who knows from where and perhaps it was destroyed in a bombing in World War I, but every time I look at it shows me the meaning of beauty and harmony. If any of the hundreds I have supported, achieves such beauty, then my life would have not been in vain, Guntram. Tell me something, when you said Medici what's the first word that comes to your mind?"

"Art patrons, Florence."

"You see? Can you tell me the difference between Lorenzo and Cosme Medici?"

"Not really. "

"Cosme paid for many of Donatello works and for Fra Angelico. The family extinguished in the XVII century and all the artwork collected over the centuries was donated to the Tuscan State and we can enjoy it at the Uffizi or

the Accademia.”

“I didn't know it.”

“Perhaps the best for you would be to send you to study Arts History. I'm afraid that an Art Academy would counterproductive for you. You know very well what you want to paint and from there you will find your own way. You need to broaden your sights and improve your education.”

* * *

“Boss, it's show time tonight,” Oblomov broke the news and ruined Constantin's idea of dinning again with Guntram, now that the boy was slowly accepting his designs and had proved to be a delicious companion.

“Why?” He growled, making the other man flinch. One word sentences were a bad sign indeed.

“The Super Senator's team. They organized a dinner to see you good-bye in Puerto Madero, and it's with everything,” he put the emphasis on “everything,” slightly rising his right eyebrow.

“I'm not in the mood for it. A dinner will not convince me to do what they want,” Constantin retorted starting to sound upset at the prospect of a full night of talk, cheap looking whores dressed in designer clothes and alcohol and playing the “employee of the month” charade he had started with Oblomov.

“Boss, you have to be a little more charming.”

“I have already dinning plans as tonight is my last night here.”

“Constantin, I should go home, really. I have to wake up early tomorrow and I'm already very tired,” Guntram interfered shyly. Oblomov, realising that he was getting support for his cause, opted to disappear and leave all entirely up to the boy.

“I just invited you, Guntram.”

“It's really not necessary, Constantin. I go now. Politicians are very touchy and they could be nasty to you if you don't attend. Federico's mother will be the first to make your life a living hell.”

“I've seen much worse than her, don't worry.”

“We'll maybe see each other in a few months. Thank you for all what you've done for me.”

“It's my pleasure, Guntram. You deserve it.”

“I didn't mean the scholarship, for listening to me this afternoon. Thank you,” Guntram spoke, keeping his gaze to the floor, only raising it at the last moment, his eyes locked with Constantin's black ones.

The man placed his right hand over Guntram's cheek in a fatherly caress, softly stroking it before he spoke: “You have a great talent and your father realised it. Achieve it to its best and make him proud,” Constantin said, glad to have found the right button to push the boy in his direction.

“You're right, Constantin. I should give it a try, only for a month.”

“Irina will contact you with the details. Write to me and show me what you're doing. Take care of your hand and don't carry weights.”

“I will,” Guntram smiled and to his shock, Constantin put his arms around him and embraced him 'in a manly way, in a manly way' Guntram repeated several times as his spine became very stiff, but Constantin caressed his back several times, easing the tension he could feel from the boy, who relaxed after four or five strokes, 'like a kitten' Constantin thought. He firmly clasped the delicate face that was driving him crazy and softly kissed him on the forehead, enjoying the soft whimper from his angel when he removed his lips from his smooth skin.

“We'll see each other. Good-bye, Guntram.”

“Good-bye, Constantin.”

“Yuri will drive you home.”

* * *

“Boss, I truly like him. He knows his place and respects your business. That already grants him some points on my list.”

“Mind your own business, Ivan.”

“However, I would not get Olga Fedorovna jealous or concerned about her economical stability, boss. Keep the boy away from her.”

Chapter 4

October 19th, 2001

Guntram was very tired from working in the mornings in the slums, spending the afternoons at the University's library studying for his tests and finally attending his classes. Not having a stable job or looking for one had made him realise how exhausted he was. His left hand was much better with the rest and the splint the doctor had forced him to wear. Federico had long shouted with him for accepting the Russian's offer even if his foundation was well known and had many students living from it in Paris, London, St. Petersburg and Rome. Zakharov had sent Luis with an envelope with \$3,000 from Oblomov for the new portrait from his wife and Guntram had taken the money because he was not sure if the lay off compensation (less than \$2,000) would last till December and be enough to support him for a whole month in Europe. He didn't want to touch his reserves in the bank.

He was confused about his embrace with Constantin. It wasn't something sexual, far from it, but it couldn't be called "fatherly". Friends were not hugging him like that and finally he had confessed to George that "embracing a man wasn't as disgusting as he had imagined. In fact, it was nice to be held," making the other man snort.

What disturbed him was how quickly he had started to trust Constantin and how he would find himself thinking about him at the most unexpected moments; when he was sketching in a park, drawing reading cards for the children, in the middle of a Sociology lesson, on the bus or shopping for groceries. The man's e-mails were a source of joy when he told him about an exhibition he had visited or an auction he was planning to attend, a description of a painting or a sculpture or what he thought about something he had sketched. For some unknown reason, he was supposed to give part of his work every Monday to Zakharov and he would send it to wherever Constantin was.

Oblomov had also written to him, telling that the portrait was very beautiful and that "the old witch I have for mother-in-law adores it. She has it on her living room and shows it to anyone who dares to enter in her cave."

Today was his nineteenth birthday and he had been a little disappointed when Federico had not called him. Perhaps the previous night fight had been too much.

At 10:00 he finished his last class and he was going down the crowded stairs, taking good care of not slipping with the incredible amount of political leaflets scattered over the steps forming a slippery carpet, and keeping his head down to avoid the many banners hanging from the ceilings and walls. The exit at that hour always reminded him of a cows corridor as all the students fought to be the first out through the smallest door ever made, partly blocked by the activist handing out more leaflets.

"Hello, Guntram," a deep voice with a thick English accent shouted, making several students to look at the big -monster size-Russian, standing at the entrance, dressed with a good tailored suit and an overcoat that shouted "cashmere" "Or should I say *Strasvidye tovarich*?" He shouted making several of the political aware students look at him with clear hatred. "God, there are some people from Bakunin even! I thought those were killed in the 53rd Congress of the PCUS."

"Hello, Ivan Ivanovich, please keep your voice down, Trotskyists are very sensitive about jokes about the Soviet Union."

"What's their problem? They never lived there. I did. The only good thing for me was those holidays in Cuba and going to the Black Sea every year, and the State paid my University too. Nothing like being part of the Vanguard of the Proletariat."

"Now, are you going to upset the Stalinist too?" Guntram chuckled as he moved the big Russian before the PRT boys would have his blood, 'not very likely, but I don't want to prove that theory.'

"Happy birthday boy; nineteen, huh? When you reach the twenties, the years come faster and faster," he rumbled. "Come with me, boss is waiting for you in the car. Just seeing the Communist around here, made him sick."

"Where you not living in the Soviet Union?"

"Yes, and his father was the General Secretary of the Party for the Black Sea Provinces. Very important man, but we buried real socialism in 1991 and it was very good idea."

"Is Constantin here?" Guntram suddenly realised.

"In the car before he shoots someone dead on idiocy charges," he chuckled.

A big black Mercedes was parked seventy metres away from the University building, with a chauffeur standing next to it. The man hurried to open the back door for Guntram and Oblomov only pushed him lightly in with

a "see you tomorrow, boy," as he went to the second black car that appeared out of nowhere.

Inside, Constantin was sitting with his legs crossed and reading some papers in Russian, as Guntram noticed while he sat next to him.

"Hello Constantin, I'm truly surprised to see you."

"Happy birthday, Guntram," the man told him very warmly. "I was in the continent doing some business and decided to visit you."

"I'm glad to see you. Thank you for remembering it."

"Do you want to have dinner with me?"

"I'd like to, but I'm not ready for it."

"Then, come home. I think we could find something there. You don't have other plans, do you?"

"No, nothing. I'm not very sociable."

"Then, it's decided. My home. I hope Zakharov hasn't depleted the wine cellar."

* * *

After a small dinner, Guntram was more relaxed and openly laughing at Constantin's stories of his time as a student. "I need a cigarette. Do you want to come to the terrace?"

"You don't smoke inside?"

"Never, it could ruin an artwork."

Guntram shuddered in the cold night and Constantin went immediately inside, without telling a thing to return a few minutes later with a thick cover ornamented with fox tails. "You're going to catch your death with this cold and only that thin pullover," he said simply, putting it around Guntram shoulders. "Come, sit next to me," he stated simply pulling Guntram down with him.

"Are you not cold?"

"Not really, I live most of the time in St. Petersburg. I dislike hot weather. I escape from there in the summers as they can be suffocating. You, on the other hand, look like you're going to catch the flu with this fresh air. Come closer," Constantin pulled the boy against his shoulder and embraced him, rubbing his sides to warm him more. Guntram leaned against the man instinctively although his education was telling him not to take so many liberties with another man and smiled warmly, getting lost in Constantin's black eyes. A large hand forced delicately his head against the Russian's chest and he complied, enjoying the feeling of being embraced by another person.

Constantin was very glad that his angel was slowly accepting him and enjoying his caresses. He continued to stroke with long movements his back as the boy nested his head over his shoulder, his hair softly playing with the sensitive neck skin. He knew he shouldn't press much or the boy would be scared. This was a long game and it could be very rewarding at the end. "Are you warmer now?" Constantin asked casually, disentangling himself from his angel, unable to hide his disappointed look. That was what he loved most of him; his kindness and innocence. Like seeing everything for the first time: not like a seasoned lover, someone with a good heart who wouldn't try to take advantage of him or betray him.

"Yes, thank you," Guntram answered, blushing as he realised that he had been using the poor man as a pillow.

"I have something for your birthday. I saw it in London and thought you might like it. I think your style is very similar to his."

"What is it?" Guntram couldn't help to ask like an eager child.

"I have it inside. Let me go for it."

"No, stay here, please. You haven't got the time to smoke."

"You don't smoke?"

"Oh, I tried in school but threw up after the second or third puff. Not my thing. I felt as if my heart was about to explode," Guntram explained as Constantin chuckled softly. "I even tried with a full vodka shot when I was sixteen and I still remember the headache."

"You should try some champagne when we go inside. It's not so strong. The secret with alcohol is that it has to be very cold outside and you won't feel it."

"I'm not so sure."

Constantin lighted his cigarette and Guntram lightly coughed with the dense smoke. "Is that legal?" He asked, when he smelled the smoke.

"Russian cigarettes. Unmistakable. Very legal. Perhaps that's why we don't have much weed consumption back home. You'll get used to them. Once you're used to them, you want nothing else. I like them a lot, but don't smoke much. Only two or three boxes per week, at night. It helps me to think."

Inside the flat, Constantin opened a second bottle and gave his present, enjoying how Guntram was deeply absorbed by the book's illustration; a Bronzino's drawings guide. He laid against the white leather couch delighting himself in just watching the boy's profile in the half-light and how his hand traced reverently the contours of the drawn figures and his eyes registered every small detail.

"It's magnificent. How did you know I love this man's work?"

"I didn't know. I'm no fortune teller. I just thought that since your style was similar to his, perhaps you would like to copy it."

"I love it. I used to have a *Madonna* painted by him in my room. It was a copy, of course. My father had brought it for me from Paris. I think it was sold with the rest of the furniture at our flat in Buenos Aires. He was the first painter I copied from."

Without really knowing his reasons, Guntram closed the book with a dry thud and left it over the coffee table, his eyes looking for a second at Constantin's face. He leant over the man and without any further notice his lips touched the others and he kissed him softly at the beginning as his boldness increased with Constantin's passivity.

Constantin let the boy do till he felt that he was ready for some more action and firmly clasped the silky hairs before his tongue briefly caressed the lips, gently demanding to enter into the mouth offered to him. Surprised, Guntram opened his lips, allowing him a free entrance and the man roamed his mouth with his tongue, increasing his hold on the boy, pulling his body closer. Guntram felt his own lips on fire as he wantonly put his arms around Constantin's neck and entwined his fingers with the black hair.

As suddenly it had started, Constantin ended the kiss, gently pushing the boy away. "Why did you do it Guntram?"

"I'm sorry. The wine must be on my head," he hurriedly answered, blushing like never before.

"No, it's OK, but you said you were not into men."

"I don't know any longer. I think not but I think you think you can have something with me."

"Guntram, all this thinking can't be good for you. Your logic remains very unclear for me."

"You visited me on my birthday and gave me champagne. You offered me a generous scholarship and go with you to Europe. The least I can do, and the most honest, is to let you find out if you would like it or not."

"I see. Whoring yourself to me is the most honest thing to do. Are you sure you don't want a scholarship for the Law School?"

"I'm not whoring myself! I'm giving you the opportunity to see that what you want is not so great as you think!"

"You're whoring yourself the minute you're offering yourself for sex even if you know you don't like it. Don't come to me with a tearful story. I hear hundreds per day!"

"I don't know any longer if I don't want it!" Guntram admitted, dying of shame.

"How did you feel when you kissed me?"

"It wasn't bad or repulsing as I thought it would be. Sinful, but good."

"Two more words and I would have thrown myself over the balcony. Flattery is not your main virtue, it seems, and honesty is quite overestimated in my opinion."

"I didn't mean to be rude. I liked it in fact."

"Why are you not a little more honest to yourself and tell me that you would like to see how it is?"

"Because I don't know! I don't want to jump into someone's bed for a single night. I always thought that my first time would be with a woman whom I would love enormously, but here I'm offering I don't know what!"

"Guntram, I've told you that I'm not the romantic type. We can have an adventure but the minute you start to cling to my neck, I'll be gone. If you want it, it's under my rules, do you understand me?"

Guntram gulped, truly afraid now because, his doubts assaulting him more than before. "I also don't think this could be permanent. You'd be disappointed the next morning, but at least you would know that you're missing nothing. I think we should try it again, if you want it, Constantin. I think, I wouldn't find any better teacher than you. "

"Remove your pullover," Constantin ordered sharply and Guntram felt his heart stop, blanching like a paper sheet, a gesture that didn't went unnoticed for the man. "Do you see it? You're about to get a heart attack only with those words. What would happen if I tell you on your knees boy and suck me?" He smirked. "Don't play with

fire, child. This is a very dangerous game for you.”

“I still think we should do it.”

“Really? All the way?” Guntram hesitated for a brief moment before trying to utter an answer. “See again? You're still considering what ‘all the way’ means,” Constantin chortled.

Guntram fixed his eyes on Constantin's, tired of the belittling remarks the man was throwing at him. He was not such an idiot! He could do it. He gulped again, rather noisily and removed his pullover without saying a word as his voice would betray his nervousness and uneasiness. He gasped when Constantin advanced toward him and took his head by the neck, exerting a light pressure over the cheek to affirm his hold over the boy. “Have you ever been with a man ever before? In school?”

“No, it was not my game,” Guntram answered shortly before Constantin plundered his mouth with a long kiss, sucking the air out of him. Without fully realising it, so absorbed he was in the kiss, Guntram felt himself being repositioned against the cushions over the large sofa, a strong arm taking him by the waist as Constantin settled his weight against his chest.

Guntram felt the kiss odd but utterly erotic, nothing that could compare to the smooches he had once exchanged with a blonde girl on a party when he was fifteen years old. In his mind, it had been pleasant but nothing out of the ordinary, perhaps because he was not in love with her and they both were very nervous, well, he was. The expert kisses he was receiving from Constantin were different, he thought. First, Constantin was advancing as he would swallow him in one go but then, he was stopping and encouraging Guntram to repeat his actions with a brief lick of his tongue over the boy's lips. This play of cat and mouse was maddening for him at the same time that he felt more bold and comfortable with what he was doing. Relaxing more than before, Guntram put his arms around the man's neck and pulled him against his chest while his tongue devoured and tasted the faint traces of champagne on Constantin's mouth.

The Russian's free hand expertly unbuttoned the first buttons of Guntram's plaid cotton shirt, briefly marvelling at how cold and smooth the skin was, like alabaster, no better like ivory, lightly playing with his left nipple, enjoying the initial surprised gasp and then his soft moans at the caresses. Constantin finished to open the shirt revealing the white torso reminding him of a teenager's Apollo sculpture by Praxiteles he had seen so long ago in the Louvre; classic long limbs despite the boy was short, well proportioned chest, nothing overdeveloped in a cheap, made to the excess, no, his angel had truly a classical beauty, trapped in that moment when he was not a child any longer but not yet a fully grown man. Although his desire urged him to take the boy, he knew that he needed some self control if he wanted to keep him forever as it was his wish.

“Guntram, we must stop right now,” he made the supreme effort to disentangle from his angel, regretting his words the minute they were out of his mouth and feeling the bulge on the boy's trousers pressing against his. “You're half drunk. If we do it now, you'll regret it in the morning.”

“I do want it.”

“Guntram, you won't remember a thing tomorrow. Stop now and we will reconsider it later. Come, I'll take you to bed.”

“Let me sleep with you,” Guntram pleaded nearly clutching the Russian's jacket lapels.

“Do you think that's a good idea? I'm not made of stone and someone like you in my bed...”

“Please, I don't want to be alone,” Guntram wailed not truly understanding why his mood had changed so much in a few minutes; from being completely high and optimistic to feel utterly dirty and miserable.

“All right, but don't come to me crying in the morning if you don't like it.”

“I like it very much,” he smiled shamelessly.

‘Two glasses of champagne is his limit. Three is too much.’ Constantin evaluated as he stood up from the couch offering his hand to Guntram, who stood up, faltering a bit, his opened shirt completely forgotten when under normal circumstances he would have been terribly shy about his body.

Constantin surrounded his angel's waist with one arm as he led him toward his own bedroom, quickly typing the entrance code. Guntram was not very coherent when he took a look around the big room, sparsely and modern decorated, with several blurry paintings on the walls.

“Do you think you can go in the bathroom by yourself?”

“I'm not a baby any more! Of course I can go!” Guntram was deeply offended at the suggestion and went there by himself as Constantin sighed. ‘No, alcohol and him do not mix well,’ he thought again as the normally modest boy, always hiding his beauty with those horribly large pullovers was removing his shirt and trousers without caring at all of the show he was putting on... ‘and a very good one, I can't control myself any longer. Perhaps a little taste won't

hurt us.'

Guntram took care of his needs while Constantin searched for some night clothes for him. He washed his face in the marble basin but the haze around his eyes didn't go away, sighing again and muffling a yawn, he stretched his arms and back, like a lazy cat under the sun. He didn't jump when two strong arms grabbed him from behind, and he just lay against the chest that was there, offering his neck to the man slow and languorously caressing his belly, drawing long circles. He closed the eyes to revel in the blessed feeling provided by the lips, softly kissing the side of the neck, the teeth scratching the sensitive skin or playing with his earlobe and the tongue licking his salty sweating, while a strong hand wrapped against his member and with firm moves made him reach his climax in a few minutes.

"Shower," was the only thing Constantin could utter, pushing him slightly toward the stall, closing the glass door behind them.

Under the warm water, Guntram felt himself more alive and relaxed at the same time as he let the water kiss his skin at the same time Constantin massaged his body. Unable to hold himself any longer, the boy turned around and renewed his kisses with more ardour than before, plundering his lover's mouth with all his energy, making the normally reserved Russian moan when the object of his desire for almost a year rose on his tiptoes to have better access to his mouth, tightening his embrace.

Unexpectedly, Guntram felt the need to repeat what Constantin had done for him and his hand took the fully erect member and jerked it with long moves, enjoying as the man groaned in pleasure. Not truly realising what he was doing, he went to his knees and licked the shaft in front of him several times, his lips only playing with the top, sucking it with force while Constantin put his hands over his temples to encourage him to continue with what he was doing. The tangy taste of the precum was strange for Guntram but it wasn't disgusting as he used to believe and in his dazed state he wanted to do more.

Needing to breathe he briefly removed his mouth from the penis but in that moment, Constantin had his own release, staining his face, shocking him a bit, through the dense haze fleeting in front of his eyes.

Fearing that it could have been too much for his angel, Constantin went to his knees and quickly hugged him, while he cleaned his face with tender moves. "That was too much for a first time, my love. Come, let's stop now and go to bed. You're tired and need to rest. We'll speak tomorrow," he said hugging him tighter and turning off the water.

The man took a big towel and dried Guntram as you would do with a small child, looking very carefully every detail in the youth's slender body. Wrapping them both in towels, he led them to his bed where Guntram took silk pyjamas and put them on without saying a word. He went into bed silently, tucking himself under the covers still shocked at what he had done and with whom he had done it. Embarrassed, he turned around in the bed, trying to escape the man and hide the knot he felt constricting his throat and the tears willing to fall from his eyes.

Constantin immediately felt that something was very wrong with his young lover. Had he overdone it? After all, the boy had no experience at all and from a few kisses to oral sex in the shower, was an important jump for someone so prejudiced as him. He carefully placed an arm over the tiny waist and spooned his body against the boy's back. "Are you all right, little one? Have I made you feel uncomfortable?" He said as softly as he could.

"No, you did nothing," the saddest voice he ever heard answered.

"Why are you on the brink of tears?"

"I'm not. You must be thinking that I'm a whore by doing all this," he partly cried.

"You? Never. We both wanted and we both enjoyed this. Believe me, I've seen countless whores in my life and you're the sweetest creature I've ever seen. It's impossible not to love you the minute you see yourself in your eyes. Guntram, don't you ever think about yourself like that because you're a pure soul, nothing that can be stained or corrupted," Constantin intoned softly, almost cursing himself for having bared his soul to the shy boy, ruining his original strategy.

"Do you really think that?"

"Yes, I do. With all my heart."

"This month I couldn't stop thinking about you all the time. I think I'm falling for you, Constantin," He whispered before falling asleep in the Russian's arms.

"I love you, Guntram," he whispered as he petted the head cuddled against his chest. "You have no idea how much I do. I won't let you go away."

Chapter 5

The silken sheets and the comfortable mattress made Guntram realise that he was not in his bed much before he opened his eyes to the new day. Nearly jumping out of the bed from the shock, he remained very quiet to realise several more things. First, it wasn't his room at all, not even the guest room in which he had already slept twice. Second, the decoration was far richer and luxurious than said guest room, as if that could be possible. Third, the pictures on the walls were not abstract as he had believed last night, proving him how trashed he had been, but an incredible Quinquela Martín and a three very delicate Raúl Soldi, if he was correct. Fourth, Constantin was nowhere to be seen or heard in the room or the bathroom. Fifth, the sun was up.

Guntram buried his head in his hands as he remembered all what he had done—drunk but not to the point of the oblivion—with Constantin and how he had enjoyed, contrary to his original idea. “Shit!” he mumbled softly. “I'm in deep shit,” he repeated squeezing his eyes, to escape the images assaulting him and the headache killing him too with the pain and nausea. For a second he wished to undo all what had occurred but he knew it was impossible. He took a deep breath, decided to face whatever could be waiting for him outside that room. Constantin had told him that he didn't want him at all. It was just an adventure.

* * *

“You look more relaxed this morning boss,” Oblomov commented, trying to sound like a little lamb.

“Yes, thank you,” Constantin answered, giving all his attention to the coffee.

“Not as good as you imagined?”

“Better actually. Ivan Ivanovich, I don't ask you such private questions.”

“Did you score at all?” Oblomov gloated, skeptical that his boss had turned into a gentleman who kissed and didn't tell.

“He's off limits for you and the others. Understand it once and forever. Is that clear?” Constantin stated very seriously. “Do I ask you what you do with your wife, Ivan Ivanovich?”

“No, boss. I apologise if my words were offensive to the lad. I had no intention at all,” Oblomov quickly said as he understood the message; the boy was not a simple fling for a night and he was going to be placed over the status of lover. Where? That remained to be seen, but at the moment he was certainly along with the wives and should be respected. Oblomov decided to keep his gaze down as the furious expression dangling in Constantin's eyes was a very bad omen. He took his laptop out of his briefcase and plunged himself into Petrobras latest data.

* * *

Guntram got finally dressed, with his hair combed, after nearly dying of shame when he saw the hickey on the right side of his neck. For the tenth time, he pulled up the collar of his shirt in a vain attempt to hide it but it was useless. After finishing tying up his shoe laces, he asked himself how he was going to face Constantin. 'With the same face you have, what's done is done, Guntram. You screw it up and all by yourself,' his inner voice informed him very clearly. 'You liked it, didn't you? Take it as an experience and go home because the man already told you this is nothing else but an adventure.' “At least I wasn't so drunk that I can't remember a thing, but this will not be something to tell my children about,” he whispered to the floor. “Hormones and alcohol are bad advisers,” 'Let's admit it Guntram, the problem are not your hormones, but the fact that you fear he will send you home and be done with you.' “Shut the fuck up,” Guntram growled at his own conscience. “Fucking superego. I'm not in love with a man!”

Going trough the long corridor from the private stances to the living room and dinning room was a slow torture for Guntram as he didn't remember it to be so long. 'It's not long, it's that you walk slowly, Guntram. Like a dead man walking,' his conscience again told him. Standing in front of the door he fought again with his demons, 'how can Fefo do this every weekend? He fucks and even has breakfast in the morning with the girl. Yeah, that's the key word here. The girl, not the guy who you were giving head the previous night.'

Decided to finish it as soon as possible, he knocked on the door and Constantin's voice only said something in Russian. Hoping that the phrase would be the equivalent of a “come in”, Guntram opened the door and entered the room where Constantin and Oblomov were sitting, still having breakfast and obviously in the middle of a

business meeting.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Constantin. I just wanted to say good-bye. I go home now," Guntram spoke mortified. "Thank you for the book."

"Come, sit and have breakfast. I should get used to using English more. You don't understand Russian at all."

"No, please. I don't want to importunate you. You're working. Good-bye."

"All right. Come back at around five, Guntram."

Guntram only nodded, willing to leave the room more than anything in his life, nearly tumbling with his feet in his haste to disappear.

"I've seen shy people, but this one takes the big prize," Oblomov chuckled visibly entertained at the bad time the boy seemed to have.

"Let him be, Ivan Ivanovich," Constantin grunted, still crossed that his angel had refused a direct invitation to stay once more. Tell Irina to remind him to be here at five."

"Boss, with all due respect, this one will not take orders from you. You have already seen it. Artists are temperamental and whimsical."

"Not the real ones. He just needs to be tamed. That's all. He's only nineteen."

"That's robbing the cradle boss," Oblomov laughed.

* * *

Guntram hoped to evade George, his more than intruding neighbour, but it was impossible. At 1:00, the man was standing in front of his door while he was checking some CV's model in his old laptop.

"Well, look here's the party boy!" He sauntered, entering like a whirlwind in his small flat, the dog barking behind him and running to jump into Guntram's untouched bed.

"I did nothing!" Guntram answered very fast.

"Yesterday was your birthday, wasn't it? I waited for you with a cake, all excuses are good for a monster calorie intake, but you never showed up."

"Sorry, I didn't know it. I was..."

"At your own party, it seems," George chortled. "By the look of your neck, it was quite a party, boy," he playfully added, enjoying the words and the blush creeping in Guntram's cheeks.

"Mosquito bite."

"Child, you have so much to learn to proficiently lie to me. That's a love bite and made by a man, if I might say," he sauntered.

"Are you in the CSI now?" Guntram yelled, losing his politeness for the first time since they had known each other.

"Oops, I hit very close. Did you blow the candles too?"

"Fuck you!"

"Was the cream not to your taste?" George said, this time seriously. "Don't take it on me."

"I'm sorry, George. I'm a total yokel. I didn't mean to yell at you," Guntram apologised regretting his harsh words toward a man who had always been very generous and kind to him.

"No, just shout me vulgarly," he snorted. "Come on, you can tell papa George what you have been doing because you didn't sleep here. I won't judge you, mostly because I have no stones left to cast."

"You were right," Guntram whispered, sitting in front of his small table and silently inviting George to do the same. The man left the cake he had in the hands and sat.

"It looks like confession time, Guti."

"It is."

"Then, I'll make some tea for us and serve the cake. Things don't look so dramatic in front of a cup of tea," he said while he stood up and dashed to the kitchenette to boil the water, get two mugs left over from the "Colombian Coffee" promotion. George made a face at the cheap brand for tea, but let it go as he put one teabag in each cup.

"So you can tell your big sins to Uncle George. School parties can be very wild. I remember when I was in..."

"It was no one from the school, and you're right. It was a man. A real man."

"You were always telling me that you liked girls, a real pity if you want to know. Who was it? A teacher from the University? A customer from that sorry place you were working?"

"The later," Guntram confessed starting to feel very uncomfortable and willing to jump inside of the steaming tea cup.

"Dr. Zhivago?" George nearly shouted, but Guntram only blushed more, rowing the cup with his spoon. "Shit! Well, my boy, you have an excellent taste if you allow me to say so. That guy is really hot with those dark eyes and long eyelashes. The accent also helps too... Wait a minute. Was he not back in Russia?"

"I guess so. He came here for my birthday, we had champagne, too much and one thing led to the next and before I knew I was in the shower doing you know what. Well, you know better than I," Guntram spat the words very nervously.

"No, I don't know. I wasn't there. Pity. The guy flew from Russia just to be on your birthday? Shit Guntram! I was glad if one of my boyfriends was sending me a postcard or giving me a phone call!"

"That's because your date of birth is Top Secret for everyone who knows you."

"Don't change the subject. You won't escape from me. All right, you were doing "what I know about" with him... Did you like it?"

"Yes, very but it's not supposed to be so!"

"How's supposed to be? Don't tell me you're into masochism and need to have it bad!"

"NO, no, no... It's just I don't know why I did it. At the moment it seemed a great idea and then, I don't know, it just hit me that I only knew him for a few days and there I was sucking him like..."

"Only oral sex? Are you making such a big deal for a little oral sex? I was thinking that you have done much more."

"Well, for me it was much more! I've done nothing with anyone ever before!" Guntram shouted.

"YOU DID NOTHING BEFORE?" The coiffeur yelled incredulously with Lola howling in unison.

"My landlady didn't hear you George. Can you shout a bit louder? No, I'm a fucking, freaky virgin with men."

"You were in a boarding school, Guntram."

"I did nothing there. It wasn't appealing at that time. Besides, all my friends were more into getting the poor girls in the neighbourhood than banging each other. You read too many novels about boarding schools. Nothing glamorous or sexy. Just a bunch of smelly teenagers fighting to get the biggest piece of meat in the canteen."

"All right, after you have destroyed one of my fantasies, tell me what have you been doing."

"I slept with Constantin, the Russian. In his bed."

"Good choice, the bed I mean. Tables are overestimated and standing is not so great. You get cramps in the morning."

"George! I've just told you I slept with a man!"

"Do you want a medal or what? I offered to hook you up with several of my friends, Guntram. Pedro is absolutely crazy about you and he's only thirty years old..."

"This was never supposed to happen! He told me it was just an adventure. I behaved like a whore and he won't like me ever again!"

"What did you exactly do?"

"We kissed on the sofa and then had oral sex in the shower. We slept together in the bed."

"Only that? That's the minimum you get on a date nowadays."

"Excuse me if I didn't do all whatever you are supposed to do! I slept in the same bed with him!"

"All right, you're not going to tell the whole story. What happened in the morning. What did he say?"

"Have breakfast with me. I refused and then he said come back at five. I'm not going."

"Guntram, the doctor dropped you on your head when you were born... And then, you fell from a tree several times. Daily, I daresay. He asked you to stay and you left; then he tells you to come back and you don't want... and you come crying to me because he only wants an adventure with you? Dear, you're behaving like the slut here. Some sex and you run in the morning? You got your fun and disappear without an explanation?"

"He does not want me around!"

"And invites you for later? Normally, what you get is one croissant, some orange juice, a greasy coffee and an 'I'll call you later', line. Wash yourself, wear something nice, not those rags you like so much. Honestly you were looking much better in the waiter's uniform. No, better I'll choose something for you."

"I don't know if I want to go."

"Do you like him?"

"I don't know. It was fun what we did but it was not as extraordinary as people say it is. I like him and I was thinking a lot on him over the past month. Not in that way George!" Guntram added when the man lifted an eyebrow.

"Go back to him today at five and see what happens. Perhaps you love him or perhaps not. There's only one way to know and that's by experiencing it. Forget all the shit you got over the years about being gay is wrong! See if you like it or not. If you don't, go away, but never let my boy, that other people tell you what is best for you! Choose your own path! Make a stand like a real man, not like one of those idiots you have for friends!"

"It's too much for me!"

"Because he's a man? Because your landlady will think that you're a faggot? Who cares? I fought with my whole family when I left my home and moved from Mendoza. I formed a new family here with my friends and much better than the one I used to have. Don't be afraid of living your life fully. If you don't do it, you will spend the rest of your life hiding in a corner and wondering what it could have been. Live for yourself, not for the others."

"I don't know," Guntram said very confused.

"You're clueless, but it's part of your charm, dear. You live in another planet most of the time. Pisces, no doubt."

"I'm Libra."

"The ascendant is what matters for the personality and you must be Pisces. All of them truly adorable, but crazy as cuckoos. I couldn't live with one of them. I need a decided Leo, an Aries, a Capricorn or a Sagittarius, if you want some laughter in your life. Cancer is too dull and Scorpio is dangerous. Speaking of I'm overseeing your dressing today. Leave the Che Guevara fan look out of the picture. It's hideous for a well educated man as the Dr. Zhivago."

"He told me her mother was the daughter of an immigrant from the Revolution but his father had a position by the Communist Party in Georgia... or was it Odessa? He studied chemistry and engineering at the Moscow University."

"So we bathe you in addition. Would love to trim your hair too."

"George! I know how to dress posh! Do you remember where I spent most of my life?"

"Yes, but the minute you saw the PCR guys you asked them about their tailor! Lord, what a waste! A good looking boy like you wearing a llama infested pullover with cargo pants! Burberry for you dear and nothing else. Honestly, you and your 'I'm the Rebel' look reminds me of a chicken with a bear's skin. It just doesn't fit you!"

"I still don't know, George."

"Go and shower while you think about it. Don't dry your hair, I'm trimming it; you're an offence to my profession and I can't stand it any longer. Do you have a light blue pullover? That makes your eyes much bigger and blue, almost like a lemur. Don't look at me as if I were an alien. Rich people pays me a lot for my advice and if I can get that vulgar tart on TV look like a lady, I can fix you in no time."

Uncertain of his next course of action, Guntram rose from the table, his cake untouched and went to his bathroom to shower.

* * *

George was definitively pleased with his work as his little boy looked perfectly elegant and well groomed with his clothes and haircut. 'I totally side with Pedro's opinion that he's a true prince with the manners of one. He has the real courtesy of them and not a single move is faked. Poor man, he's totally in love of him and now a Russian steals him away!'

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me to the disco? I'll get you a good man in no time, Guntram."

"NO! This is your idea and I'm not sure it's good. I'll go home."

"This is your flat, boy. Don't be so nervous, you look great, are intelligent, talented and the man already eats from your hand."

I don't know if this is what I want, George. He only wants an adventure with me and I don't know if I'm into men at all!"

"Denial phase it's called. Go and see, if you don't like it, you come home and cry on my shoulder. If you like it, you send me a postcard for my birthday from wherever you are."

“What if I like it?”

“Enjoy your dinner or whatever you're going to do, Guntram. Stop thinking so much; it wrinkles you. Bye bye,” George finished the conversation before the boy would think it over once more and hide in his closet. 'It's hard but he needs a push in the right direction, or we will be here till midnight,' the coiffeur thought before steering Guntram out of the flat and putting some money in his jacket pocket. “Here, for the taxi if you don't like it. Don't take a bus in the middle of the night, boy.”

“George...”

“Have fun!” He said before closing the door in his face.

Guntram was still undecided. Much to his chagrin he had enjoyed what he had done with Constantin the previous night but something inside him was telling that it was wrong. “Sinful,” as he had told the man, but he wanted more. 'Father Patricio will hit me with his Bible tomorrow. Why am I going at all? It's the perfect opportunity to disappear. I don't show up and he feels insulted and leaves me alone.' Guntram stood in the bus line, getting some looks from a group of young girls, no more than sixteen, dressed with their finest probably on their way to the cinema. After getting several protruding looks from them, he had to divert his gaze when one of them winked at him, making him blush while the others girls roared with evil laughter at their exchange. Although he was first in the line, he automatically moved away to let them enter first on the bus, making them laugh at him even louder. “Don't bother boy, those are not ladies,” a man in his forties mumbled behind him.

Mind-absently he threw the coins in the machine and went as far as possible from the girls as they were laughing and commenting on his look in a rather vulgar way. 'No wonder Fefo tells me they're only good for one thing. Those could never be the mother of your children,' he thought. 'Wait a minute, what am I doing? I want to have children and I'm going to a man's bed? Shit, I'm totally crazy! I want to be an accountant, marry and have babies, three or four. I want a family with a good woman. I don't want to be a painter or live with a man who buys a Picasso like other men buy a t-shirt! I go home now, but I should leave a note at least. He came all the way from Venezuela for my birthday. I can't stand him up again.'

Determined more than ever, he descended from the bus at his stop and with quick step he crossed the street and asked the doorman if he had some paper to leave a note for the owner of the fourteenth floor penthouse.

“Certainly, sir,” the man said to the obviously rich boy standing in front of him.

“Good evening, sir. I'm Yuri, I drove you home last time you were here. Mr. Repin waits for you,” a tall blond man said as he was busy writing.

“I'm not staying...”

“Mr. Repin does not like to be kept waiting, sir,” the man said firmly, taking Guntram by the elbow and dragging him toward the private elevator. Unsure that the boy would reach the fourteenth floor, he entered in the cabin just to be on the safe side, unmoved by the furious looks he was receiving from the youth. 'You need more than that to make me flinch, boy. He's a little dove, exactly as Ivan Ivanovich told us. Harmless and good looking. We might have hit the jackpot with this one. I'm sick of disposing of brats.'

“This way sir,” he ordered the minute they both entered in the large parlour. “Mr. Repin waits for you on the terrace. He cleared his agenda for you,” Yuri added slightly rising an eyebrow so the boy would understand and behave.

“I wasn't planning to stay.”

“Explain it to him,” Yuri answered curtly, thinking that his hopes of an easier life under his superior had just been crushed. He knocked on the glass door and Constantin's voice said something in Russian. He opened the door and pushed the boy in, closing it before the lad could escape.

“Hello Guntram, you're on time. I truly hate tardiness. It's a very bad habit this country has,” Constantin greeted him rising from his chair in front of a table disposed for tea.

“Hello Constantin. I just wanted to tell you that I will not stay today. I'm sorry,” Guntram blurted at full speed.

“May I ask your reasons?”

“I want to have children,” Guntram answered firmly. “I will not get them here.”

“Guntram my dear, I have met many artists in my life and listened to the most absurd answers from them, but today your own sentence exceeds anything I've heard so far,” Constantin intoned, wondering if the boy had been using some products from a very low quality, typical from the slum he loved so much to go to. 'I have to get him out of there tomorrow. His Mother Theresa days are over. He can send them a check if he wants. At least, he looks polished.'

"I can't have a relationship with you. I want to marry and have children, three. With you, it would be impossible."

'No, he's not high, just adorably crazy.' Constantin sighed. "Guntram, as I told you I'm not planning a long term relationship with you. I've told you I'm not the commitment type of person. My boyfriends never lasted more than a few months. I get bored of them very easily and frankly they have no talent at all. I go to bed with them because they have some feature that could be entertaining. I warned you that any kind of relationship we might have it would be under my conditions. I also told you that you were the type for long term relationships and that in the next morning you would be crying in my bed the minute I leave it," Constantin said, noticing that Guntram was thinking on him as a serious prospect.

"I can't continue. It wouldn't be fair for both of us."

"Please, do sit down and let's discuss this as two adults not like two teenagers shouting at each other," Constantin sighed, regaining his seat and showing Guntram where he should sit, in front of him. "Tea? I can order a coffee if you prefer it."

"Tea is fine," Guntram answered feeling already very embarrassed that he had been so rude to the man and he was behaving so civil. He took the cup from his hand and immediately glued his eyes to the painted flowers in the china.

'Just a little grooming and he looks fantastic,' Constantin briefly thought before choosing his strategy for the game. "Are you nervous about last night? Are you uncomfortable to be here?"

"No," Guntram whispered.

"Perhaps I should have not taken advantage of your state but it was impossible for any man to resist you. I truly enjoyed it and the least I want in this world is to hurt you, Guntram."

"I don't know if I can do what you want. You go to bed with me, I remember I insisted upon it, I was not so drunk, but then you say you don't want me. I don't know if I'm into this at all."

"Consider what happened last night as a learning experience and forget it. You did nothing wrong and we both enjoyed," Constantin shrugged not missing the flash of sadness going through Guntram's eyes. "Is it not what you wanted to hear?"

"Not really," Guntram admitted in a blink.

"Do you want me to tell you that this is the beginning of a long term relationship; that we are going to grow older together; that I'll love you till the end of time so you can drop your plans for the rest of your life? I can't and I don't want to lie to you. There's no certainty in this life Guntram. People change and they do it faster than you think."

"You're right, Constantin. I should go now."

"Do you love me? You said something in that direction last night."

"I don't know. I never had a girlfriend before. I cannot consider you as one of my friends... When you were away, I was waiting for your letters anxiously, but this could be because you're the first person to treat me like an adult and you listen to me."

"I enjoy your company very much too. I long for it also. We could try it, but I can't guarantee that it will be forever. You have to keep me interested as I lose interest very easily. What we might have could be bad for you in the future. Some people fall in love for life, some others don't have such fortune."

"I understand."

"No, you don't Guntram. If we decide to be together, I understand that I can't ask from you what I'm certain that I can't give you. If you want to marry and have children, I can't forbid it as it would be a shame that such beauty would be lost. I think that you're still too young to consider to have a wife or children, but it's your life."

"I'm not going to marry tomorrow. I don't even have a girlfriend or one interested in me. I couldn't support one", Guntram protested starting to feel dizzy and confused about the conversation. "I'm only saying that I want to have a family in the future."

"And I'm telling you that you have no future with me. What you have to decide is if you want an adventure with me. It could last a few weeks, months, years or a lifetime. Nobody can be certain about that. To love is to risk. I'm only being honest with you about my character and past. I was never in love of anyone and that's true. I liked or desired many, but I never experienced the feeling of waking up every morning thinking in that special person or sacrificing myself for his well being," Constantin explained with a hint of sorrow in his voice, provoking a mix of feelings in Guntram ranging from sympathy to sadness for the man baring his soul in front of him.

"I don't know what love means too. I don't know what commitment is; I had no one close in my life since

I was seven,” he confessed with a soft voice, his hand reaching Constantin's in a childish attempt to soothe his pain.

The Russian held the small hand for a long time while he bided his time to answer Guntram's words. He sighed, quickly checking if he had the boy's attention and he found his blue eyes dangling from every word coming from his mouth. 'He's truly naïve and uncorrupted, his soul is more beautiful than his face. He has to be mine only.'

“Guntram dear, I want to try to start something with you but I'm afraid to ruin it. I'm forty-two years old and I have lived a very complex life, working all the time with difficult people and doing many things I'm not proud of. You want some guarantees from me that I cannot grant you because they're not in my nature. I want to start something with you but I will not change my ways. You will have to accept me just as I'm.”

“I'm very confused about you.”

“To start a relationship is never easy nor straightforward. The ‘they lived happily ever after’ doesn't exist, like this ‘love at first sight’ theory. You like a person and from there you get along or not; you love him or not, but it's not something that appears overnight. It's crazy to think that you will see someone and in two days and a couple of dinners you will decide to spend your life with this person regardless of the gender.”

“You're right, Constantin,” Guntram mumbled more at loss than before not knowing from where the sadness engulfing him had come from.

“I think that you're very beautiful and I would love to start something with you, but I'm sure that you will feel very disappointed if we don't work out at all. Your talent as an artist already makes you precious for me and I don't want to be the cause for you to stop working or progressing. You're starting your life, I'm in the middle of it therefore our priorities are not the same. You want to build, I want to preserve what I have. You're building your personality and I have a lot of personality,” he laughed. “Too much according to my partners and competitors.”

“I don't know what I want any longer.”

“Make no plans for the future; take things as they come. Know only your priorities because life will move you at random. You can't fight fate or fortune. You have a talent for something—and I realised it much before I knew who you were, so you can't tell that my opinion is biased—and that's much more than many people start with in life. Two art dealers agree with me. Follow your instincts for once and don't think things over because finally you'll achieve nothing. Take this opportunity I'm offering and this will be independently of what happens on a personal level between us, and see how you do.”

“Maybe I should take my chances with you...”

“Exactly, if you don't like it, tell it to me and we split, no regrets and no shouts. I promise to tell you the minute I'm not interested in you any longer. I don't want lies between us.”

“I don't know what to do next. I would like to be friends with you but I don't know what to say or do.”

“Start by finishing your tea. It must be cold by now,” Constantin replied, pleased that the boy had accepted his conditions and rules. Oblomov was right: ordering him is useless; a soft leading and he goes everywhere you want. “Let's do not rush things between us. No one is pressing us to do anything. Take your time to discover me and explore yourself. Rushing things is never good and patience is a virtue.”

Guntram never expected that the Russian would leave his chair, walked around the table and kissed him softly on the lips without a previous warning. He stood there, frozen for a moment as the kiss slowly melted his resistance. Constantin's hand caressing his cheek gave him the required boldness to return the kiss and putting his arms around the man's neck, totally lost in the ministrations he was receiving. He almost yelped when the Russian forced him to stand and his arms crushed his waist pulling him against his chest, feeling like two iron bars effectively trapping him.

“Stay here with me, don't go home. I leave in two days,” Constantin whispered in the blond's ear as he nibbled the earlobe, making him shudder. 'So inexperienced, it's wonderful'. “You can stay in the guest room or in my bed if you want.”

“I don't know.”

“We won't repeat yesterday's exercise if that's your main concern. You were drunk and we both need to know each other before we take things one step further. You have to trust me as this is the basis for any relationship, Guntram. Tonight, I have some business meetings and a dinner with the locals, but I would like to know that you're here and find you here upon my return.”

After pondering for a while, Guntram answered; “yes, I'll stay if you want,” just to be silenced by another devastating kiss. Still dazed his mind could only register the “I'll tell Carlos, the butler to arrange everything. I'm afraid you will have to dine alone tonight, but tomorrow we can be together.

* * *

"Well, Yuri Alexandrevich and you owe me \$500," a more than satisfied Oblomov told Zakharov's henchman. "The boy agreed to stay here and sleep with the boss."

"No way!" An incredulous Boris Gregorevich shouted. "I read the note he was writing and he was sending the boss to hell!"

"Never underestimate the boss, Boris Gregorevich. You owe me also money now."

"I don't mind paying this one, Ivan Ivanovich. Is the boy as good as you say? He looks very well from the distance," a tall man smirked while he put some papers back in his briefcase.

"He's off limits for all of us. Respect him or you'll be in troubles," Oblomov barked very seriously. "Boss took a lot of effort to get this one."

"Boss saved almost two million dollars for one like him," Yuri smirked. "With such face, body and education, he should reach top prices."

"You're wrong; one like him, speaking three languages, well educated, good looking, real blond goes to the Middle East or Asia where they can afford to pay more; 3.4 million, I would say," Boris evaluated. "He's very exotic, if you ask me, although a little old."

"Not all of us want to change diapers and clean noses, Boris Gregorevich," Oblomov huffed. "Be quiet if you don't want to see the boss furious with you. I'm warning all of you, no deals around him, speak Russian only if you have to. He's convinced that we all are into the oil and transport business and are serious businessmen from Russia."

The men laughed at the last sentence. "Boss says that you have to fix this problem with the people in that slum he likes to help. He should never set a foot in there ever again, is that clear?"

"Incredible, I have to kick the Mother Theresa out," Yuri smirked. "The boys will visit the man in charge there and he will ban the boy. Should we take care of the priest too?"

"No, we don't want to attract any kind of attention. This is the Order's territory and we are here only as investors, nothing else. They invited us as they think this could be a good opportunity for all of us."

"Since when is Lintorff generous? He's after something big this time."

"He's just sharing this land. He knows he can't hold it all by himself and needs some allies here. Some cartels start to revolt and disobey him. He needs us and he has had a good working relationship with the boss for the past twelve years."

"I hope boss knows where he's getting into. Lintorff respects nothing. If he has not released his hounds on 'his troublesome lambs,' it's because he expects to win something from us or make us clean his backyard for him. Remember 1989 when he had the uprising," Boris Gregorevich huffed, visibly upset at the memory.

"We only helped with the cleaning and look, Petrom was handed on a silver tray to us. Give me more of those deals. He's only planning to overthrow the local government to make the Americans suffer a bit and get some good investment opportunities for all of us. He can't do it too openly, but many of his 'brothers' are circling around this country like the hungry wolves they're. We have to get the gold mines concessions before the Americans do it. This capital flight he has started two weeks ago will finish them in a few months. The local president is a useless prick and the opposition is bidding his time to throw him out. All the local industries are dying to make a default to save their companies from their huge debts in dollars and will support it."

"Bad payers are bad for the business Ivan Ivanovich. You know it well."

"Boris, my friend, don't think for a minute that Lintorff will not make more money out of this little country than what he might lose in the upfront. He adores playing the victim. Von Kleist told me that he bought five miserable million dollars in bonds to show his support for the local government and the idiots congratulated themselves for getting a pat in the head!"

"Boss should be careful; he's dangerous as enemy and worst as friend. A real demon."

"I know him well, Boris Gregorevich. The only good thing you can say about him is that he never attacks you unless you provoke him. Remember that simple rule, and you'll be fine. The little lamb stays for dinner. Tell it to the maid and she should prepare his room."

* * *

Constantin was pleased as the dinner had not been a total waste of his precious time. He and Oblomov had finally wrapped up the price for the forty-five years concession on the gold mines in the South with the governor's henchman and the State Secretary, leaving the Americans out of the game. Ivan had done his part very well

threatening to leave the negotiation table when they wanted to increase their commissions once more. Finally, they had settled for a miserable percentage on the estimated volume. "Their prospections were outdated, wrong and they had no idea about the mining business," Oblomov was telling him in the car. "Perhaps these politicians should hire the seven dwarfs from Snow White as advisers and would get a better picture than what they have now. Poor Zakharov, to retire in this country! At least, people are nice if you don't expect much of them."

Speaking directly with the governor's henchman had been more profitable than losing his time with that stupid woman and her idiotic Senator friends. 'No, I endured her and the brat she has for son, just to get my angel. I have him now, so I can send them to Hell.'

The transport business was dead as it needed a huge investment just to turn it into something decent and the unions were impossible to deal with. No, I'll try my luck with oil and some farming after the collapse.'

"Boss, do you need me?" Oblomov took him out of his reverie.

"No, you can go away. Be back tomorrow evening," he chuckled.

"I want to check some of our associates, those resenting Lintorff. They want to use our people in the export business as we control the harbours in southern Spain."

"Ivan, I don't want troubles with him. If the Colombians and Mexicans want to expand their business, they should start to respect territories. Not a single gram in our docks that has not been approved by the Order. We have a non aggression pact since 1991 and I'm not going to break it."

"They want some equipment from us."

"They can shop by us, but inform Mladic or Pavicevic in advance. They're quite jealous."

"I don't trust Lintorff. He's after something boss."

"I'm sure of it but he has not shown his game so far, so we stay put. Perhaps he's only putting his "little lambs" back in fold. I heard the people in Medellín refused to pay their share and look what happened to them. Maybe the others need a reminder of their previous bosses' fate."

"Lintorff and his people are only offering advice and that smells fishy. They sold everything they had in this country; stocks, bonds, industry."

"To buy it back cheaper! Don't you know him already? He's into a bucolic phase so to speak; he wants lands and agribusiness. His man, Landau told me so and showed me all the field studies they have done over the past months. They're even buying lands in the judicial auctions. Germans are always crazy to get a piece of land! He will not go after the oil or mining. He refuses to buy a bank here! The one who's having a hard time is Meyer as head in Sao Paulo because Lintorff's shopping list there is larger than life, Ivan."

"Why does he need us?"

"To stop the Americans; snitch all what the Colombians tell you or buy by us and keep his profile low. He can't take it all and that's something I admire in him; he knows perfectly well his limits and is not greedy."

* * *

Constantin changed into his pyjamas somewhat disappointed that Guntram was not sleeping in his bed. 'Probably he's in own one, still debating if that's a good idea at all,' he chuckled while he went to check on his angel, soundly asleep in his bed.

The dim light coming from the corridor showed well his features and Constantin had to fight not to fall into a trance at watching them. 'So beautiful and tender, almost as if someone would have created him especially for me. He's all mine.' Very carefully the man moved the covers away and joined the boy in the bed, spooning his body against the slender back.

Guntram woke up when someone touched him but he relaxed when he saw it was Constantin. "It's you. I'm sorry I didn't wait for you," he whispered as his hand took the Russian's hand and pressed it against his chest.

"Go back to sleep. I didn't want to wake you up. It's very late."

"Everything fine?"

"Yes, my dear. Everything is fine now."

Chapter 6

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 17th 2001.

I still can't believe that I'm here. On my way to London to see Constantin. The last time I saw him was around my birthday and then we only exchange e-mails or spoke twice in the phone; once in mid November to convince me to come earlier to Europe, but I didn't want because I wanted to finish the term at the University and stay with the children at Father Patricio's school for as long as I could. Unfortunately, the boss there, Cucho, decided to throw out all "outsiders" and only let the school teachers and the priest. Who knows what he's doing in the moment as he doesn't want witnesses. As if I would have spoken about his deals. Also Maria, the leader of the Peronist Party didn't want us there as we were "competition" against her. As if a few Church volunteers would rob her from her precious votes! I still remember the time when they were giving only one shoe to the children so their parents will vote that party and getting the other if they were getting the amount of expected votes. It was much worse when they gave the school material for the photo and took it away, not even an hour later. I truly despise those politicians! If you're not with them and do part of what you get from your unemployment money, you're out and they make your life miserable.

The second time Constantin called me was a few days ago, on the twelfth, to order me (literally) to take a plane with his man, Mikhail Massaiev to London. I tried to reason with him telling him that I still had to sit for my tests, but he didn't want to hear anything. "You'll present them in March, Guntram. I want that you come to England as latest as the seventeenth.

"Constantin, I can't drop everything like that! We agreed that I would go in January!" I protested but he's like a rock.

"You said that you wanted to come in January and I said that I would consider it. One of my men, Mikhail Massaiev will pick you up in two days. Be ready or you can forget all what I told you. Remember what we spoke about in October."

"Be reasonable, Constantin! You know I'm very keen on you, but this is too much!"

"Guntram, I thought you loved me as you told me several times, but your refusal proves me that you're not willing to commit yourself to me. Have I ever done something against your wishes? Did I ever do something to betray your trust?"

"Constantin, it has nothing to do with you! I just need some time to organize the things here! You know I want to try it!

"Then, come here with Mikhail. He will take care of everything."

"I have a Macroeconomics test on the fifteenth!"

"You can use the sixteenth to pack and gather your papers. You take the plane on the seventeenth and that's final Guntram."

"Constantin..."

"Guntram, you're delaying things as usual. We said December and now you try to shift it to January. Enough is enough. Why do you want to stay there?"

"All right, I'll come. You win," I replied because I didn't want to answer his question.

"Angel, your indecision is a slow torture for me. One day you jump to my neck, tell hundreds of love words and on the next you pour a bucket of cold water over my head. We agreed that we would be always truthful to each other. If you don't love me any more or have second thoughts about us then, say it to me and we will continue as friends. No ill regrets between us."

"Constantin, you know it's not like that. I trust you with all my heart! You're the first decent person I've met in my life..."

"Why do you always have an excuse?"

"I'm confused," I confessed finally. "It's too big for me."

"Why? It's only coming to London for the holidays and then, you go with Mikhail to Italy. I don't know if I could be able to join you there. We will meet again in Paris, around the end of March. If you're afraid of the intimacy, rest assured that the house is big enough so we can lead separate lives. Do you prefer to be in a hotel, my

angel?"

"No, it's not that! I like being with you! It's just..."

"Just?"

"I'm not sure that I would meet your expectations," I blurted and a long silence was over the phone. I held my breath because I had confessed what a dork I am.

"Guntram, stop reading books or asking your school friends for sexual advice, or at least, ask to those who know," he retorted very dryly. "My own experiences with you had been excellent so far."

"How do you know it?" I asked mortified, well, dead of shame.

"Because I know you and I can well imagine the scene. You asking your best friend what he knows about gay sex and he telling you that it's demeaning, that you're going to be permanently the passive subject; that you will end your days performing oral sex to decrepit old men in public WC or that you'll catch AIDS and suffer a horrible death."

More or less what Fefo told me without the passive subject part.

"Let's do not forget the part when you start to speak like a woman, dress in funny costumes and attend the gay parade and fight with a drag queen over a headpiece made of parrot feathers."

I gulped. "I'm not going to wear feathers," I said almost inaudibly.

"Dear, nothing is as they tell. There are many myths around. We both enjoyed our time together and why shouldn't it be like that any longer?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly, you don't know. Let me show it to you. If you don't like it, we stop. We both want to have a good time together, right?"

"Yes, Constantin. You're right. I'll go."

"Excellent. Mikhail Petrovich will see you on the fourteenth and accompany you to London. We'll see each other on the 18th or 19th."

Just like that, he hung up on me.

Exactly as announced, the famous Mikhail Petrovich was at my doorstep on the 14th at 10:30 in the morning. He's not a bad guy. Very tall and big, square jaw and terribly serious. I think he might be around his fifties or maybe more, but I'm not sure. Grey eyes and chestnut short hair; informally dressed, as he was coming to the Pampas. First, I was intimidated by his presence and the fact that I only had some tea and cookies to offer. He said nothing and drank it without making a single remark. He looks very aristocratic if you ask me. He wanted to know about my education, beliefs, religion, the places I want to visit in Italy, if I speak another language besides Spanish, English and French (I'm not a bloody parrot!)

Finally, he wanted to check on the things I was planning to take to London, while I wanted to get rid of him so I could study some more. I think he realised and offered to leave me alone, as he "had seen me long enough to know what was suitable for you" and he would see me again, on the sixteenth at 9 a.m. at his hotel; the Alvear Palace as the good shops were nearby

Needless to say, I was at 9 a.m. on the sixteenth, at the hotel's lobby where he was already waiting for me, dressed in a good summer suit when the outside temperature was announced to be over 30° C.

"You're punctual. That's a sign of good breeding. Did you have breakfast?"

"I drank some tea in the morning, sir," I replied exactly as I was doing when the Headmaster was around.

"We will take something light then. My table must be ready."

I was glad to be dressed with the "job interview clothes" because here they will not appreciate the "Public University student's look" and his face at seeing my llama decorated sweater was a good enough to convince me to drop it for the time being. It was surprising to find so many silver cutlery around the table. The maître here sucks if he can't distinguish breakfast from lunch and throws everything they have around a mountain of dishes piled up in front of you. I did my best to hide my annoyance at such gap of etiquette. I mean, they charge you crazy prices and can't they afford to pay some protocol lessons to the one in charge of the monkeys' army? I took what I needed once the black bird served some omelette on a dish (on top of the other three) I noticed a brief smile from the Russian and he made a discreet sign to one of the butlers, who quickly reorganized the table, this time properly.

"I understand you're part of the Guttenberg Sachsen family. Do you have any contact with them?"

"I believe my grandmother was named Guttenberg Sachsen and that's my second last name. I generally don't use it as I know no one from that family."

"Yes, if I were a de Lisle, I wouldn't bother to use it. It's enough to carry six hundred years of French history on my shoulders. Your grandfather was the Vicomte de Marignac, wasn't he?"

My father never said anything about my family at all. He only spoke about my mother and all this aristocratic jumble seems very far fetched for me. I mean, for some unexplainable reason people love to hear that you were born with "blue blood". "I don't think so, sir. My father never mentioned anything in that sense. I was very young when he passed away and I had no other living relatives left according to my legal tutor."

"Very well, have you decided what you would like to visit in Italy? I will be your mentor there."

Mentor? He looks like an elegant tank, not like a professor. I stared at him.

"Mr. Repin showed me part of your work and told me about your interests in Renaissance painting. I suggest that we stay in the north part of the country."

"As you wish, sir."

"You may call me by my first name, Guntram. We are going to travel together. My family was also living in France for a long time after the Revolution. My mother was a good friend of Mr. Repin's mother and she helped us when my father died in the Indochina War and I was a small child. I made career in the French Army and in the Foreign Service, stationed in Moscow till I quit after the fall of communism. Since then, I work for Mr. Repin."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. It was a long time ago," he said affably. "We will take a British Airways flight, tomorrow at 3:00. It arrives early in the morning. I have noticed that you're not well prepared for the cold weather. We need to get something for you today before you catch your death in Heathrow."

"I have a jacket, sir. Mikhail, I mean."

"It's very light in my opinion. There are some stores around."

"I'm afraid I cannot afford them."

"It's an advance from your scholarship, Guntram. I'm afraid that what you were wearing yesterday is fine for here but totally inadequate for Kensington or Belgravia. I understand that Mr. Repin wants to introduce you to several Art dealers. There's one very interested in that series of nudes painted on newspapers. He has several customers for them and offers £6,500 for the whole lot."

"Excuse me? Those were for the trash!"

"I admit that your choice of support material is eccentric, but after they were well framed, they looked very well in the gallery and arose some interest. In my opinion, £6,500 is a low price considering that you're only obtaining £250 per each painting and I've heard the marchand is offering them for £500 a piece, and he has sold several."

"I can't believe it," I whispered and he smiled at me.

"That's the reaction Mr. Repin told me to expect from you Guntram. They're very nice and the sanguine is difficult to master properly, contrary to popular belief."

"It's the cheapest, sir."

"Who was the model?"

"No one I know. A dancer in Plaza Francia. I sketched her from live on the newspaper I had that day and later made the drawings at home. Mr. Repin bought the box in which they were in for 50 pesos. He should keep the money because it's his."

"All right, we will not speak about it any more. We will get you something more appropriate for the first week on that money. Mr. Repin still jokes that if he would have known that he was going to make money so easily with you, he would have forced you to go into his plane with a gun," Mikhail told me very seriously and I laughed at the ludicrous idea.

After breakfast he took me to "Rhodes", the shop where Federico's father buys, well known for importing fancy things from Armani, Hermès or Burberry's. The salesman had already ready a set of clothes, from underwear to jacket and shoes in my size and the only thing I could do was decide if I liked it or not. I nearly had a heart attack when I saw the tag in one of the morning tweed jackets allegedly "on sale" A lot of people could eat with that. I got a monstrous coat and I tried to protest that it was too thick, but Mikhail showed with one look that several years at an embassy didn't cure him from his military years. He ordered very sharply the salesman to make the adjustments for the three trousers, two jackets and coat and send everything to his hotel to have it cleaned for tomorrow. Surprisingly, he didn't complain at all and promised to have everything ready at 4:00.

"A tailor would be much better but we have no time for that. We will see in London."

"Now, Mikhail, tell us. How's he?" A big Russian asked, dying to know.

"Is he worth it? Yuri told me he's over 2.7 millions."

"It seems our midwives are drinking together, are you comfortable, girls?" Massaiev joked as he took a chair around the big table in the pristine kitchen. "Give me a shot at least. I was out in the snow, baby sitting a child and then, putting him in his room. Iosef, don't make another remark like that ever again. Boss will kill you outright if he hears you," Massaiev said, taking his small vodka glass and emptying in one go. "Do you think I could get a coffee?"

"I'm not your maid!"

"All right. You wait and see for yourself," the deep growl Iosef let out made Massaiev realise that he had won the battle and that they truly interested in hearing what he had to say. A cup of black coffee appeared in front of him and the two men sat around the table, his gazes fixed upon him.

"You're quite the gossip girls, are you not?" he purred the words out, determined to enjoy the moment as much as he could. "He's off limits for all of you, so what is your problem now?"

"Spit it out!"

"He's very young; nineteen years old, just turned in October, blond, very harmonious facial features and body, exactly what the boss likes. Baby blue eyes, shy, nothing scandalous like the many we have seen, seems to be intelligent although he's very naïve. During the whole trip from the airport he was looking through the window in awe. He's nice to speak with and has a natural elegance around him. A real aristocrat from the old times. Perfect for our boss. I could have never taught that to the boys; that's something you're born with. He's glad to see the boss and that already saves me a lot of work. I have to dress him with something better before Mr. Repin has a heart attack if he sees him with those mall clothes. I'll take him to Harvey and Nick's in the afternoon. A tailor might be too much for the moment. He's truly shy and doesn't want to spend the boss' money."

"No way!" Iosef shouted incredulous.

"It's true! I wanted to give him some pocket money, but he rejected it. He told me that he has his own funds and a scholarship from the foundation. He asked me where to buy a bus ticket and if I knew when was the students' day at the British Museum. He even has an International Student Card with discounts."

"Where did boss get him?"

"Buenos Aires, the Pampa. Make no mistake Boris, he comes from one of the most expensive schools there. Thankfully, he's not a spoiled brat."

"Sounds good."

"Better than I thought. If he lasts, my life is going to be very easy from now onwards. No more looking for and training vulgar brats to pass like elegant boys. No more hearing wannabe artists ranting over the boss and the best of all; no more waiting outside in the rain, like a dog, for the boss to cast out the tramp. This one has a permanent room here; the one with the Renoir. Mr. Repin chose that paint by himself."

"How did he behave?"

"Fine, he's kind to everyone, even to me. He was very glad to be in the business class, not complaining at all because it wasn't first class, all full, he spoke little, wrote a lot in his folder, drew some things and slept after dinner till the morning. Very nice fellow. No problems at all."

"Are you also in love with him?" One of the men chortled.

"No way! I like them younger and brunette. Not my type at all. To your information, Boss calls him 'his angel' and refers to him as 'his lover'. He's not a punk, so be careful around him," Mikhail warned the men once more.

"Is he staying here?" Iosef asked shocked. "I thought he was going to the flat in Belgravia. The new one."

"That's for the witch," Massaiev answered. "Mr. Repin bought it in case she wants to visit London."

"That looks already bad. The boy here and she in a flat? I see the storm closing over us."

"Boss thinks in getting rid of her since a long time. Times have changed. No one cares any longer if he prefers boys to girls as long as he keeps it quiet. This one is someone you can take to a good place without problems. He's going to attend the UCL. They made an exception and will take him in, in February for some courses."

"You're going to have a good life indeed Mikhail Petrovich."

"I have to take him after New Year to Paris, Florence and Rome for fifteen days. Boss will take him back in Milan or Venice and stay here for the winter. The boy wants to see Assisi and Perugia too, good choice in my opinion."

“And leave Olga Fedorovna alone in St. Petersburg?”

“It seems.”

“Bad idea.”

* * *

Guntram's de Lisle diary
December 18th

I arrived to London this morning very early and here I'm at a big house, waiting for Constantin to arrive from Texas where he has some pending business. His employee, Mikhail, told me that he travels permanently and it's very rare that he stays for more than two weeks in one place. I suppose that's the down part of being a millionaire.

His house is located at Ilchester Place, very posh and expensive place. It was bought and refurnished almost a year ago and it's very beautiful place. It has a garden, a real luxury in Kensington, with huge old trees, and a lot of peace around. I'm surprised you almost don't see cars in the streets. It looks like a Gothic building, brickwork and French tiles on the roofs, many windows and a huge balcony over the garden. The most incredible things are the paintings and sculptures I've seen around. All originals. On the corridor to the bedrooms hang a Miró, a Kandinsky and a Picasso, all together. There's a pastel from Renoir in my bedroom and it's just incredible. I have no idea how much it could cost, but I'm already nervous around it.

No, I'm nervous around the double bed here. This monster is not meant for a single person, I'm sure. I don't know what I'm going to do and certainly will look like a dork the minute he asks me to do something more than kissing, holding each other or performing oral sex to each other. I don't think I can do more than that, no matter what George tells me. It's too big for me and I don't think that's supposed to be done. Maybe this is a huge mistake and I should tell it to Constantin before we're both hurt.

He's supposed to arrive tomorrow evening and I'm supposed to accompany Mikhail to get some more clothes for me. I tried to talk the man out of his idea but he only told me that London is rainy and very cold and I'll get pneumonia the minute I'm out in the streets running without proper clothes. Which is the difference between clothes from a normal shop and Harrods? Both stay the same under the rain.

* * *

By the end of the day, Mikhail Massaiev was dead on his feet. His original idea that the boy was going to be easy to manipulate was wrong. Very wrong. He had an independent streak and a very strong willed personality; “stubborn like an old mule, mixed with the ability to make big puppy eyes or argue in a way that he was finally getting his way. Boss will have to fight hard with this little devil. Fortunately, he's good tempered and obedient... Once you can convince him.' Something as easy as taking one of the boys for shopping; they all loved it and the others were only happy to be out from their cells. But this one had refused almost everything, saying that it was very expensive—“it was just Harvey and Nicks, for Christ's sake!”—or useless as he had enough with two sweaters for two months! When his patience was at an end, he barked something like “you can't be next to a man like Mr. Repin in those tatters! You will only embarrass him!” so the boy would see reason.

To his credit, the boy bent his head down in shame, provoking something akin to remorse in the Russian when he had never regretted in the past to punish the boys when they were being difficult. Those huge eyes looking in pain were something moving.

'I hope he behaves like a sensitive lad or to put him back in his place will be very hard for me.'

* * *

His heart was beating so hard with the approaching time. Only fifteen minutes left till Constantin would be home. One of the bodyguards had already confirmed Mikhail that his private jet had landed on time and that he was on his way in his car. For the fourth time that afternoon, Guntram broke his pencil lead trying to sketch from memory the Elgin Marbles and cursing himself for not accepting Mikhail's offer to buy the book. “No, it's too heavy to carry back to Buenos Aires,” he returned to his work once more, hoping that what he was wearing would be good enough for Constantin. The man, Mikhail was right and he should know because he knew Constantin since they were children

living in Paris and then as friends when he was stationed in Moscow and his friend was gaining positions in the Party and within the Energy Ministry. "Make no mistakes Guntram; Mr. Repin is an Arseniev and his mother educated him as one. Her grandfather was an advisor for the Czar and his wife one of the attending ladies for the Czarina. They were powerful landlords in the St. Petersburg's area. He's not a new rich like the many we see around nowadays. If he has said nothing so far about your general appearance, it's because of his education. Tell me, has he taken you anywhere when you're playing the rebel?"

The muffled voices he heard downstairs made him break his pencil once more, jumping to his feet in a hurry to meet Constantin. "Careful boy, I want to reach my fifties," one of the bodyguards told him when Guntram bumped into him. "Tie is not straight," he smirked when the boy started to excuse himself. 'Great, I'm doing Massaiev's work now!'

Guntram had to stop at the bottom of the stairs to catch his breath and calm himself down. He suppressed the light cough scratching his throat and composed himself before going down the stairs. He heard Constantin, Oblomov, Mikhail and two other more men speaking in Russian in the living room and hesitation took over his heart as they had the door closed.

"You may go inside, sir. Mr. Repin awaits you," Dimitri, the head butler told him casually as he carried a tray with six vodka shots. He knocked on the door and easily opened, allowing Guntram to come in first.

Constantin was shocked when he saw Guntram. Before the boy was very good looking and gracious like a kitten, but Massaiev had overdone himself this time. Now, with a decent grey suit, tie and light blue shirt, perfect for dinner, he was stunning. 'I will have to kill many for him.' There was a very compelling mixture of shyness, elegance and certainly aristocracy in the way he stood in the middle of the room, perfectly knowing that he had not been invited or that he was interrupting something important but on the other side, he carried his head in a way that proved that he knew he had the right to be there.

"Good afternoon, Guntram. Please, join us. Do you know my cousin Malchenko? He takes care of my business in France. This one is Morozov, my lieutenant in Moscow."

"Good afternoon gentlemen," Guntram said and shook hands with the men he had just been introduced.

The butler serving the vodka shots was the perfect excuse for Guntram to go to the farthest seat in the room to allow some privacy for the men resuming their talk in Russian. He left his vodka aside as he was sure he couldn't drink (drowned) it like the men had done in the blink of an eye without falling dead on the spot.

"Ivan Ivanovich and Morozov have to take a plane to Zurich. My accountant misses me terribly and needs to be reassured."

"Konrad was always very insecure of his charms. That's why he's so jealous all the time," chuckled Oblomov, making the other men laugh in front of a perplexed Guntram. "He has to see some money to be happy again. Like the Tax Office."

"The parallel one," Malchenko chuckled. "Very difficult man."

"He's a banker, what did you expect Boris?" Constantin shrugged. "Good luck but you will not need it. Everything is going as planned."

"German precision it's called," Oblomov laughed. "Nice work so far in Argentina."

"I don't follow you, Ivan Ivanovich," Guntram said perplexed.

"Where were you the last two days, boy?"

"Here, visiting London and in the British Museum today. Why?"

"Well, you can consider yourself lucky, boy. You left the country one day before the revolt."

"Revolt?"

"Don't you watch the BBC? There are riots all over Buenos Aires. Activists attacking banks and the McDonalds'. The police used force to stop the riots and there were some dead protesters. The presidential palace is surrounded and seems that they will cook the president."

"Is it true, Constantin?" Guntram whispered opening his eyes very big, still believing that it was a joke the men were playing on him.

"Yes, indeed. Should be in the evening news. By the way, Ivan, make sure that Lintorff's insurance company pays me back if something happens with the Museum. I would be most upset if something were to happen to my paintings, especially that Tamayo Guntram likes so much." Constantin shrugged. "Do you want to watch the news, Guntram? Do you want to call your friends to see if they're fine?"

"Yes, thank you Constantin," the youth answered while he was still processing the news.

"I'll call you for dinner," could only tell Constantin before the livid young man was out of the room.

Guntram tried first to reach Federico, but no one was answering the phone. Very strange because the maids were always around. More concerned than before, he switched on the hidden in a cupboard TV to check the BBC and the smoking cars and people running from the police in the streets, while they were looting forced him to sit on the bed to recover from his shock. He dialled George's home number.

"Hello," the man answered the phone to his utter relief.

"Hi, George, it's me, Guntram. I just heard the news and I wanted to..."

"Slow down, boy I can't understand you."

"How are you?"

"You should be telling me what you have been doing with Dr. Zhivago."

"George, don't joke now. What's going on?"

"Nothing I haven't seen in 1976, 1982, 1989 and 2001. Relax Guntram. It's some people running around, some policemen after them, some looting and some street fights. Nothing else. I closed my shop and I'll wait for the people to calm down. It seems the president is going to step down. All the blasted politicians are locked in the Congress. Wonderful moment to drop a bomb there. But tell me, how's everything for you? Are you happy?"

"I was till I found out what happened."

"Is he treating you well?"

"I don't know, I just saw him for ten minutes and found out what happened. I hope the mob doesn't destroy his flat! There are fantastic artworks there!"

"Don't worry. This is not the French Revolution, dear. It's Argentina. I'm so glad you're not here! Lola is barking like crazy with all the noise and the firecrackers. The poor animal is desperate. You stay there, enjoy your time in London and take many pictures and write everything down so you can tell me all when you're back. And go back to your boyfriend! Don't waste your time with me!"

"I only saw him a few seconds. He's in a meeting now."

"What time is there?"

"Around six or seven, I don't know."

"Find it out and if it's more than seven, it's cuddling time for every advanced society, especially if you're starting a relationship. Don't worry about us. Super Guntram is not going to save us."

"You're right. Take care please."

Guntram opened his laptop and connected to the internet to check the news and if he had some e-mails. Nothing more than messages from people from the University to join the different demonstrations or going to take over the presidential palace. 'Yeah right, they're killing each other and I'm worried about some Siqueiros. What's wrong with me?' The croaking of a bird announced him that Federico was online.

"Hey, you. How are you? Guntram typed at full speed.

"Fine. In Montevideo. I'll take a plane to Paris tonight. Mother sent me to my father's."

"I'm glad. How's everything?"

"The 'niggers' are killing each other. And you?"

"I'm OK"

"Fucking with the Russian?"

"Mind your business, Asshole!"

"That short?"

"Fuck you!"

"I offered and you didn't want. Now weep."

"Federico, this is serious. I'm worried about you."

"Guntram, I'm in another country, going to Paris to my father's and his new bimbo. Perhaps you're right; I should be very afraid."

"How can you be so shallow?"

"After you finish fucking with the Russian and I the Parisian girls, why don't we meet in the continent and we fuck some more? Now that you play on the other side, I can show you a world of pleasure."

"Fefo, you were kicked out of the Blockbuster for not returning the movies. I doubt you know enough French as to rent one for you."

"Lie to yourself Guntram, lie to yourself."

A soft knock in the door made Guntram stop to write his answer and went to open the door to find Constantin there. Without any kind of warning, his arms quickly took the boy by the waist and pulled him against his

body, kissing him deeply, enjoying how his angel returned his kisses with matching ardour. Not truly caring any longer, he half carried the boy inside the bedroom and both fell on the bed kissing deeper than before.

The croak of the bird nearly made Constantin jump. "What's that?"

"The messenger. I was speaking with a friend. He might be worried that I was not answering him."

"Get rid of him," he ordered mildly, kissing the young man's neck.

"Don't we have to go downstairs?"

"Damn, I forgot Boris!" Constantin cursed very frustrated that his more than probably party time had been cancelled due to a prior engagement. "We'll go now, and later I will come here, my angel. You have no idea how much I missed you."

"I also Constantin," Guntram stuttered with a look of pure terror in his eyes when he understood what the man wanted to do. He gulped very loudly.

"My angel, you look like the deer in front of the lights," Constantin sighed. "If you want, we share the bed as kissing or sleeping together and we'll see if something more comes up."

"I hope something does come up," Guntram joked, relieved that the man was not cornering nor pressing him.

"You shameless brat!" Constantin shouted falsely shocked. "You'll see in a few hours," he whispered in the boy's ear, licking and enjoying how his angel was unwillingly shuddering. Guntram found himself once more lost in Constantin's dark eyes.

Once more the bird's squawk broke the spell. "Get rid of him or I'll strangle that bird."

"You can't; it's in the program. You'll be fighting against Microsoft," Guntram laughed, leaving the bed to write: "see you later, Fefo."

"Asshole!" was the immediate answer.

"What does he tell?" Constantin asked feigning indifference, just to check later if his angel was truthful or not. Trust was good, but checking never hurt anyone.

"Nothing important. Shall we have dinner?"

"Sure," Constantin said. 'Massaiev should take a look at it.'

* * *

After dinner, Guntram felt relaxed and very happy to be in Constantin's and his cousin Boris Malchenko's company, who had lived all his life in Paris and was returning to Smolensk only after 1992. Both men were educated and seemed to have a long lasting friendship. Malchenko was kind to him asking him about his impressions on the city and telling him that he should go to Paris for a few weeks just to see the Louvre. "After all, your country seems to be in a complete turmoil for the next months. I doubt your University will start again in March or that you could present your tests."

"I'm not sure."

"Guntram, it's Paris. All young men want to go there. You can stay at Place Vendôme and from there it's only a short walk toward the Louvre or the Quai d'Orsay. You will learn a lot just by looking at the Great Masters." Constantin said in a voice that left no doubts or place for arguments.

"But this time, I'll keep your drawings. Constantin told me he made £6,000 with them." Malchenko laughed.

"At least, he will not deplete my resources buying fancy papers," Constantin laughed in unison with his cousin. "Although I should protect my morning newspapers."

"Or the Marks and Spencer catalogue!" Malchenko added with a thunderous laughter, remembering how his cousin had been on the brink of a nervous breakdown when he had opened the box and saw the boy's studies of a woman, some children and dogs, all of them of a very good quality according to two different merchants. Finally, he had controlled his temper, after a stormy week for all his underlings and chose the twenty-four he liked most, framed them and offered the lot to one of his dealers. The man immediately offered £4,500 but Constantin had dribbled till the £6,500.

"We should count the paper sheets every morning, Boris. That's the only way we can be sure he throws nothing to the garbage can."

"Constantin, those drawings were meant to go into the rubbish bin. Those were only sketches."

"Guntram, let's not discuss your appraisal abilities or we will argue," Repin said in a half joking, half

serious voice. "We should go to sleep now, it's getting late and we have to work tomorrow." He finished the conversation rising from his seat and pulling Guntram along by his hand.

Guntram was very shocked when Constantin laced his arm around his waist and pulled him against his chest, kissing his neck. He blushed for that display of affection in front of another man, expecting his contempt, but Malchenko only smiled.

In the corridor and when his cousin disappeared into his own bedroom, Constantin renewed his kisses over Guntram's lips, more feverishly than before "My bed or yours?" He whispered to the dazed boy. "Yours." "Good choice."

The master bedroom was bigger than his own and the bed—much to Guntram's chagrin—seemed to be large enough to fit four or five people and had a big balcony over the garden. The boy's jacket was thrown in a heap over a corner while the Russian continued to ravish his angel, fighting against his tie and shirt. "Stop, Constantin, you're either going to strangle me or destroy it," Guntram said raggedly as he removed the man's jacket more delicately.

"I'm dying for you," he whispered, taking the boy's head with his hands, getting lost in his blue eyes and soft and timid smile.

"I do want you, my friend," Guntram decided and kissed the man back.

Their clothes were quickly discarded while Constantin kissed and nibbled every inch of Guntram's skin, marvelling at its softness.

The man groaned in pleasure when the boy started to firmly suck the tip of his member exactly as he had taught him during his two days stay in Buenos Aires while his fingers delicately fondled with his sac. Slowly, he was becoming bolder and taking more in. For the man, the feeling was maddening as the boy was changing his rhythm several times, increasing his pleasure every time he stopped for a second and renewed his ministrations more enthusiastically than before. To feel his soft lips against the base of his member or his tongue licking his shaft was a hard test to his self control because he felt like a teenager in love. His climax blinded him and he profusely emptied himself in his angel's mouth.

Guntram took advantage of Constantin's fleeting dizziness to clean his mouth with a paper tissue and wash his mouth in the bathroom, returning to the bed as fast as he could.

Constantin's anger threatened to burst in flames, but his brain reminded him that Guntram was very new to such things and he had swallowed the other times they had been together. He should tell it very clear to the boy that he was not supposed to spit his liqueur like a cheap street whore. 'He can forget to get something from me tonight, but let's clear up some things first,' he thought angrily.

"Angel, don't you like to do this?" The man said very softly while he stood from the bed and removed the covers to go inside them.

"Did I do it wrong? I'm sorry, I did my best to please you, Constantin," he replied looking truly sad and his own member hiding between his legs.

"Maybe it's because you don't know it. Get inside, it's cold."

"I have no pyjamas."

"There should be one under one of the pillows." Good, the boy had understood he had done something wrong and was not expecting to get anything more from him as punishment. He observed as Guntram quickly dressed himself with the ivory white pyjamas. 'Massaiev overdid it this time, he's a virgin, but so much symbolism is a little too much for my taste. Light blue, grey, beige or red are the best for him.'

Once redressed, Guntram stood undecided in front of the big bed, waiting for Constantin to tell him where to go. The man took the right side and patted lightly on the left side and Guntram jumped in, deeply burying himself under the thick brocade and silk covers.

"I'm sorry if I did something wrong, Constantin. I told you I was going to be a huge disappointment for you," Guntram intoned with a broken voice.

"My angel, it's not exactly bad what you did; just insulting."

"I never meant to insult you! I swear it! You're so kind to me!"

"Guntram, if you are in a stable relationship with another man and have oral sex you should swallow his seed. If you spit it, it's an insult to him. Only whores do that. Or people who do not trust each other. I have no disease at all, my love and I would never risk your health as you're precious to me." He explained, deciding to go for the "soft and kind" version of scold—and the one that had worked best with his angel; shouting only made him afraid or stubborn like a little mule—mixed with some "parental concern" tone.

"I didn't know it, I'm so sorry I ruined it for you. I wanted to do my best for you," Guntram quickly excused himself.

"Why did you do it? Before you were swallowing without problems." Constantin was pleased by his reaction and pulled his angel against his chest to pet his dark blond head.

"Federico gave me this article from a magazine about the increase in esophagus cancer cases due to performing oral sex and swallowing sperm. There are bacteria that provoke small tumours," Guntram explained very seriously. "He says we should use a condom when we do it or I should not swallow at all."

Constantin's fury threatened to erupt and hurt his angel in a way that would only ruin things for him. He took several deep breaths while his mind played different scenarios of what he could do to that impudent brat who had refused to introduce him to his angel and now was doing everything he could to spoil his fun. The tapes from the previous night fight between the boys had been a test for his patience and Mikhail had had clear orders to bring the boy willingly or kidnap him and bring him by ship to Europe. That brat had called his angel many things and told him dreadful words just to prevent him from taking that plane. Had it not been for that silly old neighbour, Guntram would have rebelled against him in the most stupid way.

"Angel, if that were the case, half of the world population would be infected. That's only a lie! Which University made the study? Who were the case subjects? Where did they perform it? How did they isolate the other variables? A non specialized magazine article? Please! I studied Chemistry for seven years at the Moscow University when it was one of the leading universities in its field. I studied Civil Engineering too, at the same place. In parallel. I saw many times what these popular articles do to real scientific research. Who knows if that was the original conclusion of the study."

"Constantin, I—"

"Hush, my angel, don't think about it any more. Just check better beforehand your sources." He quieted the boy placing his fingers over his lips. The soft kisses Guntram placed over his palm melted his cold fury while he focused on the boy's pliant eyes. He pulled Guntram closer and felt his small hands grab his pyjama top and press his forehead against his chest.

"You must be thinking that I'm a real dork."

"Never my angel; you're just very young and inexperienced. You have to trust me and I will look after you."

"Can you forgive me? I never wanted to be rude to you."

"Of course, but next time, ask me or Mikhail about such matters, Guntram."

"All right."

"Don't ever do this again, dear."

* * *

The morning sunlight awoke Constantin to find Guntram deeply asleep in the crook of his arms. 'He can certainly sleep fast,' he remembered as his angel had only snuggled against him and simply fell asleep after their talk. 'It's strange, he's so full of life and willing to do many things and suddenly, he collapses and needs to rest. Why is he always so tired after the minimum stressful situation? He's so beautiful. Just exquisite.'

Determined to avoid wasting more time in his musings, Constantin removed the bed covers and his own clothes, doing his best to suppress his chuckles when the youth slightly complained in his dreams at the loss of warmth. He opened his trousers and took the boy's member in his mouth.

Guntram nearly jumped to the ceiling when he was awakened by someone touching his private parts. He relaxed a little when he saw it was Constantin—'who else?' he briefly thought—and decided to let the man do as he wanted and enjoy the feeling. Without realising what he was doing, his hand caressed the black haired head and slightly raised his hips to give his lover a better leverage.

The boy closed his eyes to get lost in sexual bliss, relaxing himself achieving his release too soon for his liking.

Constantin knew that his angel couldn't be more relaxed and satisfied than at his point and decided to take him fully, tired of his constants delays and unreasonable fears. 'Let's do it before all his friends come to stuck up their noses and I have to cut some.' he thought while he left the bed to look for some jojoba based lube and a panthenol spray just to make the skin and tissue more elastic. 'He could be so nervous that not even nine hours or foreplay could calm him down.'

"What the hell is that?" Guntram asked with wide open eyes when he saw the two small black items in

Constantin's hand.

"Something to make us feel great when we have sex," Constantin clarified.

"That's..."

"It's a jojoba and silicone based lubricant and a panthenol spray to relax your sphincter. We can try them and if you feel bad or uncomfortable, we stop. Don't you want to prove your love to me Guntram?" He added the last question with a hurt look dangling from his eyes, secretly enjoying when the boy looked pained at his words. 'He's crystal.'

"I'm not sure..."

"Have I ever hurt you?"

"Never."

"Then, you should trust me in this too. You know I want only the best for you," Constantin whispered and started to peck his love's lips, enjoying you the boy seemed to literally melt under his touches.

Guntram did his best to relax and shut up his brain—screaming against what was going to occur—he blindly returned the kisses and only held stronger to Constantin's neck when he felt something cold in his anus. Seeing that the boy was not opposing—although keeping his wonderful blue eyes shut was very disappointing for him—Constantin spread some of the lubricant over his own member and in his fingers, waiting some moments for the spray to become effective. He applied the lube and started to massage the boy, delighted to confirm that he was truly untouched as the entrance was truly narrow.

Hearing the boy purr like a cat nearly threw him out of his senses but he controlled his libido once more and continued to massage till the boy moaned showing him that he was willing to continue. He knelt down in front of the boy, lying on pillows, and placed his hips over his thighs as he spread his legs wide. Holding his member with his right hand and the soft hip with the other, he thrust himself inside the boy with all the force he could, making him yell in pain at the brutal intrusion. 'He has to understand that he's mine,' he briefly thought before his hands secured the arms of the boy, throwing all his weight over them to secure his mount as he felt how Guntram arched his back in a futile attempt to escape.

The pain was insupportable no matter if Constantin was doing his best to calm him down with his kisses all over his face, not moving an inch after he had buried himself inside him. "Don't focus on the pain, it will be gone soon, try to relax my love," Guntram could hear the voice in his ear but the urge to get away from the pain was stronger than reason. He felt something cold and wet running down his cheek.

"Angel, it always hurts the first time," Constantin comforted him again, releasing one of his arms as the boy was not rebelling and doing his best to control his pain and obey him. He caressed gently the boy's face and slowly started to move, trying to make him enjoy it too. Being inside him was an incredible feeling as he felt trapped, constricted, touching the silkiest skin he had ever seen, with the most breathtaking person he had ever met. Guntram was indeed all what he had desired in his life. 'He's perfect for me.'

Some minutes later, Guntram's pain started to fade, but the sensation was not so incredible as it was supposed to be. He took the man's face and pulled it against him to kiss him, looking for comfort and warmth. He relaxed as much as he could and let his older lover take over the situation. The pain slowly dissolved with the moves and Guntram renewed his kisses on him as Constantin seemed to be enormously enjoying what they were doing. The final ecstatic groan and the hot liquid he felt flooding him, made him realise that it was over.

"Are you all right, my angel?" Constantin sounded very concerned as he kissed the boy's hands, trying to keep him as close to his body as he could as he could feel the need to escape in him.

"It still hurts." Guntram confessed and abandoned the fight to disentangle himself from Constantin because he was exerting a strong hold on his waist.

"It's uncomfortable at the beginning, but it will improve with the days. You were incredible for me, angel. How could you ever think that I could be disappointed with you?"

"I don't know, Constantin." Guntram mumbled, feeling completely drained.

"You're very nervous and tired, my little one. Let's sleep a little longer and then, we'll see." Constantin's arms cuddled the uncertain boy and his soft petting, lulled him to sleep.

The second time they tried, it wasn't so bad for Guntram as he knew what was expected from him and could relax more and enjoy his lover's ministrations and return his kisses more truthfully than in their previous exercise. This time, Constantin took much longer in the foreplay, stretching him more as he was not so lust driven as he had been in the early morning.

Guntram only whimpered when he was penetrated, this time lying on his side while Constantin was

fondling his manhood with achieved expertise. He focused on the pleasure he was receiving, ignoring the initial pain, and suddenly the pain transformed itself into hot pleasure waves when the man hit a special spot inside him. He arched his back and groaned, showing Constantin that he had finally gotten the boy where he wanted and he kept hitting that part, till he felt him on the brink of his climax. The man withdrew only a little to change the angle and Guntram had his release in unison with him.

Constantin smiled knowingly as he kissed the forehead of the panting boy, still trying to recover his breath and overcome the dizziness hammering his head, incredulous that such pleasure could exist.

"I told you it would be much better, once you could let yourself go," the Russian chuckled.

"It's amazing."

"Thank you. You're incredible yourself. Taking you is almost a mystical experience. Say that you will stay with me."

"As long as you want me, as we said."

"After these two times? We'd better start to look for an old people's home that would take us both together." Constantin laughed and became serious and kissed Guntram on the lips. "Forever."

Guntram was lost. Had Constantin not told him that he only wanted an affair with him? From where was all this coming from? No, it was the typical "post coital expansion" as George had called it; don't believe a word of it, just be nice and polite, and he preferred to only smile shyly, hoping that it would be enough for the man and he could go back to sleep. He had never been so tired in his life.

* * *

"Guntram, you'd better leave this bed if you want to see a little of London. It's 3:00 in the afternoon. You have missed breakfast and lunch. I'll give you tea at 4:00." A fully dressed Constantin shook him awake. 'Strange indeed how tired he was after sex, normally young ones start to run around and want more till you kick them out. He slept five hours after the second time!'

"So late? Mikhail Petrovich will kill me. I asked him to go to the National Portrait Gallery today."

"Don't worry about him. He must have found something to do. You can go tomorrow. Get ready and you can have tea with me. Ask him to take you to a book store. There are very good ones. See if there's something you like."

"I don't want to leave you alone," Guntram blurted out, much to Constantin's amusement. "Lord, it's like you said. Not even twenty-four hours and I'm clinging to your neck. Don't pay attention, please." He corrected himself, upset at his own weakness.

"I'm not going to be alone, angel. I have a date with a blonde, hot blooded German at 5:30."

"Ah," Guntram said sounding terribly devastated. 'Don't complain, he told you in advance.'

"He's after my money." Constantin shrugged, secretly pleased at how Guntram was doing his best to hide his deep sorrowful expression. 'He's adorable.'

"I'll go now, Constantin."

"Guntram, I should be very drunk before I touch a single hair from him. He's a mean man and my accountant, although he prefers to be called a banker. Besides, he's Swiss; they train to be boring or 'reliable' as they say." Constantin laughed. "I'm afraid, I won't be able to see you till dinner time, at 9:00. He can be very dense and probably wants to speak about Argentina. Oblomov told me he was on the brink of a nervous breakdown last night."

"Something new?"

"The president escaped in a chopper and the Congress is looking for a replacement as there's no available Vice President. There's a strong rumour that they will declare a full default and there's a devaluation in process. The new government will take over the people's savings in dollars and transform them into pesos. Lintorff used several of my planes to smuggle money out of the country in containers to Uruguay and Brazil. He needs my services and I need his financial advice. I think he also helped some locals, for a fee, of course. Once the *debâcle* is unleashed, he and his friends will come back to buy everything they want for a more than reasonable price. Don't look so shocked. That's how things are done these days. Argentina had a very weak government and a feeble international position, so they were the latest dish on the table. Who knows whose next. I'll ask Lintorff."

"This is criminal! How can you be so calm about it?"

"Because I did nothing. That's their doing."

"He should go to jail!"

"When was the last time you saw a real banker sitting in front of a judge? Do you know what we say in Russia: 'No one has ever been hanged with money in his pocket.' Anarchists are not so mistaken with their solutions. It's a way to stop them; pity the next will take his place."

"They can't do that! People died for this!"

"Be glad they don't cause wars any longer and that they found the way to achieve the same results with only a small popular uprising."

"Can you not stop him?"

"Impossible; it's not only he, but a bunch of bankers and industrials all together, forming a very closed group. You don't fight with any of them because they react like a single entity. Perhaps, you've heard of secret societies like the Masons, some satanic sects, many of them around London, and these are originally Catholics. Nothing more dangerous than people who believe that they're forgiven in this life; they have no restraints or constraints of any kind; like Crusaders."

"It shouldn't be like that."

"But it's. I have always been like that and will always be. You're no part of that world; you're an artist and your art is all what should matter to you."

Guntram remained silent for a long time before getting showered and dressed. He did his best to look interested in the conversation Constantin tried to engage him, but it was useless; his mind was permanently on Father Patricio's children and how they were going to survive this new blow to their already frail economies.

"Constantin," he interrupted his friend as he was elaborating on the Elgin Marbles, "do you think that this art dealer you know would like to buy more of my stuff?"

"I don't know, I could ask him. Why? This is most surprising. I thought you didn't want to sell," he asked puzzled.

"If I gave him some of what I would paint in Italy or even here, in good paper, do you think he would pay for it?"

"It depends on what it's, if he likes it or if he thinks he can sell it. But Guntram, you never wanted to sell anything before because you were, and I quote you, 'robbing us'. Have you been touched by greed?"

"I could use the money."

"What for? You have a scholarship."

"Six thousand pounds is a lot of money; Father Patricio could use a sum like that for the soup kitchen. I assume that if there's a default, like you said, most people in the world will be pissed off with us. There's no government and probably no money for him or the kids."

"All right, I'll ask Irina, my secretary to make an appointment for you with him. His customers are among London's high society. Many artists would kill to be in his gallery. Your material was partly sold to an insurance company."

"Perfect. If they ruin our lives, we can take some money out of them and don't feel bad about it. It's simple justice."

"Remind me not to let you read Tolstoy, who knows which ideas you might come up with. If you think about it, he destroyed two great Empires."

"They destroyed by themselves, by their inner tensions and greed. No, I'm more pro Bakunin."

"You? No way. You'd be sitting along with Kerensky, while you read Tolstoy and think about non violence, angel. I can't deny you have your originality; Robin Hood with Arts."

After tea, Massaiev discreetly suggested Guntram to fetch his jacket as it was time to leave. "Lintonff and his people are very punctual. Let's avoid them, shall we?"

"No problem by me. Kitchen door?"

"If you don't mind."

"Why should I? Perhaps I can steal another blueberry muffin."

"I was wondering when you were going to start to behave like a hooligan," the serious man joked. "I'm so glad you're not a saint."

After scurrying from the kitchen, already taken over by three visitor bodyguards, looking very serious and dangerous, sitting around a big table with Yuri and Boris, gloomier than usual, Guntram stopped in the garden as he saw the gate open and a big black limousine parked. A very tall man, got out of the car, while the chauffeur held the door for him. 'The devil is not bad looking,' Guntram briefly thought while he took a quick look on the stern face, blond-brownish hair, aquiline nose matching his strong features and the coldest blue eyes he had ever seen.

Instinctively, he went backwards to blend himself against the wall and foliage, unwilling to be seen. The man and two other more men entered the house through the main door.

"Is that the Swiss banker, Mikhail?"

"That's Lintorff. Stay away from him; he's bad news whenever he goes."

"Yes, Constantin told me about him. Nasty guy."

"You have no idea."

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 25th 2001

I'm so happy to be here with Constantin. He's so nice and understanding with me. I love to spend the days in his company. I think I will miss him when I'll fly to Italy tomorrow. I'm going to Rome-Assisi, Florence and from there to Perugia and Arezzo. Constantin suggested to drop Venice as he wants to go with me, but in the moment it's impossible because he has a lot of work. We will see each other in twenty days, in Paris.

Fefo is still stranded in Paris, ranting and bugging me via messenger. He's truly getting to my nerves with his meddling and prodding. It's really not his business what I do or don't do with Constantin. The funny thing is that he, the worst student ever, nags me about going back to Buenos Aires to study for my pending subjects! The nerve of him! I haven't seen you opening your Argentine History books! He wants that we meet in the continent and I'm evading him. Most surely, I don't want him around when I'm with Constantin! He can spoil a wonderful moment! Why can't he get a Parisian girlfriend and leave me alone?

* * *

Massaiev sat in front of the latest transcriptions and translations from the boy's emails and chats for the past week in London. The e-mails were mostly with school friends lamenting over the mess his country had turned into, but nothing of a personal kind or any comments on his relationship with Repin. 'Weird, they normally brag in front of the others about their catches.'

The copies of his diary showed that he was truly happy living with his employer and in love with him. Repin would be pleased to read it.

The only disturbing issue was the many e-mails between Guntram and his school-mate, Federico Martiarena Alvear as the later seemed to be very interested in the boy's dealings with the boss. The many sexual offers he was making and refused or laughed at, were already bordering on sexual harassment. The fact that he had asked Guntram to meet him in Paris or in Italy could pose some problems for him as Repin was very possessive of the child and the least he needed was to have a punk causing havoc, after the boy was behaving so well and doing exactly what was expected from him. A true gem.

'I'll speak with the boss before we fly to the continent. I want clear instructions if this turns out to be something more. The boy has not much experience and could be easily tangled into a cobweb.'

Chapter 7

“Hi, pumpkin.” Guntram read on his screen, already hating the noisy messenger bird. ‘Is any way to shut up this thing? I’m starting to hate it too,’ he angrily thought before writing back; “Hi, Fefo.”

“Where you are?”

“In the hotel, still in Florence. I went to Perugia today. Very beautiful place. I was in the Galleria dell’ Umbra.”

“Ugh! Again in a fucking Museum? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I like it. Most Perugino is there. Too bad the clerks don’t let you sketch. Have to be happy with the book they sell for a good price.”

“Guntram, you’re nineteen. What are you doing tonight?”

“Dinning and going to bed. Tomorrow we take the train to Arezzo. All Piero della Francesca is there.”

“Are you telling me you plan to be in bed at ten?”

“Sure.”

“You’re crazy. Get rid of the Russian and go out! You’re in Florence!”

“It’s very cold and rainy.”

“OK, grandpa. How about we go out for some beers?”

“Not very clever; you’re in Paris; I’m in Florence.”

“I’m in Milan, can be there in a few hours, tomorrow for example.”

“What are you doing in Milan?”

“Travelling. I had enough of my father and his bimbo, Solange. Snotty bitch!”

“Poor baby. Sorry, I can’t. Tomorrow I go to Arezzo and I’m not sure when we’ll be back. “

“OK, we’ll see each other on the fourth. Which hotel are you staying?”

Guntram hesitated; he didn’t want to see Fefo as he feared his more than expected scorn at his relationship with Constantin. ‘It’s not that I’m ashamed of it; it’s just I don’t want to fight over it’, but on the other side, he didn’t deny himself to his best friend. ‘He might be very bored, alone in Europe.’

“Posh place. You’ll have to shower to enter.”

“Ha, ha. How witty you’re.”

“I’m in the Grand Hotel. In front of the Arno River in Piazza Ognissanti. The suite us under Mr. Massaiev’s name. At 8 p.m?”

“OK, sounds like a date to me.”

“Idiot!”

* * *

Mikhail Massaiev was crossed when Guntram informed him that he was going to have dinner with his school friend, Federico and that they would meet at the hotel’s lobby at 8 p.m. “We’ll go around, for a pizza and some beers. I’ll be back around twelve.” Repin was going to kill him! His boy with another punk—especially this one who had already crossed him to no end with “his constant meddling with my angel”—Repin would come all the way from Moscow just to kill the impudent youth... and then, shoot him. He was leaving very clearly that his job was to look after Guntram, take him to Museums, check that he works, and eliminate any kind of competition that might appear. No hot blooded Italian, or any kind, hunters around his angel. “You know what to do.” The only rule: “Guntram has to be always well treated. No yelling or hitting him. If you touch a single hair from him or if I get a single complaint about you, you’re dead. Use your intelligence to lead him; he’s perfectly bendable if you know how to treat him.”

“Finding and getting rid of boys was an easier job,” he mumbled before dialling his boss’ private number.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

“How is my angel, Mikhail Petrovich?”

“He’s perfectly well, sir. Drawing everything that moves and not. Today we went to the Uffizzi, again. From 8 a.m. till closing time. It was Bronzino’s day.” Mikhail slightly complained, knowing that if he sang his praises perhaps Repin would be partly appeased when he heard the news. “He was looking the painting and then, running to

the cafeteria to copy it. He has a very good visual memory and I'm dead from running up and down the whole day. He's drawing in his room now, some people he saw while we dined."

"But..."

"He has agreed to meet this friend of his tomorrow at 8 p.m. The boy is currently in Milan, sir. What should I do?"

"Nothing. I'll speak with Guntram about this. Go with them. Don't leave him alone under any circumstance."

"I don't understand a word in Spanish, Mr. Repin."

"Guntram is too polite to speak Spanish if you're there. He will only speak English. Record the conversation."

"Yes, sir."

"Take Guntram to Rome on the fifth; to the St. Regis'. Don't let that boy come near him ever again. I'll take care of that small nuisance. For some unknown reason, he's against me and does whatever he can to ruin my relationship with my angel. Stay in Rome for a week only and then, go to Paris to the flat in Place Vendôme. Leave him under Malchenko's care and come to London. I have to speak with you."

* * *

The annoying sound was again bothering him when Guntram realised that it was his own phone, forgotten in his jacket, and he dashed to answer it.

"The fourth time is the winner. I was considering to start a relationship with your answering machine. It's always there," a slightly annoyed Constantin greeted Guntram before he could say anything.

"Hello, Constantin. I didn't realise it was the phone. I'm not used to it. I thought it was something else," the boy confessed very ashamed at his slip.

"Why don't you tell me the truth? You were drawing and perhaps a volcano explosion could have gotten your attention."

"How do you know it?" Guntram said very shocked and made the other man laugh.

"Because I know you. I'd bet that Mikhail has to send you to bed too."

"He can be impossible sometimes. He's very nice and polite, but I swear that one day he will tuck in bed. Too much of a mother hen in him."

"It's his work, angel."

"More than a mentor, he's like a nanny. He knows a lot about history and arts, but he forbade me to go into the Burger King! It's not as if I was going to ask him to eat there. I just wanted to have a coffee." Guntram whined, becoming more frustrated when he heard the Russian's chuckles.

"What have you been doing, besides almost food poisoning my employee?"

"I was at the Uffizi today, walking around with him and then, here. Tomorrow, I want to go to San Marco, but they close at noon. Perhaps he wants to go again to Santa Maria Maggiore."

"And later, more drawing?"

"Ah, I forgot to tell you. I'm having dinner with a friend of mine: Federico. We were room-mates in school. He's a bit dense, but a good friend. He's in Paris, no wait, Milan and comes here."

"Why?"

"I suppose he's bored. He hates this "museum stuff."

"And you?"

"I love it. I don't know how I am going to live without them. Everything screams of beauty. I'll truly miss it. It's not just the museums; it's everything. Even the light. Constantin, could I ask you something?"

"What is my dear?"

"Are you serious about the scholarship offer? I think you were right. I don't know if I would ever be able to support myself as an artist, but I would love a job in a Museum, even as the security guard or tourist guide."

"The board already signed the papers. It's for five years and unless you reject it or if your grades are below the minimum required, it's a binding contract and being sued by a student looks very bad for my company. What I mean is, regardless, of what becomes of us as couple, you should continue to study Art History and work in a Gallery, Museum or antiquity shop, as I'm convinced that you're an artist. I'm very glad that you have realised it. Live with me in London, if we don't work at all, move to a flat nearby the University and finish your studies then. The

money you have is more than sufficient to support yourself. Many students do.”

“I don't want to mix things, Constantin.”

“Guntram, if you fail one single test because you were not studying for it, you won't like my reaction. This I can promise.”

“No, I don't want to be at odds with you. You showed me a new world, one I never thought could exist. I'm very grateful to you.”

“I miss you, angel. I wish you were here with me.”

“Where's here?”

“Moscow, which reminds me. On the fifth you have to go to Rome and be on the twelfth in Paris. I need Massaiev in New York on the thirteenth at the latest. You will stay with my cousin Boris Malchenko. He will assign you another bodyguard and you can copy all what you want in the Louvre. They are student-friendly there. My flat is very near, you can walk to the museum every day and I'll meet you on the twentieth.”

“I also miss you, Constantin. I want to see you soon.”

“We'll be together in Paris for a few days and then, return to London. School starts in February and you've been accepted for some of the classes as the school year really starts in September. You can also take some painting lessons.”

“You're starting to sound like my former Headmaster.”

“My experience with artists has taught me that keeping them busy and on a short leash is the best; if not, you all start to dribble and work nothing or worst; you work like you don't care and the result is much worse.”

“I'm no artist and don't even know if I'm working at all. Painting is like breathing for me.”

“Contrary to your belief, you work a lot. Continue like this and everything will be fine.”

* * *

The evening was going to prove a fiasco for Mikhail Petrovich Massaiev, standing in the lobby at 8 p.m. with a very nervous—and edgy—Guntram by his side. The boy had behaved reasonably well, not fighting over lunch time or complaining when his original idea of running all over Florence had been killed on the spot because Mikhail had forced him to visit several shops, till tea time, and then, he had remained in his room, quietly drawing and organizing his things for tomorrow's trip to Rome. 'At least, he obeyed the boss without complaints.' Ten minutes had passed after 8:00, and he was starting to lose his patience with the “Gaucho brat”.

“There he is, Mikhail,” Guntram announced and ran toward a tall dark haired boy, many years older than him. 'Were they not together in the same class?' He thought as he also went to meet his problem for the night.

“Mr. Massaiev, may I introduce you Federico Martiarena Alvear? We were in the same class,” Guntram said very politely. 'At least, he knows how to lose with elegance. Three hours ago, he nearly told me to piss off for the night,' Mikhail remembered while he extended his hand to the “native”, looking at him sullenly. 'Same school, different results.'

“How do you do?” Federico growled, hoping that would be all.

“Mr. Massaiev will join us, Federico,” Guntram whispered, inwardly praying that his friend would keep his temper in check. The Russian was very sensitive about status and protocol. Nothing like a gesture out of place to get a big—and hurtful—scold from him.

“Are you kidding me? Get rid of the fucker.” Federico told Guntram in very fast and slurred Spanish.

“I'm afraid, Mr. Massaiev does not understand our language, Federico. He has been with me all the time and knows Italy like the palm of his hand,” Guntram answered in English.

“Are you sure you want to come? It's only two teenagers eating pizza. Nothing for you,” Federico fired.

Mikhail had many troubles to refrain his desire to give a slap to the impudent brat. None of the boys he had trained for Mr. Repin would have ever dared to be so rude; not even those picked up from a poor rural area. He swallowed hard before giving his reply: “This hotel's restaurant is fine for me, Mr. Martiarena. Guntram has been feeling under the weather the past days and we have to leave very early tomorrow morning.”

During dinner, Mikhail lost interest in their conversation because both boys spoke about Argentina and the current political situation. Guntram told his friend about his decision about staying in London to study and the other boy showed no reaction at all, only a “Juan is also there. Architecture. All the Dollenbergs want to move there.”

Around dessert, Guntram had the poor idea of inviting the boy to his room to show him all what he had sketched and painted over the past weeks. “We'll be quiet as mice, Mikhail. We need to catch up with gossip,” he half

pleaded and the Russian had to agree much to his discomfort. 'Guntram you're so wrong if you think that you can hide this from Mr. Repin. Everything you say will be recorded.'

"Of course, Guntram. Young people need some time for themselves," he said jovially.

* * *

Federico was not pleased at all in the change performed over his long time friend. First he looked better than ever before and he seemed to be happier than ever. His eyes shined like they had never done before. Second, he was not the mousy, sad and frightened boy he used to know, but a person who had his ideas and was clearly telling him that he had decided to throw everything out the window and stay in London, living with a much older—and richer—man. Third; he looked absolutely gorgeous now.

"Guntram, how well do you know this Repin?"

"Enough to want to live with him. We get along very well and I admire his character."

"Guntram, are you really gay? You're not like Rodrigo; he was a true gay; he sucked all the school cocks for free."

"That's gross, Fefo. That was just a rumour."

"Guntram, I know it first hand. He was drooling all over us in the showers."

"Fefo, what's your problem if I go to bed with him? I like it!" Guntram exploded, enraged at the permanent questioning for the past months.

"Do you say it like that? 'I'm being fucked by a man, who's my sugar daddy, and I like it.' I was expecting something more from you, Guntram."

"He's not my sugar daddy. Look, go home before we fight. If you don't approve of my choices, then, don't come to me. I'm sick of doing what everybody expects me to do! He has been the first person to treat me decently and show a real concern for me."

"So decently that he has to dress you up like his favourite doll and get you stuck with a sniffer dog, so you don't fuck with any other person?"

"Did you come all the way from Milan just to criticise me? What is your problem? It's not as if you would lift a finger for me if I'm in trouble. You never did before."

"Guntram, you're like a brother to me and there's something fishy about those Russians! My mother says that this Oblomov backed off from every project. He's forcing us to make new deals or threatens to drop everything. Many of our friends lost money with him."

"Are you asking me about your mother dealings? If I'd have a single cent, do you think I would put it in a country that defaulted so graciously? How much was it? Two hundred billion dollars from the State and how much more from private companies? Your mother was cheering when the president announced the default! I never saw her so happy in her life! Did you pay your own mine workers or did you again tell those poor devils that all your money was trapped in the banks like she did in December?"

"How dare you to criticise us! You're nothing!"

"Great, so it shouldn't matter who I fuck with. I don't care what you do in bed."

"That Oblomov is Mafia. Of the worst kind. Do you know how he dealt with the trade unionists in that gold mine concession he got for a very cheap price, at my mother's back? Their main leader is now part of the foundations of a new hospital in Patagonia."

"If you have any allegations, go to the police."

"The local police obey them! The Governor is on his side! My mother wants to start a Senate inquiry about many banks getting their money out of the country in cash through containers and planes; two of the five companies who did it belong to Oblomov!"

"Money in containers? And all our local thieves missed it? Please!"

"The local gangs—according to our intelligence sources—are terrified of these Russians. They were like a horde, crossing the Triple border and killed many of our criminals. They started to invade us in 1996 and it was just prostitution and some smuggling because it was very easy to obtain dollars in Argentina. Later, they continued with some internet fraud, collecting taxes to local companies, immigrants for slave labour, drugs and weapons through the Triple Border. They supply to anyone who has money! Terrorists included. The American Embassy is very concerned about their activities in our country."

"The Russian Mafia or Oblomov's? Because those are two very different things," Guntram said very

coldly. "Look Federico, I know Repin and he's a good person. Stern, yes. Not funny or outgoing, also true, but to accuse him of being a Mafia boss just because he's gay, is somewhat extreme. He has done nothing against you or your mother."

"He commands this Oblomov just with a single look. My mother saw it."

"They both are telepaths and I didn't notice," Guntram said very sarcastically, feeling very tired, frustrated and willing to kick his friend out. "Is it not getting late for you to walk back to your hotel?"

"Are you throwing me out, asshole?"

"I have to be up very early, like 6 a.m. Federico, I know you're very disappointed with me. I don't know how I would have reacted if you would have told me out of the blue that you wanted to live with a man. Probably, I would be doing the same you're doing now. I'm sorry if I hurt you, but I would have never lied to you. I enjoy Constantin's company very much, even if he were just a simple man. He listens to me without judging me. He understands me better than any other person I've met; better than myself. I don't care if this is just an adventure for him. I want to live it and keep the memory for the future. Even if we don't work out as a couple, he has shown me what I truly want to do with my life. Only because of that, he has my eternal gratitude and respect. Do you think I would have lasted long as an accountant or waiter? I would have only lived in bitterness. Seeing all this made me realise that I want to be a part of it."

"Some old stones and doodles made you throw your life away? To become a rich man's whore?"

"The whore part you can save it, Federico. I'm not expecting that a brute like you can understand this. Only know that those stones are more valuable to me than any of your tantrums. Good night." Guntram used a very dry tone of voice, rising from his chair and going for the door.

"Guntram, you're making the biggest mistake of your life!"

"Perhaps, but it's my mistake. I gave a lot of thought to it. If you can't understand it, good-bye. We are so different one from the other that it's impossible we could remain friends for the rest of our lives. Remember that I'll always be for you."

"This is far from over, Guntram. I can't see you destroying your life like you want to do!" Federico shouted before slamming the door.

The noise attracted Massaiev, still dressed. "Something wrong Guntram? I heard you yelling with each other."

"Just a disagreement over our chosen lifestyles. We always argue rather loudly. I'm sorry if we disturbed you."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you. I'd better go to bed, now."

"As you wish, but whatever you need, tell me. I appreciate you."

"We fought over Constantin. He thinks I'm his whore; that I'm with him because of his money, that he's a Mafia boss, no not him: Ivan Ivanovich is the boss. Can you imagine something so ridiculous? Maybe he's right and this kind of life is not for me. It's not how I pictured my life. I wanted to marry, have children, a regular job," Guntram said, becoming more and more agitated.

"Stop before you hyperventilate, child. I don't think you're with Mr. Repin because of his money. He's very fortunate to have you. The week you were together in London, you asked not a single thing from him. You gave him everything you have."

"It's the least I can do for him. He has always been so kind to me. I think I love him."

"I also think you do. Mr. Repin has never been so happy than with you. I've seen many of his past lovers and he was never so concerned about one like he's about you. He literally kisses the floor you tread on. If some of your friends reject you—and many of them will do it because you have radically changed your life—forget them and look for new ones. You will meet many people with interests more akin to yours in the University."

"You're probably right. I can't spend the rest of my life pleasing everybody."

"Only the people who truly care about you, like Mr. Repin," Mikhail clarified. "Go to bed now. We have to drive tomorrow."

"Will you let me drive?"

"I survived the Cold War, the war in Algeria, but I'm not sure I can survive this, Guntram." Mikhail joked with one of his charges for the first time in years.

"It's not that bad."

"Guntram, you asked me what was that "inverted triangle" painted on the road and believed me when I

told you it was a Satanist signal,” he laughed.

“I will not believe any more of your explanations Mikhail Petrovich,” Guntram laughed back, still embarrassed at the memory of how easy he had fell for it. “Or play poker with you.”

* * *

Guntram de Lisle Diary
January 18th, 2002

Six days ago I arrived to Paris where Boris Malchenko was waiting for me at an incredible flat at the Place Vendôme. By flat I mean two entire floors transformed into a penthouse overlooking the square. Very chic and decorated with priceless artworks. It was Constantin's mother's house when she was a child and he spent here the first nine years of his life. The artworks are amazing, mostly impressionists. The shops around are very chic; Chanel, Hermès, Cartier, Dior, Guerlain, the Ritz Hotel. The Louvre is very near and I went there three times, mostly to draw and look in awe. I went to the Tuilleries twice and walking around. In a way, I miss Mikhail because he disappeared on the 13th and Malchenko assigned me another “bodyguard”: Yuri Alexandrevich Rimsky. He was in Buenos Aires too, I remember him. He's fine but I still don't get why I need to have one around. I have nothing that could remotely interest anyone. However, he's my shadow and even told me off when I was at the Louvre, copying one of the big Assyrian Gates and two Japanese Girls stood in front of me, giggling all the time while I was working. I think blue eyes are rarity for Asiatic people as I've noticed several looking and laughing at me in Rome. I found them cute and I made a quick sketch of both of them and gave it to them, leaving the place immediately. The Russian went ballistic and shouted at me in English and Spanish—in case I was not understanding—because I'm not supposed to be “flirting”—excuse me?—with two tourists. “Do you want to face Mr. Repin's wrath for something so stupid, boy? Don't ever do that again, and much less in front of Mikhail Petrovich! He will eat your guts alive!”

He ran and told Malchenko. Gossip boy! I was again scolded in the night, during dinner, this time more elegantly.

“Guntram, your bodyguard has told me about a certain incident in the Louvre. Do you have something to say about it?”

“It was something very stupid. The girls just stood there for more than forty minutes, giggling and looking how I was drawing. I just made a simple portrait of them and gave it to them. I didn't speak with them. I left the room. I didn't mean to be offensive to them.”

“Your actions could lead to a serious misunderstanding. Please refrain from such childish acts in the future. My cousin does not tolerate any kind of lapses from his lovers. He reacts rather strongly to them.”

“I did nothing wrong!”

“I'm not accusing you, but some ill-disposed people could use your naïveté against you. Constantin is very traditional and if he has chosen you to be his companion, he expects the best behaviour from you. His temper is very short, Guntram. Know from now onwards, that he's very jealous. Is he your first serious relationship?”

“We are not in any kind of relationship, Mr. Malchenko, he told me so. He only wants an affair with me. Boyfriends don't catch his attention for too long, so he prefers that we consider this like a friendship with intimacy.”

“It's true that his boyfriends only last a few months, but he's not treating you like one of them. You were living in his house in London, he has assigned you Mikhail Petrovich to look after you—he's one of the best men he has—he lets you speak with us and we're supposed to treat you well and now you're here, under my charge till he comes for you. It doesn't look like an “intimate friendship” to me. I saw Constantin with you in London, and he treats you like a mate; not like one of his flings. Therefore, your behaviour should be spotless.”

“I understand,” I answered somewhat pissed off. I didn't do a thing, and here I was almost accused of starting a threesome with two tourist girls. I'm not Fefo!

“You can have your friends, but always remember to whom you belong to. I'll talk with my cousin over this.”

“Should I not tell him?”

“Let me do it and remember always this; despite whatever he might have told you, Constantin is very serious about you. Behave accordingly, Guntram. You would not like to cross my cousin. He can be your worst nightmare.”

January 21st, 2002

Last night, when I was sleeping, I was awoken by Constantin's hungry kisses. He really took me by surprise because I wasn't expecting him for another two days. The second he let me breathe—yeah, he can be very passionate and once he's in your bed, there's no way to get him out—I could only say: "I'm surprised, I missed you these weeks," but he didn't hear me, too busy tearing my pyjamas and his own clothes, not even bothering to answer me. Almost without giving me time to realise it, he had turned me around and was inside of me, riding me fast and hard. I didn't realise how much I had needed him and—even if it was hurting me—I joined his enthusiasm. He made me come like an animal. I don't know how sex is for other people, but with him is getting better and better.

I was almost dead after it, panting like crazy as he held me while kissing my neck. "Hey, should I ask your passport again angel? You're almost out of breath," he chuckled, proud that he had taken me, driving me mad with pleasure.

"If I continue to live with you, I don't think I'll reach my thirties," I laughed, kissing his hands and rearranging my position for better cuddling. "Also, jumping my bones in the middle of the night, is too much. I thought I was going to get dinner before."

"These weeks without you almost drove me crazy. I haven't slept the past two days just to hurry my business. You're addictive, my angel."

"Constantin, I'm totally lost with you."

"Why?"

"You say that we only have a friendship with sex kind of relationship; an open one as you get bored of us very easily, but yesterday the bodyguard and your cousin Malchenko nearly killed me because they thought I was fooling around with two girls in the Louvre. They were looking at my work and I made a sketch of them and gave it to them. Yuri shouted with me all the way back. Your cousin says that you think about me seriously and I should be, you know, a good boy."

"Were you flirting with two girls in the middle of the Louvre?" he asked me half upset.

"NO! Those were two tourists; Japanese or Chinese, looking at me drawing and laughing at me. I must have monkeys dancing all over my face because all girls do it and I hate it! I just gave them the paper and that was all! I don't understand why everybody turned this into a national security issue!"

"Guntram, hear me well. That we have an open relationship, as you call it, only means that we can break up at any time we don't like each other anymore, not that you can jump on every bed you see!" he shouted me, grabbing me by the wrists with some force. I shook myself free but he didn't let me go.

"Sure, I jump on every bed I see! Pity there's no one in! How many do you think I had before you?"

"Guntram, you're mine, is that clear? If I see another man or woman near you, it will end badly for both of you!"

"I did nothing! I'm the greatest dork in town and you accuse me, without even being there, of starting a threesome in front of your bodyguard and fifty visitors? This is insane, Constantin! If I'd have a guilty conscience, do you think I would have spoken?"

He looked at me with his black eyes in a terrifying way. I swear they shone in the darkness. He x-rayed me for a long time, trying to elucidate if I was lying or not. As fast as he had grabbed me, he released my wrists.

"Constantin, I don't want to be with any another person than you. You're wonderful to me. Do you think I want to cheat on you with two perfect strangers? It makes no sense." I tried to reason with him but he was still enraged and looking very dangerous. Suddenly he jumped on top of me and kissed me on my lips and I let him do it because I had no idea of what was going to be his next reaction.

"My angel, you're mine, understand this and we will have no problems at all."

"I'm yours," I protested.

"Yes, I know but you have no idea how desirable you are. Any other with half your looks would be making my life very miserable," he told me, crushing me against his chest.

"I? People don't even look at me."

"Guntram, I saw many drooling at you in that bar, but you never noticed them. I tried to speak to you many times, but you didn't notice me either. At your friend's party, you nearly hid under the table when I spoke to you. If you weren't so... I don't know, innocent, you'd be getting laid every two minutes," he said dejectedly, making me laugh.

"Not noticing you? You really pissed off Verónica with your French lessons. She specifically asked me to

get you, and you sent her away. That was really nasty, poor Verónica. She only wanted her tip. She has a family to support with her two brothers, her mother and her unemployed father. You gave her like fifty pesos the previous day."

"And told her very clearly to send you next time."

"Seems the message was never passed along," I chortled. "Next time, bribe her better."

"There will be no next time, Guntram. I want to keep you with me. I love you."

I was taken by surprise. I was speechless. I didn't know what to tell. Didn't he tell me that he didn't love me and only wanted to have fun with me? Was he sincere? I hesitated, not knowing what to tell. I looked him in the eyes and I saw the sad expression dangling from them and I knew he wasn't fooling me.

"I love you too," I confessed and buried myself in his chest.

Chapter 8

'There are worse places than this. Here, I could only die of boredom. An improvement considering my past positions. This one is well mannered and not troublesome at all. Mikhail Petrovich trained him well. He looks like a real prince, not affected or posh. But this is too boring for me. Today, he was in bed with the Boss till 11:00 when they finally left it. Repin was very satisfied because he wasn't yelling or making anyone's life miserable. Then, he was drawing and writing a little in his bedroom, very quietly while I was "parked" in the kitchen. The French maids are not like in the stories. Those two are fat, ugly and old. They have ruined one of my fantasies.'

'Repin had lunch with the boy and then he decided to send him for a walk. Since 2:00 I'm sitting at this terrace, drinking coffee only and reading the same magazine for the fourth time. What does he do? Sketches from some nasty doves. How Parisian! He even fed that disgusting bird with a croissant. "He has an attitude. I like him," he told me while he drew it. Too bad there's so little meat in that animal.'

'A dove is better than what I suffered under that hideous "Poppy", Olga Fedorovna's pet. Horrible, bubbly eyes, rachitic dog-rat. The witch decided to use me as the thing's bodyguard. Who can be such a son of a bitch as to buy a half a million dollars diamond collar for a dog, just to show in front of the other bitches? It's an insult to all what we were taught! So, here I was, a former group leader no less, opening the door for an excuse of a dog wearing a real Kashmir coat and two carats diamonds, so it could piss everywhere!'

'That thing hated me. I'm sure. It defecated on me several times and was always throwing its food—it had a special Chef only for it—out of the dish!'

'It was very unfortunate that the rat wasn't fast enough to pass through the door. Repin also hated it because he said nothing to me over the accident, only laughed and offered to buy another so it could inherit the necklace. I was sent back to work in the streets, once more collecting debts and keeping dealers in line, till Zakharov called me again because I speak Spanish fluently to work in Argentina for two years. I met the boy there and translated several of his conversations, took care of the mess in the slum with that dealer, and Mikhail Petrovich asked Repin to have me as his assistant so he could return to his normal work. The boy doesn't need to have him around at all and Repin is very pleased with what he sees so far. It's really an easy job but very boring.'

Once more Yuri Alexandrevich stifled a yawn—unnoticed by Guntram who only minded his drawing—and pondered to ask for another coffee (even if it was one of those sunny days in Paris), as a chilly wind was biting his cheeks. He looked around, uninterested, just to check that the table behind him had a new couple, two businessmen arguing over some papers, the next one had a group of old ladies drinking coffee, there was another with a good looking girl deeply engulfed in her book, the waiter was pretending to be busy sorting out glasses and in the table placed in a direct line in front of Guntram, were the two Japanese girls from yesterday, looking at him, but the boy was too busy with the birds to notice them.

'A coincidence? Don't think so. Better check them because they could belong to a rival organization. Besides, I don't want any more trouble with the boss. Surviving the Chihuahua experience was sheer luck.'

"Guntram, it's getting cold. Should we go back to the flat? The light is almost gone."

"Sure, Yuri Andreievich."

"It's Yuri Alexandrevich," he corrected him mildly, glad that the boy was not throwing a tantrum, like the dog used to do every time he was pulling it from its leash.

"I'm sorry, Yuri Alexandrevich," Guntram apologized truly contrite, starting to gather his charcoals and pencils.

"I know a good book store around here. We can spend some time there," he added to keep the boy distracted while he threw forty euros over the table. 'Get him out, before I have trouble. The last thing I need is to have Repin around.'

Guntram finished organizing his materials and put them back in a small metal box Massaiev had given him after finding several graphite spots in his jackets and packed everything in a leather portfolio, smiling briefly at Yuri, dying to leave the place.

"Wait! Look, that's Constantin! I mean, Mr. Repin," Guntram shouted joyfully when he saw the well-known frame of his lover.

"Hello, dear, you were here the whole time? Since two?" Constantin greeted the lad and stood in front of the table while Yuri rose to his feet and moved away from the place.

"It's nice here. I was drawing, but we were just leaving."

"Thank you," he dismissed the bodyguard and Yuri noticed that Alexei, Fiodor and Boris were already taking the other table. He bowed his head, praying that the boy would be clever enough as to keep his mouth shut about the stupid—or not—girls. Now, he would have to follow them. 'Cold War times were much easier.'

"What have you been doing so far?" Constantin asked Guntram as he sat next to him, taking the folder out of his portfolio and opening it for a close examination.

"Ouch, is it checking time? Nothing impressive, just drawing some doves. One was quite a funny guy. Hard to bribe for posing. He charged me two croissants," Guntram joked, but Constantin was not hearing him any longer for he was too focused on the drawings.

Several minutes passed as the man studied the different sketches of the doves. "Constantin, I told you it's not impressive, just birds doing bird things," he said, becoming more and more nervous at the man's deep silence and fierce concentration on his papers.

"No, they're very good. For the first time, I'm seeing you reflected on the drawings. Before they were perfect creations, lively too but they were recreations or perfect copies of what you have seen. Now, these birds have a life of their own; a character. It makes you want to touch the paper to be sure they're not alive. You obviously focused on the bully of the group, how he chases the females—more interested in eating than anything—his fights with the other males or how he loses his food to the sparrows, but at the same time you describe it, you take part of it, as many of the objects are slightly deformed to adopt them to a bird's perspective. I saw the watercolours you made from your stay in Italy and some of the studies you made and I'm starting to see a change in you."

"I paint like always, Constantin."

"No, you don't. I was right that coming here would change you for good. I only woke up what was dormant."

"You make me very happy and make me feel great," Guntram said, smiling softly.

"Should we leave now? I want to take you to the *Comédie Française*."

"That sounds great but I'll have to carry a dictionary with me."

"Time to learn your own language, Guntram." Constantin laughed, feeling like a young boy once more, rejuvenated and full of life.

His enthusiasm collapsed when two Asian girls came forward and shamelessly stood in front of Guntram, showing him a paper. "*Monsieur l'artiste*, you forgot to sign our drawing," one of them told to a very puzzled blond boy.

"Yes, of course," he mumbled, frantically looking for a pencil in his jacket, forgetting that he had just put them in the briefcase. "Constantin, do you mind? I don't know where I left my pen," he half pleaded with the man, forgetting in his embarrassment that he carried several pencils with him.

"No, of course not," Constantin answered dryly, chewing his rage as undoubtedly those women were after his angel, following and drooling over him. Clearly, Guntram was not guilty at all because he was looking very upset at the whole story.

"Write your phone number too," the second one suggested, making Guntram gape at her like a big dodo, unable to believe her boldness.

"We might also find someone for your father," was the final blow from the shorter one.

"I have no phone. Good day, ladies," Guntram barked very crossed making them flinch, their giggles abruptly stopped.

Constantin's fury knew no limits or boundaries. He wanted to kill the two little whores for offering themselves to his angel; for obviously making him have a hard time with their advances; for ridiculing him and cruelly laugh at his pure love, calling him "sugar daddy" right in his face. The kind and noble façade he had been maintaining for Guntram's benefit threatened to collapse but he was able to control himself thanks that his angel had started to walk home briskly. When Boris discreetly caught his steps some fifty meters away from the café, he only barked in Russian "those two won't see another morning." The tall man only nodded and disappeared with Alexei in tow.

Guntram stopped in his tracks and turned around to face Constantin. "My friend, you were right, I was a total idiot for giving that sketch to them. I thought they liked my stuff and I repeated what I used to do for the children. They all love to have something specially done for them. The rules here are different and I should be more careful. I'm sorry if my actions might have hurt you in any way."

"No, my dear; it's not your fault. I could never be upset with you. You just didn't know how people are."

You are too well-meaning and kind to believe it. Trust me and I will look after you.”

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's diary
January 24th London

We returned this morning from Paris in Constantin's private jet. He has one and it's a very beautiful aircraft. I was very surprised to find one of my earliest landscapes framed and hanging in his office there. "I had to fight with Oblomov to keep it. He wanted to steal it saying something like I had too many."

"Constantin, I filled many boxes in Italy, but this time you will let me throw to the trash what is useless."
I laughed.

"The last box you disposed of was valued in several thousand pounds. Don't you want to make some money out of the disgustingly rich people in London for your friends in Argentina?"

"You're right, but let me choose this time. I still have a very bad after taste with the newspapers."

"You have an appointment with the gallery owner. Mikhail Petrovich has the details. One piece of advice; let him negotiate the price. He's excellent for that."

"Do I get him back? Yuri Alexandrevich is fine."

"I prefer that you're with Mikhail. I trust his judgement more and he has finished his work in Romania and Ukraine."

"Don't misunderstand me, I like him also, but perhaps he feels bad to baby sit a boy."

"Guntram, you're very important to me. I want the best looking after you. I have a good position and you never know when your enemies may attack you or people would try to get money out of you."

"It's just I feel bad to make him stand in a Museum or walking in the cold to go to visit something. He has never complained or anything, in fact, he's very polite to me and was a great help in Italy but he's my elder and I feel like he has to be under me."

"Nothing more, far from it, my angel!" Constantin laughed at me. "Massaiev will put you in your place if you do something that displeases him. Once you start school, he will return to his normal occupations and Yuri Rimsky will stay with you for the normal things like drive you there. Now, let me work. Go and sit over there, or I'll start to ravish you."

I sat far away from him as he opened his laptop and dived into his work. He can easily read many of this pipelines or something like that projects. I took "Le Figaro" and I started to browse the newspaper, uninterested, looking for news about Argentina, but there was nothing. I guess the thrill was over. I read the film and books reviews and when I was going to leave it, I saw a small inset telling about two Chinese Exchange Students missing for the past five days when they left their house in Chartres to go to Paris. Their families were flying from Shanghai for the search and I thought on the two Japanese girls. Tourist women are truly vulnerable; they were after me, a simple idiot, looking to try the "hot French man" experience (!) but what could happen to you, in a foreign country if you tamper with the wrong people? They were nearly offering themselves to Constantin and me! What if I were a psycho? What were they thinking? Strangers are not nice by definition. Norman Bates was a regular looking guy; polite and hard-working and he was chopping naked girls on the shower and blaming it on his dead mother. On top, there were idiots staying at his hotel for parts II and III. People should try to find out more before trusting a total stranger.

Chapter 9

September 7th, 2002
St. Petersburg

The meeting had been utterly frustrating for Constantin, with the rising challenges to his authority in his own internal front. The new Russian government wanted to recover the spaces lost over the past decade and they were pressing more than ever before, driving many of his underlings into panic, pressing him to look for new markets in Europe.

"I don't trust Morozov any longer, Ivan Ivanovich."

"He met with Lintorff in Frankfurt two weeks ago." Oblomov replied.

"I know, Lintorff informed me a week ago. He refused to help Morozov. I still don't know why he kept our agreement when he could easily throw me out."

"Lintorff respects you and prefers you to anyone else. You helped him to control the situation with the Colombians. You both respect your territories since 1987 and he has been a great financial advisor to you."

"Don't forget to mention that I cleaned everything after many of his little lambs revolted against him in 1989 or when some of his customers are troublesome or don't want to contribute. One hand washes the other, Ivan."

"What should we do about him?"

"Getting rid of him might be problematic. He controls the entrances to Moscow and a war in that particular place would attract too much attention from the authorities."

"He wants to get rid of you and the others will follow him if they think they could get something out. It's going to be total war in any case."

"Most probably, but I don't want the Order in the middle of our wars. If they participate, Lintorff will keep all Central Europe to himself. We have to wait till Morozov makes a mistake and then, chop off his head."

"That rat knows about the pact and will try to make you break it. What if he forces Lintorff to fight with you?"

"Konrad is not an idiot. He knows me well."

"What if he tells him that you are having an affair with the grandchild of one of the men who tried to kill him or better, the one who killed the old Pavicevic? He would explode and we all know he's crazy when it comes to betrayals. Didn't he kill the whole de Lisle family? Up to the children? Guntram saved his ass because his father was clever enough as to keep him away and hide him in Argentina, without luxuries or anything."

"Along with sixteen lines more, Ivan Ivanovich. Perhaps Lintorff was never interested in the boy. After all he was only seven years old."

"His cousins were also young and he's still after the surviving uncle. The minute he catches him, he will impale him. Mark my words, Constantin."

"Guntram poses no threat to anyone."

"Lintorff paranoia is galactic size. If I were him, I would get the boy just to vent the frustration of not getting the uncle in more than thirteen years or just to make him come out of whichever hole he's in."

"This is why I keep Guntram away from him. Besides, Konrad wouldn't waste his time or risk to fight with me just because of him. He's no threat at all; knows nothing and prefers to keep distance from the Order."

"Boss, he wears a golden Crenel Cross. Only the top members have it."

"His father gave it to him and he thinks it's his baptism souvenir. He has no idea of what the Order is, so leave him alone."

"If Morozov opens his big mouth, Lintorff will charge against us like a raging bull."

"Morozov will not come with stories because he's not aware of who Guntram is. Morozov is just a gangster from a slum with too much power in his hands, looking for more. Nothing else. I would be more concerned that he attacks Lintorff and places the blame on me. Keep a close eye on him."

"All right, boss."

* * *

Constantin couldn't wait any longer to return to London, to his angel. Not even seeing Sofia, Constantin and Vladimir were enough reward to keep him away from Guntram. The three summer weeks the boy had spent in Argentina, fixing his papers and visiting his friends, had been a slow torture for him. 'One week more and I'll be at home. I can't stand any longer his absence,' he thought, lost in the memory of the youth jumping to his neck every time he saw him, with true happiness in his eyes or when he was showing his works or paints. His last oils were really good and he was always improving himself, working very hard, even he was telling that it was no work at all and insisted on wasting his time in that miserable Antiquity Shop at Portobello Market for four hundred pounds per month.

'All the money he makes selling his works with Robinson is used to pay his schooling or given it to those miserable people in Argentina. Finding him was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. Seeing him only two weeks or less per month is insufficient. The minute he finishes school, I'll take him along with me.'

The man opened his laptop to check if he had an e-mail from Guntram and there was one, with two attachments.

"My dearest friend, I hope you're fine wherever you are. I miss you and wish to have you by my side. I'm sending you two photos of some cat studies. I saw them in the park and found them very cute. Perhaps, I'll do something with them later or perhaps not. I'm still fighting with my last series. Mr. Robinson says I shouldn't be concerned about my teacher's opinions and continue to do what I like best, but I don't know, perhaps my classmates are right and I'm too dull and boring. With love, your friend, Guntram"

'They say it because no one would give more than ten pounds for their rubbish.' Constantin thought as he downloaded the files. He was fascinated by the two cats fighting, stretching, sleeping or playing.

His studio door was opened violently, but his hand was already on the trigger of a 9 mm, hidden under his desk. He fought against the desire to use it when he saw that his visitor was his wife, Olga Fedorovna, already looking furiously at him.

"How dare you? Get him out! Tomorrow!"

"If you don't like your new security arrangements, you might well stay at home and save me some money, Olga. The man stays."

"Don't play with me Constantin! I'm sick of your games! Get the little whore you have in London out of my house!"

"I have no whore except you at the moment! A useless, old and expensive one on top!" Constantin roared, enraged by the fact she had chosen that particular moment to rant about Guntram.

"You have the nerve to put him in my house at Ilchester Place. Get him out! I will not let you humiliate me in front of all my friends!"

"What I do with him is none of your concern, Olga."

"That you fuck around is a very well-known fact and I have turned a blind eye for many years but this is too much! I ordered Dimitri to make the house ready for me and he simply told me that you should order it!"

"Of course, those are my orders. If you want to stay in London, you have a brand new flat in Belgravia."

"I will not stay in a flea infested flat! When you bought that house it meant that we were going to go to London for a few months in the year. First, you told me that it needed a renovation, then that you were only staying there briefly and now, you have a whore living permanently there since December 2001! That place cost more than fifty million pounds!"

"Exactly. I bought the house, with my own money so it belongs entirely to me. I was gracious enough as to get you an alternate lodging should you dislike hotels. It's mine and Guntram lives there by my wish."

"You pay for his schooling, have granted him a scholarship in our Foundation, pay for his clothes and food!"

"The same I do for you—without the schooling of course—but he's cheaper than you and a thousand times more satisfying. He makes me very happy. Now, go away as I have to work."

"I'll divorce you for this!"

"Be my guest. It will only cost me two hundred million. I have wanted to get rid of you since many years. Take your bastard and go."

"I will not let you have the children!"

"I will not let you take Sofia, Constantin or Vladimir away. The smallest one is yours. He can visit his brothers whenever he wants."

"I will not tolerate your ways any longer!"

"Stop whining Olga. I said nothing about Stephanov. Have your adventure with him and leave me

alone!”

“You bought a \$300,000 dollars flat for him!”

“Yes, that's my anniversary present; something small for the first year.”

“Send him there!”

“It's far away. In Buenos Aires. You see, my neighbour, the one from the twelfth floor wanted to sell and I thought that maybe Guntram would like to have a *pied à terre* when he visits the city. Part of the collection I bought in Argentina, will go there.”

“It's a lot of money!”

“I said nothing when you bought that villa in Marbella for that man, in front of many of my business associates.” Constantin retorted dryly. “Listen to me well, Olga Fedorovna because I will not repeat myself. The house at Ilchester Place is off limits for you. Sleep at Buckingham Palace if you have to! Leave Guntram alone. If you come near him or disturb him in any way, you will know another side of me.”

“The men laugh at you because you're a faggot! A faggot running after a silly little boy! How do you expect that they respect you if you're such a ridiculous old man?” she spat the words.

“They will not follow a whore either. A gay is a hundred times preferable than a woman. Don't go against me, whore. I know how to treat your kind.”

“You'll cry and hide behind Ivan Ivanovich.”

“You're warned. Don't bother Guntram or go against me.”

“My father could hold the men much better. Remember that if you were accepted into our society despite being the product of a decadent woman and a stupid party member, it was because of my father.”

“The Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 and my decadent roots allowed me to form alliances with the decadent capitalists you love to suck and buy from. My stupid father controlled the Caucasus while your father was shaking his tail to Gorbachov. We were smuggling all what you desired to have during the “real socialism” times, do you remember? The USSR is dead my dear wife. You're useless now. I have my children and my position well secured. No one cares any longer who I fuck and no one is so stupid as to challenge me for that.”

“We'll see what the men have to say about this.”

“That Guntram is discreet, polite and totally out of their way? Oblomov and Malchenko like him very much. Strepovich, Baragan and Raditsky bought some of his paintings unaware that he was my lover and they also like him. Baragan asked him to do a portrait of his wife. No one has a problem with Guntram because he doesn't try to influence me or gain power. My five most powerful warlords accept him and I suspect they are glad that he's around because “I'm more easy to speak with,” according to Strepovich.

“This will not end like this, Constantin Ivanovich!”

“It can end any way you want, happily or badly for you; your choice. Now, get out!”

Olga Fedorovna slammed the door leaving the house more furious than ever. Constantin sighed and checked his watch. Time to tell the little monsters a story and put them to bed. He had had enough for one day.

Chapter 10

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
October 20th, 2002

Yesterday was my birthday and now I'm officially twenty years old. As Constantin is away on business—I can't help to remember how we spend together my previous birthday—I went out with some of the guys from the art class, Peter Steenburg, Clarissa Adams and Mary Higgs. I have a good relationship with them because they are the only ones who don't laugh at me. I'm not very popular with Mr. Southern's class. My style is too old compared to what all of them do. I'm also too young and most of them have already finished their MAs and I'm on the first year of the BA. They went to St. Martin's—one of the best worldwide—and I study Art History. No wonder that I got the “posh boy” nickname. I try to do my best to dress normally, without bespoke jackets or expensive brands when Constantin is away, but the other days I have to make the bloody parade. I completely hate it. I draw very figuratively, nothing abstract, almost like a hyperrealist and truly don't understand what they're doing. I get many negative critics from them. OK, last time, it was my fault but telling me that I should paint for the “Sarah Kay” series was too much. I was very vulgar with my “try to draw something more than stick figures, copy something classical if you can, and then, criticise my work.” Also having a contract with Robertson's Gallery, one of the most exclusive in London, irks them very much. Mr. Robertson's, a very old and kind man, the one who bought my first series, likes my work very much and sells it mostly to private collectors or companies. Yeah, I'm the type of artist whose work is worth to be hung in a hotel lobby or in a bank's meetings room or you can give to your grandmother for her birthday.

So coming back to birthdays, mine was yesterday. We all went to the pub around the corner and started to drink from 7:00 till 9:00 when the bar was closed but we stayed till ten. Clarissa and Mary are room-mates and they live like 7 blocks from the studio and we walked them home. The girls were not drunk but very expressive and yelling excitedly at the most stupid things. Getting the key in the keyhole was challenging but we managed to do it.

I told Peter that I would walk with him to the tube as I was certain that Yuri would be also “walking me” from somewhere in the dark. The former KGB boys took very seriously this “protection” thing. He's your shadow but you never catch him unless he wants. I still don't know how he does it. But he's a great guy and bribes me with nuts and muffins from Victoria Station.

We got to Holborn Station and Peter asked me if I wanted to go to his flat. I refused thinking that he wanted to drink some more and I was starting to feel dizzy and wanted to be in my bed and check if I had an e-mail from Constantin.

“Come on, it will be fun for both of us. You're always alone.”

“I have school tomorrow and then, pass by the shop. There's a large new load of old priceless Worcestershire Porcelain pugs waiting to be unpacked and cleaned before Sunday. I can't drink anything more.”

“Spend the night with me,” he said and I gaped at him like a big dodo. I think he drank too much.

“No, thanks. I can't. I have someone at home. Sorry.”

“Are you in a relationship? I didn't know that. Pity.”

“Yes, sorry. See you tomorrow after.”

“I'm not jealous. You can spend the night with me.” He insisted and took my hand and kissed it the middle of a dark street.

“Look Peter. I'm not interested at all. Good night.”

“Don't you like me?” I have to admit he's very good looking. All the girls and some boys drool over him: tall, green eyes, black hair, witty and self-confident.

“I'm with another person and I don't want to cheat on him. He's a great fellow and I don't want you. End of story.”

“All right, you miss it. Would have been a great way to end the day, Guntram. I'll be back. You're quite sexy to drop only after one try,” he told me and just like that, without any kind of warning, kissed me, this time on the lips. I pushed him away and the dork just laughed and went to the underground. I was kind of shocked, incredulous with his “love declaration”—better “fuck declaration”—and I turned around to find a really pissed off, no furious Mikhail Massaiev standing there.

“What were you doing?”

"Nothing! He kissed me. I wasn't expecting it."

"This is serious boy! Very serious!" He barked and grabbed my arm with iron fingers. I have a mark there. He half dragged me for thirty metres till a black Mercedes stopped on the street; he opened the back door and pushed me inside, sitting next to me. The driver was Yuri Rimsky and he was also looking furious.

"If boss sees it, you're dead! We all are!"

"What? He jumped on me!" I protested but Mikhail slapped me lightly on the face and I was now furious with him. "Get your hands away, idiot! I'll tell Repin about your behaviour!"

"You'd better be quiet, little idiot!" He shouted enraged and he hit me for a second time, much stronger than before. I tried to punch him but he easily trapped my right wrist and squeezed it very hard. I wailed in pain and fought to disentangle myself from his grip. Impossible.

"Listen to me well, little idiot. You should never let anyone but Mr. Repin to touch you! Your life depends on it! If you have been flirting with this boy, I'll personally oversee your punishment and you won't like it. If Mr. Repin finds out that you have a parallel relationship, you both are dead and it's going to be a very slow and painful death!"

"Mr. Massaiev, remember you're not supposed to touch Guntram. Mr. Repin will be most upset if you do." Yuri saved my ass because Mikhail was looking like a madman and I was becoming very afraid of him.

"Why does he think that he can have sex with you?" Mikhail shook me once more.

"I don't know, he never said anything in that sense ever."

"You are grounded for the next month. Only to school or work. I'm going to change the days you go to this atelier. Fix your working schedule or better quit," Mikhail barked at me.

"You can't do that!"

"Guntram, it's for the best. Let Mr. Massaiev fix this and do exactly as he tells you. It's the only way to prove your innocence." Yuri said and I realised that he was truly concerned about me.

"Why? It was nothing!"

"Guntram, don't be difficult. I know it's inconvenient for you to change your schedule, but it's for the best. Mr. Repin will be very displeased if he knows that you're in the same classroom with a man that just assaulted you," Yuri interfered.

"It was a stupid kiss!"

"A kiss today, tomorrow, who knows? The best is if we separate you from him. It's very uncomfortable to work side by side with a person who's sexually interested in you. It will be bad for your concentration and this people later start with rumours. Your art is what you care most and it can't be ruined by a horny wannabe artist," Yuri finished.

"I think you're right, Yuri. I didn't think on that."

"Guntram, you have to let us do our work and trust us more. We know better. I'm sorry if I shouted at you. Are you all right?" Mikhail asked me, looking truly contrite and concerned. "Is your wrist fine?" He asked me when he saw that I was still rubbing it to alleviate the pain.

"You have a strong hand Mikhail Petrovich but I'm all right. I swear I did nothing to get his attentions."

"That's good to hear, child."

"I have class tomorrow after, should I go?"

"No, let me speak with your teacher. We will change the days and you can inform your employer. She's a kind lady and knows that you're a student."

"Yes, but I'll forewarn Mrs. Smithers tomorrow after school. I have to be there at 4:00."

"Do that Guntram. Are you feeling all right really? You look very pale and you're gasping for air."

"I have a headache. Too many beers and one whiskey," I confessed starting to feel sick.

"Lay down against me. You look like you're already starting the hangover. I'll give you something for it when we're home." He smirked, shaking his head like the grown-ups do when they see a child doing something truly stupid. I didn't want to lay my head against his chest, still sore from the slaps, but he has always been very kind to me and anyone can have a bad day. I obeyed him and he stroke my hair murmuring something like "you're a good boy; you don't want to cause troubles to us."

When we arrived home, I went to my room directly to change into my pyjamas and go to sleep. I had a huge headache and the room was moving like a wild boat. Over my desk was a nice bouquet of blue and white flowers with a box of tea and butter cookies from Fortnum and Mason—OK, posh boy is not so undeserved—and a card written by Constantin "Happy birthday my angel" Inside the flowers was a small box with a Watermann fountain and dip pen. I was so moved by it that I didn't noticed that Mikhail was there holding a glass in his hand.

"Guntram, you need to drink this and go to bed."

"What's in there?"

"Vitamins and water. You'll need it against the hangover."

"Constantin sent me this. It's amazing. I was expecting an e-mail but not this. Do you think it's a good moment to call him?"

"No, leave him alone for the time being. He has some troubles with Lintorff and is under a lot of pressure."

I felt like trash, Constantin has troubles with that hideous man and I added one more by letting myself be kissed by a guy who only wants a good fuck. I'm a jackass, unworthy of him.

"I didn't know it. He told me nothing."

"He doesn't want to worry you. Now drink it and go to bed. Tomorrow you can write to him."

"Lintorff is very bad, isn't he?"

"He's an ugly and treacherous adversary. He has no problems to resort to violence when it suits his needs. He leads the Order with an iron fist. There's the rumour that once two members rose against him during one of their meetings. He accused them of treason because they had leaked some internal documents and ordered to behead them in front of all people."

"Behead as cut in off their heads?"

"Exactly, with a sword they keep. All top members have one and the Hochmeister is always buried with his. Lintorff has one that is a copy from the Executioners Sword's from the Spanish Inquisition. Long and strong blade with a Jesus Christ in the cross in the handle. Had been used several times, especially in 1989. The murderer, —they prefer to be called Executioner— refused for some reason and dared Lintorff to do it by himself. He did, in front of the whole Order and killed that man too."

"But this is horrible! It can't be true! People don't do such things!"

"He's no ordinary people, Guntram. They're fanatics for the Church and give a lot of money to it. They lurk in the shadows and do whatever is in their hands to get more power. Mr. Repin is arguing with them over some privatizations in Central Europe. Lintorff respects the boss, but he can change his mind at any time."

"Can't Constantin go to the police?"

"What for? They control everything in Europe. It has been their territory since the XVII century. They manage up to the last cent a junkie spends in his fix. The people who benefit from these illegal businesses needs them to clean their money and have protection from the police and Justice. You have to fight with them in their own terms. Usually, Lintorff prefers to settle problems peacefully but if he's in a killing spree, there's no place on this earth where you can hide."

"What can I do for Constantin?"

"Let him work. It's not the first time they have a disagreement. They will show their teeth at each other and then, will negotiate and reach a joint solution. Be nice to him."

"I will. I'm so sorry for today's mess."

"I know, Guntram, but you have to do exactly as I tell you from now onwards. Let me fix it, child."

"Yes, of course."

"Good boy, now change your clothes and go to bed. Tomorrow you have school and no hangover will prevent you to be there first thing in the morning."

* * *

Yuri Alexandrevich collapsed on the kitchen chair, lacking the strength to pour himself a vodka. He needed one. 'Things were easier back in the Cold War. No one was going to drop the bomb and now I live in a permanent Sarajevo for my nerves. Tonight was really close.'

'I'm also dead on my feet.' Mikhail Petrovich sighed and went for the bottle in the cabinet and two glasses. "This was the last time I give him permission to go out with crazy artists. Only respectable Museum parties, theatres or movies. Shit! What was he thinking?"

"Nothing related probably. Guntram is very inattentive. I would bet that the boy made several approaches and he never realised. There's nothing in his diaries about him and he writes everything down. But our desks are covered with trash Mikhail Petrovich. What are we going to do?"

"You managed very well."

"Thank you, the French school is also not bad."

"Years of practice in Algeria; 1961 to 62. Those Arabs were really tough to break."

"I'm glad I was always in Europe or America."

"Tomorrow I'll change the boy's schedule and speak with Repin."

"Do it after he has some fun with Guntram. He's easier to talk to then."

"It's good advice but what if the boy talks? He can't be quiet for more than two hours if he screws something up." Massaiev downed his vodka.

"Then we have to enrich the story. That man, Peter jumped on him and Guntram wanted to be changed from classroom. He wanted to drop the painting lessons, but you managed to convince him to stay because he needs them but he's afraid to go because he does not want to meet the man. We should do something about it." He said, rising an eyebrow.

"I see your point but..."

"Guntram is now in one of his guilt strikes, thinking that he has done something horrible. The boy considers that buying a muffin without authorization is the biggest crime he can do."

"You're right Yuri Alexandrevich. I'll speak with the boy again. We won the lotto with this one and I don't want to change him any time soon."

"Guntram is for keeps. He was terrified of you after two slaps only. Normally when the boys misbehaved you had to do much more. He has an easy and sweet temper. We should do our best to keep the competition away because although Guntram will not look for any extra-curricular activities, he's a really good dish to ignore. He's satisfied and happy with what he has and too honest to cheat on the boss."

* * *

October 26th, 2002

After piling up the last box for the day, Guntram felt drained and still had to read some texts for tomorrow's lessons. Sighing tiredly he considered that it had been a good idea to reduce his painting lessons to twice per week as he couldn't be everywhere and Mrs. Smithers had been mildly upset when he had asked her to change his working schedule. "Sundays are out of question, darling." In order to reduce the working hours, he will have to come one day more, Monday, Wednesday, Thursdays, Fridays, and the entire Sunday to cope with the tourists and serve them wine while she was making a sale.

He took his coat from the rack and gathered his backpack full with his books. "Don't forget your scarf, darling," Guntram heard her voice from the back shop and he said good-bye. At the usual corner was Yuri waiting for him to walk him home, a true waste of the man's time in Guntram's opinion but who was brave enough as to discuss with Mikhail and Constantin over such issues. They walked in amiable companionship without speaking for half an hour till they reached the imposing house. Guntram's heart skipped for a bit when he saw the familiar black Rolls Royce sitting at the entrance and he dashed toward the iron gate but two dark-haired unknown men crossed his path with a menacing expression.

"He's with me, gentlemen," Yuri said and both men moved aside, letting Guntram into his own house.

"Who are those twerps?"

"Lintorff's men. Very crazy Serbs. He brought them to play with the boss. Inside is a full party boy. The Duke is here, speaking with Repin; they both flew together from New York. A Boeing 737 wasn't big enough."

"I don't like Lintorff here."

"Neither do I but they're in the middle of a peace agreement."

"He's a mobster with more money than the others!" Guntram said very shocked. "Look what he did to Argentina!"

"Boy, there's a little bit of a Godfather in each one of us. It's a minimal survival skill," Yuri huffed. "Do you want to eat? I can get you something from the kitchen. Dinner is going to be late today."

"No, I'm fine. I'll be studying in my room."

Guntram crossed the foyer finding three of Constantin's bodyguards and another unknown one that probably belonged to the German. Massaiev came from the living room and sent him to his room while the man inspected him from head to toe, casting a disdainful glance at the youth.

In his room he took the small watercolour he had made from the flowers Constantin had given him for

his birthday and with infinite care squared the edges with a cutter and glued it to the light blue passe-partout, writing on the back side, "Thank you for your friendship, with love, Guntram." He took a white envelope and placed the card inside; softly smiling at the idea that even if he had brought a bastard home, Constantin was downstairs and they would be together for dinner.

He opened his book and supported his head with the hands to read the chapter.

The feverish kisses from Constantin took his breath away and he was barely able to respond to them in his futile attempt of avoid suffocation. Guntram could feel that his lover was happy about something as he muttered "I missed you Constantin."

"I also," he replied tearing his angel's clothes off as he kissed his neck almost biting him.

"Let's try to reach the bed," Guntram chortled but not stopping his kisses or his hands from unbuttoning his lover's shirt.

Guntram pushed Constantin playfully onto the bed and positioned himself over the man to kiss him better while his hands unbuckled the man's belt and opened his trousers, enjoying how he held his breath and surely was trying to anticipate Guntram's next move. The boy licked the already engorged member and took it in his mouth, gently sucking it, exactly as his lover preferred.

"Get on all fours my angel," Constantin whispered in his ear as it was one of his favourite positions although Guntram hated it. He felt so exposed and the position was so mechanical, only designed to enjoy better the sex but it felt so cold, as there was no eye contact or hugs, nothing to share, only the sex. Guntram tried to make the man change his mind by lacing his arms around his neck and pulled him against his chest, kissing his neck and lightly touching the skin with his chin.

"Come on, Guntram, don't be difficult," Constantin growled partly crossed that the boy was being so hesitant. Guntram sighed but tried it once more; "please my friend, you know I don't enjoy it so much."

"Nonsense dear, we both like it. You always play difficult at the beginning but you always climax with me. I missed you so much these weeks," he said, taking Guntram by the hips with a strong grip and turning him around. The boy suppressed a sigh, hating what was coming, but Constantin deserved to have some fun and after all, it wasn't that bad, just uncomfortable and humiliating as he was taken like the animals on the National Geographic pictures.

Guntram nearly cried at the semi-brutal penetration and the fast pace he set. He grabbed onto the silken sheets, trying to relax as much as he could. The man's weight over his back or the arm across his chest, trapping him, were painful but Guntram knew that that was Constantin's way to reassure him and make him feel his love. "You're so wonderful, my angel," the man gasped into his ear just before he got his release inside his young lover.

The boy panted from sheer exhaustion but his Constantin was finally sated, exhausted, still on top of him and not letting him go to wash himself. In the afterglow, he briefly pondered if he should tell or not, but he was uncertain of his friend's reaction. He was extremely jealous of any man or woman that could come near him.

"Constantin, are you at peace with Lintorff now?"

"We reached a settlement. That's all, my love. Why do you ask?"

"When I came from work there were two men—Serbs according to Yuri Alexandrevich—and they looked like bad news. Inside was a tall blond and he inspected me in a very obtrusive way."

"That must have been Holgersen; he's Lintorff's favourite young hound and the grandchild of the owner of Wallenberg Oil Industries in Sweden and one of his heirs. All of them are Order's members but he always preferred the Navy and was in a unit similar to the American Seals; lethal in combat. There's the rumour that Lintorff trains him to be a strategy advisor in the future. The others were Ratko Bregovic and Radovan Mircic, crazy Serbs from Krajina. They like to be called Executioners but in fact they're murderers."

"What were those people doing here? They could be dangerous for you!" Guntram shouted.

"No, my love. There are no problems between us at the moment. Lintorff and I spoke, settled our differences as I'm not interested in Central Europe and he's going to support a project of mine for extracting oil from tar sands in Canada. It's a huge investment and will take most of my capital. The building costs of the processing plants are huge but we calculate that the reservoir is superior to those in Saudi Arabia. Lintorff agreed to lend me the money I need. It's a project for the next twenty-five years."

"If it was only business, why did he bring his killers?"

"Perhaps he was thinking I was going to kidnap him and force him to sign the loan," Constantin chuckled and he grabbed Guntram closer to him to kiss the boy's neck and ear, making him shudder. "You're so sensitive and delicate my angel."

"I love you, Constantin but why do you have to go away for so long?"

"I would love to take you with me but you have to study my angel. Perhaps you could make your MA in Paris and we could have more time together but we have still two years to think about it. I really would like to have you with me all the time."

"I know you do your best to be with me whenever you can. Mikhail told me you came from New York this time, sharing the plane with Lintorff."

"Yeah, very bad idea, my angel. The menu was sausages and potato salad. These Germans are impossible!" Guntram couldn't help to laugh at the image of his very gourmet lover sitting in front of a beer jar and a bowl of potatoes and kissed his frown.

"That was a huge sacrifice. I have something for you," he said, jumping from the bed to look for the envelope. "Open it."

"I should be giving you something. I missed your birthday."

"We just threw the party," Guntram grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Or should we throw another?"

"After dinner; I'm over forty now," Constantin joked as he absently opened the envelope to be rendered speechless at the picture of the flowers.

"Those are the flowers you gave me. The cookies didn't last enough as to pose."

"It's very beautiful. Thank you. I'm deeply moved."

"I was very glad that you didn't forget it."

"How could I forget it? You're the most important person in my life. Besides Irina is an excellent secretary," he chuckled making Guntram flash him an accomplice smile. "Come on, get dressed and let's have your birthday dinner. Tomorrow I'm taking you to the Covent Garden."

"I have an opening at the Barbican. Robertson gave me the card and told me I have to be there and socialize with the customers. All in the class are very cross because I'm invited and they're not. I really tried to get another card but Robertson's nearly sent me to Hell."

"We'll go to the Barbican and eat dry cheese and warm champagne."

"I'm afraid you're not invited."

"Is the opening for this William Blake's exhibition?"

"Yes, it is."

"I must have a card somewhere and if not, I will be most upset with the curator. She got like 1.3 million pounds from me this year. If she forgot to invite me, I'll dump her in formalin and send her to David Hirst so she keeps company to his shark."

"You're very nasty when you're crossed," Guntram laughed. "Almost like Lintorff."

"You have no idea, my angel. Today's goons were not because of me but because in the morning some protesters were shouting and throwing things at him at his bank's entrance. It was a funny moment for me, but the Rolls will have to be thoroughly cleaned. It was a hard moment for him to meet the populace."

"Who were they? Are they still alive?"

"Of course, some Americans and locals. The leader is a journalist and knows about the Order. Most of the chants were mentioning it. I've never seen him so furious at his own people when we went inside."

"Those people deserve a medal."

"The Order of Merit of Great Fools, Guntram. Do you really think that if Lintorff were to disappear, the Order would be extinguished? No, they will only hide in the shadows for a few years while they kill all the traitors and those who opposed them. They're deep rooted in our society. Write something about them and people will think that you're crazy. Only once you have dealt with them first hand, you know about their existence and they come to you, not you to them. It has been like this for centuries and I guess that they do this long before they founded the Order in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War. But let's do not spoil our dinner with them. I have a surprise for you downstairs, in my studio."

* * *

By dessert Guntram couldn't stand his sense of guilt any longer. Constantin had been wonderful to him in the few hours they'd been together: tender, considerate, funny and loving to him, looking after him.

"How you are faring with your teacher? I don't ask about the university because I saw you studying." Constantin asked while he drank another glass of champagne.

'Now or never.' "There's something I must tell you. I changed my hours with him. I'll only go twice per week to his studio."

"Why is that?"

"I had some problems with one of the students and I preferred to avoid him for the time being. I also will have to work one day more in the store to compensate the hours I'm losing. Besides, I don't feel like I'm progressing with this man or with the other students around. We just don't get along at all. Honestly, throwing paint to a canvas and yelling at the same time is not my style."

"Guntram, don't try to lie to me. What happened really?"

"On my birthday I was out with some of the students. We drank some beers and we walked the girls home. Then I walked with Peter to the underground. He asked me to go to his house and I thought he wanted to drink some more and I said no because I had school and work the next day. Then he said that he wanted some sex and I replied that I was in a relationship and said no. He said that he was not jealous and I stood there, frozen and he kissed me. I pushed him away and went home. I don't want to see him any longer."

Constantin's fury nearly came to the surface but his many years of self-discipline made him control himself in less than a second while Guntram was telling the story in a slurred and confusing way. 'Obviously he has done nothing, but better show him the whip. I'll take care of that man who dared to pollute my angel.'

"If you did nothing, why are you so nervous?" He started the offensive.

"I swear I did nothing! It's just that I didn't see it coming! I don't want to be near him ever again. God, I'm such an idiot! Constantin, I never wanted to hurt you!"

"Why should I be hurt if you allegedly did nothing?"

"Because I'm bringing you an extra problem when you already have so many! Because when you were thinking on me I was drinking with an idiot! I'm terribly sorry to bring this up."

"Guntram I trusted you and now you tell me that you were kissing another boy in the middle of the street when I was out, working?" Constantin used a hurt voice.

"I didn't do anything. I stopped seeing him! You have to believe me," Guntram pleaded.

"How can I be sure? That you want to leave the class shows a certain degree of guilt from your part."

"The man jumps on me and I'm guilty?"

"Why are you reacting so much then?"

"I don't know any longer, my friend. I don't know," Guntram said dejectedly, the dizziness hitting him with full force and his heart hammering in a nasty way. "If you think that you can't believe in me any longer, I'll leave the house tomorrow or now if you prefer."

Constantin laid his back against his damask chair and poured himself another glass. He tasted the champagne and let the time pass by. Nothing like properly bidding your opportunities. He could hear Guntram gasping for air and he knew without looking at him that he was staring at him with his big blue eyes full of pain, hanging from each of his words.

"Guntram there's nothing to bind us but trust. Without it..."

"You speak about trust but you don't believe me, Constantin."

"It's you who cast the doubts with your illogical actions. Why going away?"

"Because that's what Mikhail Petrovich told me to do! I'm grounded without reason till next Christmas! All of you drive me insane with your suspicions. Both were yelling at me!"

"Perhaps we should reconsider our priorities, as you say, Guntram," Constantin knew that the youth was now into his confused and desperate phase. "I come here and I find out that you were kissing another and have changed your working schedule once more, taking more hours. It's very obvious that you don't want to be next to me as much as before." His sad voice broke his young lover's heart, his eyes clinging from every move the man was making. Guntram closed his eyes in obvious pain at the sound of the chair legs dragged against the floor.

"Please, don't go away Constantin." Guntram's hand clutched onto the man's sleeve. "You're the most important thing in my life," he said with a quivering voice.

'Exactly where I wanted you. Time to clip those wings a bit. He's developing a very inconvenient independent streak.' "You're also important to me and I do my best to keep you happy but it seems it's not enough."

"I'm very happy with you!" Guntram protested.

"You quit your lessons—even if you know that I believe he's a good teacher and has many connections for your future; it was a miracle that he accepted you—and change your working schedule to spend more time away from me. You disappear every Sunday to sell china poodles for ten pounds apiece. I should have realised much earlier,

Guntram.”

“No! I never thought it that way. I took this job because it's good for my career. I'm learning a lot with Mrs. Smithers.”

“If you would wait to finish your BA, you'd probably get an internship at a real company, working and learning with real professionals. There you would see which would be your future field of expertise but you favour to spend your time in a second rate shop, moving furniture around and trying to identify an unknown painter from the XIX century.”

“Constantin I...”

“It's very clear. You have a scholarship that could support you without problems and already a manager who sells your pieces and you make some extra money with him. He wants to make an exhibition with your work next summer but instead of working hard with your teacher, you're serving white wine to snob tourists. You have just turned twenty years old, have an offer from a good gallery to exhibit your pieces—most of your colleagues would kill for such an opportunity—and you're opening cheap wine bottles. It's obvious that after one year at my side, this is not what you really want to do.”

“No, never! I love you and never wanted to hurt you! I work to support myself! I can't take any more from you!”

'Typical Guntram.' “You're wasting your talent and attacking my love for you.”

“I'll reduce the hours at the shop! I'll work harder at the studio!”

“Will you really do it or those are nice words just to reassure me?”

“I give you my word that I will only work on Sundays or quit. You always leave on that day!”

“I needed to spend some time with you as these weeks were terribly stressful for me...”

“I'll stay with you tomorrow. I will not go to work after school.”

“That would certainly be very kind of you. I miss the days when you used to keep me company just drawing or painting.”

“I want to spend more time with you but you're always travelling.” Guntram rose from his chair and put his arms around Constantin's waist and his head against the man's chest. “Please, forgive me,” he whispered without truly understanding why he was asking for forgiveness but the need to do it was stronger than anything.

“Of course I forgive you, my love. You never meant to hurt me although you did. It's just you're so young that you don't think in advance.”

“I won't do that again.”

“Guntram, you're young; it's in your nature to be foolish and reckless.” Constantin smiled tiredly still looking hurt.

“You're so patient with me. I love you.”

“I also do and this is the most important thing for us. Our love and your art. The rest is secondary.”

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's diary.
October 27th 2002

I told Mrs. Smithers that she should look for another helper at the store because I couldn't come any more on weekdays. She was very understanding and offered me to be there only on Sundays. Of course the payment will reduce significantly; to one hundred twenty-five pounds per month but Constantin is right. I can sell my pieces and I feel very well when I hear that someone spent his efforts to get something from me. It makes me want to improve myself and work harder.

Against my original belief, Constantin's birthday's present was a flat in Buenos Aires. I'm still in shock. It's in his same building! It's one of the most expensive places there! He even gave me the Tamayo I liked so much! He told me that it's for me whenever I want to visit Argentina and if I break up with him, he can move to the upper floors and make my life miserable till I return at his side.

He's just wonderful to me. I don't think I could live without his gentleness and care. He always has the right word for me.

* * *

"I understand that there was a small incident regarding Guntram and a boy from his class," a very furious Repin said to his man, standing in front of him in a military way.

"I controlled the situation and isolated Guntram from the offender. I preferred to keep its record out of our correspondence as it might need a radical solution," Massaiev answered.

"Why do you think so?"

"This man has phoned Guntram several times more, but the boy never answered his calls or e-mails. He had cut all kinds of ties to this person."

"Ask Kalashov to contribute with the logistics and solve the matter in two week's time. Permanently."

"Yes, Mr. Repin. What about the other issue? The store?"

"Cancel it. He has just resigned and will only go on Sundays. Makes no sense to waste our resources on this."

* * *

November 13th 2002

I'm horrified. Clarissa called me during the break and told me what had happened. I wanted to go to the funeral but Mikhail said that it was impossible to get a plane ticket to Edinburgh with such short notice. All full. Besides, Constantin wants to see me in Paris before he goes to Moscow for two weeks. I have to hurry if I want to catch the plane to Orly.

Poor Peter! He never hurt a fly and two robbers got nervous and shot him dead! Right on the spot. He didn't resist and gave them the little money he had!

He was a good person and a good painter too. I feel terrible for not answering his e-mails or calls. I only thought that it was the product of too much beer and whiskey but he told me several times he liked me very much. I also liked him but as a friend and nothing else. We were not even friends, just looking what the other was doing in class. The girls invited him that night. We will miss him.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 13th 2002

I'm almost finished with the tests for the term and bordering exhaustion. Honestly, I'm glad I reduced my working hours. Tons of assignments from the teachers in addition to the class presentations, visiting places to check "in situ" the collections. All that without mentioning the stress of coping with an asshole for artistic mentor. The man might be as famous as David Hirst and one of the members from the London Artistic Movement but we just don't get along. I can't paint with all these people around me, looking at me over their shoulders. The all mighty asshole laughed at the idea that I could have an exhibition at Robertson's.

All right, I lost my temper with him that afternoon.

"Yes, I have an exhibition scheduled for mid-August 2003 at Robertson's. Why is it so strange?"

"It's going to be something worthy of Hallmarks greeting cards. Good for the upcoming holiday season." Mr. Southern mocked me and all the pricks laughed at me, encouraged by my teacher's incredible wit.

"I would love to be in Hallmarks and that something made by me could make someone happy for a second."

"Can I puke Charles? This Care Bears moment is dreadful for me," Frank, the Super Clever Idiot said.

"Better being a care bear or Sarah Kay than a snob begging for wall to hang my things and hiding my frustration at rejection by playing the Rebel Artist," I answered hotly and the whole class, teacher included, gaped at me. Guess they didn't know that the nice Guntram had a temper hidden somewhere.

"At least I'm an artist and not rich brat with a colouring book!"

"Yes, I'm able to stop painting at the lines, can you say the same? Get an exhibition of your own instead of criticizing my work. Are you not tired to be in collective exhibitions? How old are you to fight with me?"

"Everybody knows that if you get something is because your sugar daddy is a rich Russian bloke, paying for everything you want and known because he has Foundation for real artists."

"Whoever I live with is none of your concern! I've sold much more in a year than you in your whole career!"

"Selling is not enough! It's what you create!"

"Enough, both of you! Guntram go there, sit and try to do something original for once instead of copying everything that moves around! And you Frank, be quiet!"

So I have to work extra to make something good for August. I'm not painting any longer at the studio. I prefer to do it at home. I work better alone.

The only small problem? Yuri is afraid that I stain his car when I take my paints to Robertson's.

* * *

His mobile had been ringing for some time before Guntram realised he had an incoming call. He cursed himself for his distraction while he cleaned his hands with a rug before answering it. "Hello?"

"Hi, Pumpkin. It's me."

"Fefo? I can't believe it! I wasn't expecting a call from you!" Guntram blurted astonished to get a call from his long-time friend after a year of not speaking with each other.

"It's Christmas, we could bury the axe. I've been thinking a lot about you and I realised I was a cretin with you. Do you think you could forgive me?"

"Sure thing, Fefo. It must have been hard for you to find out that I was living with a man. I should have told you earlier but things just happened."

"I guess so. How are you?"

"I'm great and very happy with Constantin. He's here but will leave on the 28th to Paris for a few days. I finished the first year of Art History at the UCL and I will have an exhibition in August, at the gallery where I sell my stuff."

"Wow, that's impressive, Guntram. I'm in Law School and passed many of the subjects. The rest is left for March. I'm working at the Senate with a friend of my mother's. Quite boring, if you want to know. I'm trying to be more responsible."

"Now I'm impressed. You working and studying at the same time?"

"Not having you around made me realise a lot of things," Federico whispered.

"I was your bad influence? I covered your hide more than a thousand times," Guntram laughed in disbelief.

"Perhaps too much and I should take responsibility for my actions. You were right; we were too different to be friends. I was a useless brat and an asshole to the only person who really cared for me."

Guntram had no idea of what he should tell next as he was totally shocked by the words and change in his friend. "I'm glad for you Fefo, I was concerned about you. Next you should find someone good to spend the rest of your life and have many children so you atone for all your rogueries."

"I did, but I guess I lost that person because of my own foolishness, Pumpkin."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Hey, it's Christmas and we should not be depressed even if we know that the parents are Santa. I'm in Paris again, all on my own. My father is skiing in Gstaad and that's too uptight."

"Federico Martiarena Alvear, are you telling me that you refused to go to Gstaad?"

"The Senator I'm working for made me visit many of the poor areas of his province—looking for votes, of course—and I couldn't help to feel bad for those poor devils. There's nothing funny in living with seven children and some tin and cartons for roof. Listen, pumpkin do you think you could come to Paris or I could see you in London. I would like to speak with you and see you."

"I also, Fefo. Let me think. Constantin flies on the 28th to Paris. Perhaps I could slip into the flight if he has no business meetings planned. I should ask him. If not, I could take a commercial flight after New Year because now would be almost impossible to get a ticket."

"I can always meet you in London."

"Hey, I want to visit my home country. Let me talk with Constantin and I'll write you tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Pumpkin."

* * *

Constantin was more than annoyed. Furious would have been a better description. As usual, his angel was running after the first moron who was telling him a tearful story and he had chosen that particular moment to show that he could be stubborn as an old mule.

Guntram wanted to fly to Paris alone as Mikhail was in holidays, visiting his relatives in France till January and Yuri was in Russia for the new year. Guntram had originally agreed to stay put in London for the holidays and work in his upcoming exhibition and now he was planning to run for a whole week with that impudent brat. Had they not quarrelled in Italy?

On top, he had told him that he would go to a hostel—a HOSTEL!— so he wouldn't be in his way if he had some business to run! 'Sure, to a hotel so the other can do whatever he wants with him. Lord, how big can his idiocy be? Does he not realise that this boy is after him? Yes, that's what I get for falling in love with a dove... they're by definition idiotic birds! And lambs are only good for the barbecue!'

He had to force the boy to come with him in the plane, in the middle of a planned delicate meeting with Morozov and stay at Place Vendôme with his cousin Boris because he was leaving for Moscow that same night. "Only 4 days Guntram, you have to work!" He had shouted vulgarly and he hated to be thus.

"Love as the wolf loves the sheep," was the old proverb and there was nothing more true in his case.

He was going to make sure that his angel would not spend a single minute with that boy. Boris would have to use his own people.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 29th 2002

I still don't understand him. Maybe I do but and I don't want to accept it. Fefo duped me for the...better don't count Guntram, you won't like the final number.

I took the plane with a brooding Constantin upset that I was "miserably wasting my time when I should be working." He was so right and I should have listened to him, but I'm an idiot! In the plane were Oblomov, Morozov, Strepovich, Baragan and Raditsky, all of them arguing hotly in Russian for the two hours. Morozov was the most enraged and shouted with Oblomov all the flight while Constantin was very serious. It seems he made some investments that collided with Lintorff's interests somewhere.

They continued their shouting at Constantin's flat in Place Vendôme with Boris Malchenko included. They had lunch there but I was not invited and I took the opportunity to escape for a walk around the city, without a bodyguard.

Constantin shouted at me for going away alone and nearly put me on the next plane back to London. Only Boris' intervention saved my skin. I just took the metro to Père Lachaise to visit my parents' graves! What could happen in a graveyard?

At six I was supposed to meet with Fefo at a café at Montmartre, near his hotel but he never showed up or phoned me. At 8 p.m. I was sick of waiting and getting no answer from his phone. I was freezing my ass when I took the metro back to Constantin's house.

Boris shouted at me for taking the metro and staying out for so long and told me I was going to catch pneumonia.

I'm sneezing and feeling like shit so he's probably right.

The Lost Fefo? Should I be worried like I was?

NOT AT ALL! He dumped me for 2 French blondes—peroxide blondes but he doesn't care! He called me last night at 23:30 to inform me that he had met the two and was having the greatest time of his life

Fuck you!

I went to bed feeling miserable and like a total idiot.

* * *

January 3rd 2003

I'm still in Paris and in the middle of a mess. A real one, with police included! This morning a policeman

came to the flat asking about me. I stood in front of him as he checked my documents. Fortunately, Boris was at home and immediately took the matter into his hands.

"Everything seems to be fine and Customs confirms your date of entrance to the country. Do you live in London?"

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"Please answer the questions, Monsieur."

"He has nothing to answer to you. I do not like your way of questioning."

"We could do this at the Station. I'm sure Inspector Laforelle will like to have a word with the young man, Monsieur...?"

"Which one? He will come but with a lawyer," Boris said without flinching a muscle while my knees were made of jelly. Me? Inside of a police station? I've never been into one!

"We will escort you, monsieur."

"Wait outside." The policeman was furious with Boris.

"What could they want with me? I paid everything and didn't touch anything in the Museums!" I whispered.

"This is why my lawyer will go with you. The police love to hide their incompetence by accusing the wrong people. Lefèvre is very good."

In less than half an hour the famous Nicholas Lefèvre was there and he was a man bordering his sixties, with a clear French accent, like a Belgian. We took his car to the Police Station and he ordered, yes ordered to make the mighty Inspector Laforelle move his bottom to see us.

"Mr. de Lisle, coming with a counsellor is not the best idea for someone allegedly not guilty," the policeman fired at me and I kept myself quiet as the lawyer had instructed me in the car. I should not go along with their taunts; only answer to a direct question.

"Inspector, my client is wasting a wonderful morning in here. Could you please proceed?"

"Certainly. When did you arrive to Paris?"

"On the morning of the 28th at ten or eleven. I don't remember exactly."

"Your flight's number?"

"I don't know. It was a private plane. I could find it out."

"What did you do?"

"I went to visit my parent's grave in Pere Lachaise, had lunch at a kebab stall near the entrance to the metro, then I took the metro and returned to my flat. At 5:30 I went to Montmartre where I was supposed to meet a friend. He never showed up. I returned home at 9:00 and at 11:30 he called me to tell me he had met two young girls."

"Did he tell you what he was doing with the girls?"

"Reading Proust; what do you think he was doing with two floozies?"

"The day after, on the 29th?"

"Drawing at the Louvre." The cretin laughed at me and I exploded. "Yes, I study Art History and paint. I have an upcoming exhibition and I was stealing some ideas!"

"Can you prove it? Do you have the tickets?"

"I don't collect tickets but there must be a hundred security cameras there! Look for the idiot copying at the Denon wing! I refuse to answer any more questions until you inform me of the charges against me."

"Charges against you? No, no, you're mistaken, this is only a polite talk between us."

"Mr. de Lisle will leave this interview room this moment, unless you speak frankly."

"Do you use drugs Mr. de Lisle?"

"You don't have to answer that," Nicholas told me automatically.

"Of course not!"

"Do you mind if we run a test on you?"

"Certainly I do. You have no right. Get a Judge to back your words, officer!" I said losing my patience and rising to leave the place.

"All right, you're accused of nothing. We only wanted to speak with you about one of your friends, a petty drug dealer."

"I know no dealer!"

"You called him several times on the 28th and that sounds like someone looking for his fix."

"I only called Federico Martiarena Alvear and he's a friend from my school days. We were supposed to meet in that café but he never showed up. He didn't call me after that night."

"The funny thing is that he says that you're the lover of a Russian mobster."

"I fail to understand how my client's private life is related to your investigation, Inspector," Lefèvre dryly said and added the blow. "You're bordering on harassment with your questioning. Guntram we go, now."

"I can hold the boy in a cell for twenty-four hours and you know it."

"And I can return you to the parking tickets era if you try it."

"Did you say that Federico is a drugs dealer? Impossible! He has a lot of money, he has no need to do it. It's all a mistake."

"He accuses you of bringing a half a kilo from London."

"What? I did nothing of the sort!"

"You came in a private flight."

"Our luggage was checked and a French dog sniffed us and everywhere. The stewardess was furious because she's allergic to them and that stupid policeman didn't listen and put the bloody animal almost on top of her. A doctor had to inject her with cortisone! Check the airport's records!" I cried.

"We will, don't worry. Look, son, you look like a sensible young man, substance abuse is not as bad as trafficking. Tell me what I want to know and I will do my best to help you."

"What do you want to know? I haven't seen him in a year. He works in the Argentinean Senate and I live in London."

"This man you live with, what do you know about his activities?"

"Guntram you don't have to answer more questions."

"He's an important businessman. Ask him." I answered truly pissed off.

"Don't leave the town during the investigation," the idiot said as if he were Horatio Caine or Grissom from CSI.

We left the police station and the lawyer was chuckling in his car. "Must be in the genes, no doubt."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you the son of Jérôme de Lisle? We went together to Law School, Sorbonne in 1968. It was quite a surprise to be your attorney. I'm mostly into tax law. Your father was an incredible lawyer. Never lost a case or a negotiation in his whole life."

"My father was working in a bank, not a lawyer."

"He was the head of the legal affairs of a Geneva based bank. I still copy from him. You look almost exactly like him, not the hair or the eyes, those are Cécile's. Do you want to go for a coffee?"

"Yes, of course." I couldn't believe my luck. This was the very first time that I knew someone who had been a friend of my parents. We sat at a small place he took me, near the police station. It was almost empty, with the exception of a man, also in his early sixties, drinking a coffee and having a piece of apple cake. For a second he reminded me of my father. Lefèvre took a table next to him and the window.

"Do you want one too? Apple cake." The lawyer laughed at me. "Exactly like him. He would have sold his soul for a piece of apple cake."

"I know, he was always taking me to the same place in Buenos Aires to get a warm piece with vanilla ice cream on top and cinnamon sprinkled all over." I smiled at the memory.

"How's your lawyer, Martínez Estrada? Crazy, but a good man. Was he nice to you?"

"How do you know about him?"

"I recommended him to your father when he was looking for an executor of his will for you. Was he good to you?"

"He always did his best to take care of me. He was taking me with his family on the holidays whenever he could. His wife was not so happy to have a third wheel and his children didn't like to have extra competition. He defended my money and made it last all over my schooling. How is that you work for Mr. Malchenko?"

"He's one of my clients. I'm Senior Partner in a Brussels based law firm. I specialize in making your taxes bearable and your contracts atomic bomb proof." He made me laugh. "I survived a divorce, no children and come to Paris three days per week. My cat ran away on a love adventure; don't know when he will be back. Tell me about you. Do you live in London?"

"Yes, I live in London and study Art History. I paint also."

"And you live with a man." I blushed at his words.

"Yes, Constantin Repin. I don't know why the police are interested in him. He's the owner of a big oil company and some transport too. He has a Foundation for sponsoring artists and gave me a scholarship to study here. We met in Buenos Aires because he was interested in some of my pieces and we fell in love later." There I said it blushing more violently than before as the stranger with the apple cake was piercing me with his grey, no green eyes. What's wrong with you? Never seen a gay before?

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am. Constantin is very kind and nice to me. Had it not been for him I should be still serving tables and drawing over napkins. I think I love him very much and he returns my affections," I whispered.

"If you're happy with this solution, no one can complain about it. Are you doing something with your gift for drawing? Your father told me that he had to protect his papers from the little Guntram and his pencils. He was convinced that you were going to be an artist."

"I have improved. I don't attack important papers any longer," I chuckled. Yes, that's true, my poor papa was always placing his portfolio as high as he could. "I'm studying with a fancy teacher, but it's not working at all. If Constantin wouldn't be nagging me that he's so important; the St. Peter of the galleries, I would dump him. Anyway, I have an exhibition at Robertson's next August. It's a well-known place and the owner is my manager. He sells my pieces 'quite successfully, young man, keep on with the good work'." I impersonated his crisp accent and he laughed.

"Do you remember your father?"

"Yes, I do and I still miss him. I don't know why he did it. He was always looking so full of life when he was visiting me. I guess he never forgave me for my mother's."

"Do you really think that? Your father loved you with all his soul. Your mother had a serious heart condition but they wanted to have the baby despite the risks. He was always speaking to me about you. It was really a pity that he was so sick in the end. He had the same cancer as your grandmother; pancreas cancer, very painful. He coped with a lot of shit just to save all the money he could for your education."

"I didn't know he was sick. No one ever told me."

"Perhaps Chano wanted to save you the pain."

"I only found out about his death one week later. The school's principal told me."

"The important thing is that you're happy now. I would love to see your work."

"I have not much to show you. Most things are in London. I was here only for a week to visit this 'friend'. I really don't understand him. He calls me in Christmas, makes me come here and then he stood me up. And now I'm accused of bringing him half a kilo of something."

"Choose better your friends next time. If you ever need a lawyer or want to talk, you can do it with me. I'll give you my card. Perhaps you need to, if you went to visit his grave yesterday."

Why that French was looking at me? Mind your own business! "Yes, I miss him and I wanted to see him and my mother. There were some flowers at her grave but nothing by his. I believe she had still some old aunts and someone must have left some daisies. This is childish, but I left him a letter too. I visited him a year ago when I was for the first time in Paris, but it was so shocking for me to be there, that I only left the flowers. I guess that when I read his name on the stone, I realised that it was true and he was not coming back."

"I really would like to see your material, Guntram. Perhaps you could show me what you have at home. We have to return before Malchenko raids the police station."

"I saved my skin from the police but Constantin will kill me when he hears that Federico got me into a drug mess."

"You did nothing wrong and they have nothing against you."

"I can't leave the country," I pointed out.

"I'll speak with the judge and there will be no problem."

"Thank you. I can only pay you with paintings."

"They will be much appreciated, child. More than you can imagine," he said thoughtfully. The Frenchman was still listening to our conversation and I was feeling very uncomfortable but somehow he looked familiar, as if I would have seen him before.

He brought me back home and spoke for a long time with Boris. He's not happy at all but he's not cross at me. I don't know what's wrong with him. It wasn't exactly my fault! Lefèbre forbade me to speak with any member of Federico's family and was very happy to get several of my drawings. I'll send him an oil painting from London.

January 6th

I can return to London. I'm cleared of whatever they were trying to frame me. Constantin is very upset about the whole mess and he's right. I should have paid more attention to his words. I'll do what he tells me in the future. He's very intelligent and knew that Fefo would get me into trouble once more.

The only positive thing of this nightmare is that I met one of my father's friends.

Chapter 11

May 23rd, 2004

The special project on English Renaissance painters was proving to be a difficult one, but Guntram and his team mate, Anne, were doing their best to gather the information and organise the paper due in two week's time. After working for several hours, they could distribute the tasks and texts and decided to go for a coffee to the University's cafeteria.

In the middle of his attack on a nut muffin, Guntram heard a very familiar voice yelling from the other side of the bar "Guti!" at the top of their lungs. "It can't be you!" He lifted his gaze from the textbook he was distractedly looking and saw one of his former classmates from Argentina briskly walking toward him.

"Juan!" Guntram also shouted, not believing his eyes and giving him a big embrace and almost bending under the brutal pats from his friend.

"What are you doing in London? I thought you were in Argentina!"

"I live here since 2002," Guntram said. "What are you doing here? Were you not in Architecture?"

"I came to use the library; a paper for historical architecture, something about William Morris."

"We also have troubles of our own. Anne, may I introduce you an old friend of mine? Juan Dollenberg."

"Hello, Juan," She greeted him briefly. "Nice to meet you. Guntram, I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right, thank you for your help," Guntram answered, wondering why she had disappeared so fast.

"All of them run when they see a nice German Gaucho," Juan sighed. "Were you not in Economics? I never heard anything more about you since we finished school."

"I did part of the introductory course and then changed to Art History. Here at UCL. I'm on the second year."

"That's surprising, but logical. You were always drawing and doing our homework for papers and pencils," Juan chuckled. "None of the boys has any fresh news about you, since a year or so."

"We stopped writing. I'm not living in Argentina any longer and when you're abroad the best is to sever all ties with the past. I suffered a lot from homesickness and decided to focus on my studies and painting. Do you know I'm going to have an exhibition this June?"

"No, no idea. That's great. Where?"

"It's a gallery in Mayfair, Robertson's." Guntram sat down and Juan did the same, leaving his laptop's bag on the floor. "I still speak with Father Patricio and my old neighbour, but no one else. I fought with Federico when I came here, in 2002, because he didn't like my choice of lifestyle. We spoke again last December, but he stood me up in Paris. Since then, I decided to concentrate in what I have here. No one from the school would really understand me and I don't want to fight with them."

"Why? That you paint is what we all expected you would do. Heck! I remember now that someone wanted to buy one of your paintings. My sister-in-law sold several watercolours to a Russian! He was convinced you had a lot of talent."

"I live with the Russian," Guntram articulated the words very softly and slowly, not looking at his friend in the eyes. He took a sip of his cold coffee to shake off the nervousness.

"You share a flat?"

"Not really, he has a house. I live with him. He's my boyfriend."

"Wow," Juan said in total shock. "I mean, it's not what I expected to hear. Wow!"

"This is why I fought with Fefo. He never understood it and we had troubles in Paris. I still don't understand what happened there."

"YOU DONT KNOW?" Juan shouted and looked at Guntram petrified how he was rowing the coffee in the plastic cup.

"I was there, but I had nothing to do with it. One day before Christmas he called me here and asked me to visit him in Paris. I went there and he left me for two French girls. The next day the police came and almost accused me of drug trafficking because Fefo had told them I had supplied him some drugs. My lawyer advised me against speaking with him."

"Federico died in March, Guntram," Juan said very solemnly. "In a French prison. He was awaiting

trial.”

“No, what he had was only for consumption! Nothing big. That's was the police told me! This is not possible!” Guntram said, feeling an oppression in his chest. He fought to keep his calm but it was useless. He covered his eyes, squeezing them to prevent the tears from falling down.

“I thought you knew. I don't know the details, but it was a fight between many interns and he got stabbed. His family took him back to Argentina. The whole class but us went to his memorial service. We were shocked that you were not there. You were always risking your neck for him.”

Guntram took his handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed his eyes to stop the tears.

“Do you want a coffee? Shit! I'm an idiot!” Juan cursed himself, taking his friend's hand in a futile effort to provide some comfort. “I swear I thought you knew. Nobody wrote you?”

“No one at all,” Guntram whispered. “I don't understand why this happened. He told me he was working for a senator; that he wanted to stop getting into messes and start to be decent. He had no need to sell drugs. He had a lot of money.”

“Guntram, he was providing them back in school. I'm not surprised this happened. This is why my brother Pablo didn't let me speak with him. It's a miracle you didn't get in the middle. His group of friends was always into this shit. Coco told me once that he and Mariano were nightclubbing with them and they were surrounded by older men and into heavy stuff.” Juan said at the same time he sniffed and touched his nose, raising his right eyebrow.

“Fefo was never into this! I know him!”

“Guti, you never realised it because you were living in a world of your own. We all knew about it.”

“I can't believe it. Is it true? Is it not a joke?”

“Yes, it's real. On March twelfth but I'm not sure about the date. I didn't go as I have a job here and couldn't miss it. We sold our properties in Argentina and moved here. My brother works in an insurance company and you should meet my nephew, Juan Ignacio. He's two years old and a very nice little fellow. He's always into some mischief!” Juan decided to switch the topic. “I have pictures of him.”

“I'm glad for you,” Guntram said automatically, unable to believe that Fefo was dead. He remained sitting there while his friend talked about his life in London. He felt worse and worse and had to ask Juan to be excused because he needed to be alone.

Guntram left the building walking like a zombie to be nearly run over by a car, too stunned to know where he was going. Two streets away from the university, a large BMW stopped next to him and Yuri ordered him to get inside the car. The boy looked at him as he didn't know the man and stood motionless, not hearing the other cars blaring their horns at the BMW.

“Get in! Now!” Yuri roared once more and Guntram seemed to return to his senses. He opened the passenger's door and sat, hugging his backpack, deathly pale and panting. “What the fuck did you take, boy?”

“Nothing. Fefo is dead since two months and I didn't know it,” Guntram whispered and started to sob uncontrollably.

‘Fuck! He knows about the little job. Massaiev has to fix this one.’ “Guntram, that boy tried to frame you in a drugs case!”

“He was my best friend,” the youth whispered with his eyes fixed on the board.

“Best friends don't rat you out.”

But Guntram didn't hear him as he was now openly crying. Yuri decided to ignore him and drive.

* * *

“What's wrong with him?” Massaiev asked Yuri the moment he saw the boy crying like crazy and doing his best to stop it, but unable to control himself.

“One of his friends from Argentina is dead. In France,” Yuri answered with a smirk. “He does not stop. Give him something for the nerves. The boss arrives tonight.”

Guntram only saw Massaiev and clutched to his neck, crying louder than before, burying his face in the broad shoulder, mumbling something like “it's my fault! I should have dragged him to that café!”

‘Great, he's having a nervous breakdown and Repin arrives tonight. I'm supposed to have him ready for going out at 8 p.m. His eyes are going to be red. Shit!’ “Rimsky, get a tea for him. I'll take him to his bedroom.”

“Of course, give him something,” the bodyguard said in Russian.

“Come, child, you have to calm yourself down and tell me what happened. I don't understand a single

word,” Mikhail Massaiev used a fatherly voice, hoping that this would relax the boy before resorting to tranquilizers. 'I never had to use them with him, and I don't want to start now.' The man had to drag the boy over the stairs as he was only crying and crying.

Once inside the bedroom, Mikhail realised that there was no way he was going to stop the weeping unless he used a chemical solution. 'He's too crazy to go out tonight. Damn! I'll try to get him to sleep an hour and maybe he's less crazy.' Without saying a word, he pulled from Guntram's clothes and managed to get him inside his pyjamas and under the covers.

Some minutes later, a discreet knock on the door announced Yuri with the tea and an eye drops bottle in hand. “Collyrium. Helps a lot against the red eyes,” he shrugged.

“Stay with him for a while. I'll get something for him.”

“You do it. Repin wants him in elegant sport at 9 p.m. at the VIP's of “The Lancet” Dinner and meeting with Oblomov, his wife, the official and Malchenko's wife too.”

“Fuck!” Massaiev cursed his bad luck. Of all days, his boss had chosen this one to take Guntram out for dinner with his relatives. 'They all like him and certainly the boss has decided to show Olga's replacement to the women. He has to be in his best behaviour!' He entered in his room and examined many different boxes. 'No, all this is too strong for him. Only a mild sedative. He needs to sleep a little and then, I have to work on it. It's only 5 o'clock.'

Mikhail returned to the room where Guntram was sobbing in the bed, already totally exhausted from the crying, with Yuri sitting next to him and speaking softly in Spanish, doing his best to calm him down. One look from him, and the Russian vacated the place for the French. Massaiev sat next to Guntram and petted his back several times before turning him around and sitting him against the headboard. “Take this and you'll feel better.”

“What's this?”

“Just an aspirin for the headache.” Massaiev said and Guntram drowned the pill with the glass of water Yuri handed him. “Now, you must try to rest a little. I'll stay with you.”

“He's dead, Mikhail!”

“I know, but you can do nothing about it, my child. Fate always reaches us no matter where we are. You should rest now. It was a great shock for you.”

“How could this happen?”

“I don't know, my child. Was he not in prison?”

“I guess so, Juan told me he was stabbed. Where were the guards? Why was he still there?”

“I have no answers for you. Now, try to sleep till 7:30. I'll wake you up. Mr. Repin will be here tonight and he wants to see you. He missed you so much and you want to look nice for him. He was for two weeks away, working to the point of exhaustion and he deserves your support. Calm yourself down.”

* * *

“Are you sure about this, Ivan?” Constantin asked still uncertain of the convenience of the idea while both men had lunch in his private jet.

“Sure, it's time Tatiana knows him and Laura also wants to. You have been living with him for over a year now. It's a miracle the boy has such patience with you. If he were a girl, I will tell you to divorce and marry him.”

“Fortunately, he's not. You know my tastes and Guntram is one of the best things that ever happened to me. Had it not been for you...”

“You would be still jumping around and driving us all crazy. Specially Massaiev. Does he still get the same money? He works almost nothing nowadays.” Oblomov chuckled.

“It's money well invested. I'm thinking to send him in June to do some castings so he doesn't lose practice.”

“Don't expect him to get another Guntram.”

“That is virtually impossible. He's a masterpiece. Unique. My best purchase so far. I'm thinking what to give him for his birthday.”

“It's in October!” Oblomov laughed a false protest. “What about a Renoir?” He joked.

“Could be. He likes a lot the one he has in his room. I wanted a Bronzino, as he loves his style but there's nothing available at the moment. I even suggested Lintorff to sell me one of the ones he has in Rome, but he nearly sent me to Hell. I offered to trade it for the two icons I inherited from my grandfather but no luck.”

“Once Lintorff has something, he never lets it go, Constantin Ivanovich. Like a pit bull.”

"More like a crocodile, Ivan Ivanovich. A crazy crocodile. Nothing about Morozov?"

Nothing, he's very quiet in the moment. Olga too. She's gone to Marbella with Stephanov."

"She could do us all a favour and stay there. I'm more and more tempted to give her, her share and divorce her. I hate lying to Guntram and not seeing my children. If I could put them together, that would be great."

"Boss, the minute he finds out you're married, hell will break loose. Four children? That's going to be hard to explain."

"Three, and he always wanted children. One year more and he will finish the BA. Enough time as to organize everything. Sofia, Constantin and Vladimir can move to London. There are very good schools and they will like Guntram."

"Children as babies. Your eldest will start high school soon."

"It will be good to get rid of Olga. I have enough of her."

* * *

Massaiev was on the brink of losing his patience with the boy. With great effort he had woken him up—"just a sleeping pill for children!"—and convinced him to take a shower and get dressed for going out with Repin. He didn't want to at all and only grieved for his stupid friend. 'All his fault, who tries to rob the lover of a man like Repin? The little cretin knew very well who he was because he was planning to blow our covers!'

First argument had been over the choice of clothes. The boy had refused outright to wear the beige brown jacket with the pink shirt and scarf. 'Lord, how dumb can he be! He has to meet the wives, and women melt when they see a young boy looking like just out from the Tommy Hilfiger catalogue.' After several tries, the boy had decided for a dark blue, almost black, suit and grey shirt. Resorting to his many years as diplomat, Massaiev was able to convince him to use the eye drops and do his best to "look normal".

"The ladies don't deserve to have you brooding at their table. Don't say a word about this. Remember your education."

"My best friend is dead and I didn't attend to his funeral! I didn't know it!" Guntram cried and for a second Massaiev believed that the mess would restart, but nothing happened.

"I know, but you can do nothing about it. If he were sick, it would be understandable that you want to visit him, but that's not the case. Come on, Guntram. You're a sensible young man. Be nice to Mr. Repin tonight and the ladies. Tomorrow you will speak with him about this. Perhaps he lets you go to Argentina after you have passed your tests and presented your work at Robertson's. You can't leave now. It's in a month's time."

"Everyone believes that he had it coming! Juan told me that he was into cocaine."

"What's so rare? Many are into this. We need customers." "You don't know that and it's none of your concern. You don't do such things and avoid people who do it. Mr. Repin will never want you near such kind of persons. Please, get ready. We have to be there at 9 p.m. Mr. Repin will arrive directly from the airport. He came all the way from Dubai just to be with you before he has to fly to Austin in two days."

"I suppose you're right, Mikhail. Constantin does not deserve to get troubles from me," Guntram whispered totally abashed and feeling miserably under his pounding headache. "That aspirin was not working at all."

"I'll give you another thing; perhaps some paracetamol."

"No, leave it. I'll be fine."

"Of course you will." Mikhail reassured Guntram and prevented him to take a dark tie. "It's informal tonight. Hurry up, Yuri will drive you."

Much to Guntram's chagrin, "The Lancet" was an exclusive nightclub and not a restaurant as he had believed. He hated clubs because of the loud music, the lights, the incredible amount of people packed inside, no matter if you were in the VIP's area, 'instead of being stomped by normal shoes, you get Jimmy Choo's marks'. How can they walk with such things? Constantin liked to go now and then to one, especially if it belonged to a business associate, but he hated to be parked in the middle of a loud room, surrounded by people he didn't know, with women partly clad and drunken or lascivious men who didn't care if it was woman or men what they had in front.

The Mercedes stopped in front of the velvet carpet, guarded by an unfriendly monster, keeping the young girls in check with a skinny blonde with a PDA, reminding him of Juno for her two faces; lovable for the "in", scornful for the "out" people. "As if those people you walk through the door would care about you." Yuri descended from the car, immediately getting the looks of all the girls standing in line and went to speak with her. He returned to the car and opened the door for him, something that Guntram also hated. To parade in front of people his own age was

horrible because he could feel the envy pouring out of their pores.

Guntram walked quickly, ignoring the best as he could the looks from the crowd and entered the building, the floor already trembling from the loud music on the dance floor. He was almost unable to understand Yuri yelling at top of their lungs to go into the elevator to the upper floors where was the restaurant.

Once inside the elevator, he let out a long sigh, partly glad that the noise had diminished.

"It's dinner with Malchenko and Oblomov's wives. The girls want to dance later. Restaurant is much better and has a private dance floor, 'Far from the Madding Crowd'." Yuri joked lightly. "They came from Paris to shop and will return in five days."

"Does it mean I have to see them again?"

"Hopefully, yes."

Guntram had to make a supreme effort to keep a nasty retort to himself. Once in the restaurant, only Constantin was there, having something at the bar.

"Hello, my friend, is nice to see you again," Guntram greeted him, only touching briefly his elbow to show his tenderness. "Did you have a nice flight?"

"Hello, my angel. Fine. Ivan and Boris will arrive soon. Do you want something to drink?"

"No, thank you. I have a headache."

"Why is that?"

"Nerves, I suppose. The exhibition," Guntram lied not very convincingly, raising all Constantin's suspicions. "Robertson is driving me mad. We had selected twenty-five works and now I have to change two because he sold them to some man in Brussels and he does not want to wait beyond December to take them home. A hole in the walls would look bad and they're part of a series, so I'm in a mess."

"Why?"

"Robertson wants to extend; till February 2005. He says that he has spoken with some critics and they liked my material a lot and he also believes in the sales potential. Makes sense to extend a month. He will be passing by tomorrow to check what I have at home and see if there's something to replace those two."

"I had priority!" Constantin protested feebly.

"The Belgian walked into the gallery, saw the children's portraits and bought them. He paid cash, without dribbling at all. A fat fish to let go unscathed."

"My cousin Tatiana Ivanovna Arseniev has been married to Ivan for more than twenty years. They're on a second honeymoon since several months. She was very happy with her portrait and laid down her arms for some time. Ivan on the other hand, let go of her mistress and things are going better for both of them."

"That's very good for them. I appreciate Ivan Ivanovich. He's a nice person."

"Maybe you have to paint another of her. Laura—she's American—wants one too and has been pestering Boris for a long time."

"I'll work on them after the exhibition, my friend. I have my hands full at the moment. My tests are due very soon."

Constantin was glad that Guntram was never asking anything about his business, no more than the "are you all right?" or "can I do something for you?" and he let the boy speak for a few minutes about his subjects and the class trip to Bath a few days ago, relaxing with the sound of his voice, although there was something not completely right with his angel. He saw his guests arriving and as usual Guntram behaved like a gentlemen with the ladies, hearing their stories and briefly commenting on the Covent Garden. Tatiana liked him at once and Laura took some more time, like half an hour, to fall under his spell. Guntram offered her to take her to visit some galleries and to the Victoria and Albert. "I can show you Portobello Road, if you want. I work on Sundays there."

"He's perfect for you, Constantin," Tatiana whispered in his ear when he was saying good-bye to her. "I'm very glad for you. You know I never liked your marriage."

"Thank you, Tatiana."

"Next time, he's in Paris he should visit me and our son. I guess they could be friends. Piotr is only two years younger. Ivan says he's a good kid."

"The best." Constantin kissed his cousin before opening the door for her as Ivan was busy speaking with Boris and his wife, while Guntram remained in the background.

The guests left in their cars and Guntram came closer to him to wait for the Rolls Royce, still uncomfortable about the large queue in front of the place. "It's almost 2 a.m. Don't they ever go home?"

The doorman opened the car's door and the youth jumped inside, glad to be away and Constantin

followed him, almost exploding in his desire to kiss him after restraining himself for the whole evening. The man launched himself to brutally kiss him and Guntram did his best to survive the onslaught of hungry kisses, almost tearing his shirt's collar, dying of shame at the show they were putting on for the bodyguard and chauffeur.

"Constantin, please," Guntram whispered, slightly pushing the heavier man on top of him away. "It's only a fifteen minutes drive," he pleaded.

"Guntram, don't be dense now," Constantin growled, his blood boiling at the rejection.

"When we're at home, please. You know I hate it when there's people around," he asked, making his eyes big and his lover only huffed, releasing his prey.

'I truly hate his shyness. More boys do it in the middle of a club and he can't stand a kiss in my own car! Only good thing is that he does not look around like the others and that saves me a lot of troubles.' "When we get home, we go to my bedroom, no detours, Guntram." He announced firmly and the boy only nodded, looking very gloomy.

"What's the matter with you? Are you not happy to see me?" Constantin lost his patience.

"It's not you, my friend. I'm tired and have headaches. It was a long day."

"Well, flying from Dubai is not exactly a play date" Constantin retorted very obfuscated.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you," Guntram mumbled.

"It's infuriating. You're never in the mood! I do my best to be with you and you only put your best face!"

"That's not true! I don't want to do it because I don't feel like it! Can't you respect this?" Guntram lost his temper. "The only thing you want is to fuck and then fuck some more! I'm not a bloody life size plastic doll!"

"Guntram!" Constantin shouted.

"My best friend is dead and the only thing you can think about is to fuck me! Well, I don't want to! I had enough! It's over. I'm sick of this. I want to go home!" He roared and started to cry again.

'I'll kill Massaiev for not forewarning me. This is impossible! That brat still ruining my angel from the grave! Pity I can't kill him again!'

"Guntram, I knew nothing about this. I'm sorry, angel. I thought you were upset with me. Let me hug you." 'Excellent, I have to make now the full show of the caring man if I want to get something and it's going to be very bad sex because he's a wreck.' Constantin thought bitterly while Guntram started to cry again, plastered against his jacket.

When they arrived to the house, the boy didn't stop at all and continued there. 'Now I understand the expression cry me a river. This is a damned dam about to break!' "Guntram, we are at home. Let's go inside and we can speak in my bedroom."

The boy stopped his crying and followed his lover meekly, without any kind of complaints. Constantin went to the library and served a whiskey for Guntram, convinced that the alcohol would give him a less dark perspective on life. "Here, drink this. You need it."

"I don't want it." The boy refused the drink but Constantin placed it in his hand.

"Guntram, you're still in shock. I had no idea at all. Forgive me if I forced you to join us tonight. Maybe you need some time alone."

"No, Constantin. I just knew it today in the afternoon. No one ever told me a thing and it was a great shock. You have been so kind as to come to visit me. I'm sorry for what I said in the car. It was most thoughtless of me. You flew so many hours and you have to go to America and I'm giving you troubles."

"Hush, don't mention it, my angel. Drink your whiskey and let me hold you a bit so you feel better." Constantin intoned in a soft voice and Guntram launched himself in his arms. 'Improving, but still far away.' He caressed with long strokes the youth's back and felt how the young man melted into his embrace, tightening his hold over Constantin's waist.

"I don't even know how it happened. Juan told me it was in the prison but I don't know which one. I missed his funeral too. He was my best friend in school and I wasn't there for him."

"Where? In prison? Guntram, you're not thinking clearly. Do you have any idea of how it's?"

"No, but I let him down."

"How? He nearly sent you there! He accused you of bringing drugs in my own plane! It's a tragedy when someone young dies but I cannot side with him. If it makes it any better, you can visit his mother in the summer. I remember her from my time there. I should write to her."

"No, that's a bad idea. She hated me because I was not good enough to be her son's friend. I have no money, well not the kind of money they have. Maybe she thought I was living off him."

“Guntram, that's very stupid. You're unable to take anything from anyone. Come, let's go to bed and spend some time together. I have to go away pretty soon and I don't want to waste another second with you.”

“You're right as always, my friend,” Guntram said and kissed Constantin in the lips. “I'm sorry for the scene. I did my best at the dinner, but I couldn't help it now.”

“It's all right, my angel. I wish you would have told me earlier.”

“You're so kind to me and I bring you more troubles.”

“You? Never. I enjoy each moment with you.” ‘Massaiev will make penance in a faraway place. I wonder what else he had failed to report.’

* * *

Guntram sighed as Constantin went to take a shower before going to bed. He had truly no desire to engage in some bed activities as the other obviously wanted. His last kisses had been more demanding and he had nearly torn his clothes, only stopping when Guntram had to sit on the bed because of the growing headache and dizziness. ‘Whiskey is too much for me. I only want to sleep.’ He changed into his nightclothes and slid under the covers of Constantin's bed when he would have preferred to return to this own.

“Are you still dressed?” Constantin growled the minute he saw the boy partly asleep in his bed while he removed the towel tied to his hips. Decided not to let his angel escape from his duties, his hands caught the blond head and kissed him deeply, his tongue demanding entrance to the mouth and Guntram, still dazed by the alcohol, complied the best as he could, letting the man do as he pleased.

Sure of his dominion over Guntram, Constantin settled his body over him, effectively trapping the youth. He unbuttoned the pyjama jacket kissing the smooth skin to temper the harshness of his actions. Doing his best to conceal his lack of enthusiasm, Guntram began to return the kisses shyly but letting Constantin roam free over his body. He didn't complain when the other pulled his trousers down and briefly touched his member to get his attention.

The boy slightly pushed Constantin away as he knew where all was leading him and he wanted to get everything soon over. The man looked at him partly enraged at the interruption but cooled down when the boy playfully jumped on top of him, kissing him with more fire than before. ‘That's better, but you won't save yourself from a lesson tonight!’ He let Guntram kiss his neck and chest and directed his head toward his member almost forcing him to engulf it in one go, enjoying how the boy was doing his best to please him. When he felt that he was going to reach his climax, he turned his head forcibly and removed the boy from him.

“Let's try something new,” Constantin said as he sat on his knees, laying his back against the headboard. Without giving him time to recover from his initial surprise at such brutal interruption, Constantin grabbed Guntram by the hips and quickly sat him over his lap, penetrating him with one vicious push, without any kind of preparation or warning.

The pain was almost unbearable and Guntram whimpered, trying to escape, but Constantin was faster and held him in his place by grabbing his leg tight and jerking it over his own hip, almost dislocating the youth's groin. “Stay put or it will be very painful, angel. This is all about trust. If you relax and let me do it, you will enjoy it very much. If you fight me, you will get very bruised.”

“Please, it hurts.”

“It only hurts if you allow it. Relax and it will be great. Let yourself go and it will improve.”

Guntram realised that he had not many chances to fight against Constantin as he had the upper hand and closed his eyes to ignore the pain he felt. The man began to fondle with his manhood to soothe him and kiss his nape, almost biting it every time he cried from the pain. ‘Now, you cry for something worthy.’ Constantin thought briefly, but didn't stop.

He started to move his hips slowly, burying himself deeper into the boy and he could feel how the youth did his best to be more submissive just to dull the pain. “You have to let me set the pace or it will be worse for you,” he advised with a stern voice and the boy stilled his moves, allowing Constantin to have full control of the situation.

“He loves me, he won't hurt me. It's just a rough one. Relax and everything will be fine,” was the only thing Guntram could think about and laid instinctively his back against his boyfriend's chest, taking his hand as it was over his member, stroking it with long and strong moves. He fought over his fear of the man and relaxed his body as he knew that this was the only way to make the other finish and release him.

Constantin felt how the boy accepted his dominion over him and decided to reward him with some kisses and soft words of love poured into his ears, making him relax much more and almost abandoning himself into the

arms that secured his chest and firmly held him from his manhood. "That's much better, my love," he praised and increased the pace and strength of his thrusts, enjoying the power he had over the young man. "Even Guntram needs to be shown now and then who's in charge. He feels absolutely delightful now."

Constantin reached his climax much earlier than he would have desired but it was a wonderful sensation for him. "One of the best ever."

Guntram removed himself from Constantin and bolted out of the bed, doing his best to refrain his tears till he reached the bathroom. Once inside he started to cry silently once more, opening the shower to muffle any noise.

Constantin recovered from the daze of lust and satisfaction to realise that Guntram had escaped to the bathroom instead of cuddling as it was his habit each time they made love. "The least I need is to have him sore because of this." He rose from the bed and noticed that there was a small blood stain on the silk sheet. "Should have used lube. He's not used to doing it roughly like the others." Without knocking he entered in the bathroom, finding his angel doing his best to conceal the tears the minute he saw him.

"Are you all right, angel? Shower will not help at all. Perhaps a warm bath. Are you bleeding?"

"No, I'm fine. I just need some time," Guntram lied.

"No, you're not fine," Constantin affirmed and took one of the bathrobes to cover him. "You have pain and you're going to catch a cold. Sit down and I'll get the bathtub filled. You should have relaxed more."

Guntram chose to say nothing and only looked how the other started to fill with hot water the large marble tub. "Come, get in." Constantin coaxed him gently and he obeyed, not willing to have more troubles for the night. "I'll get you a drink," he offered and left him alone in the bathroom.

Like a wounded animal, he plunged into the steaming water, letting the liquid comfort his sore muscles and calm him down. "It was too rough for me, that's all. He has never done something like this before. I guess I pulled the strings too much and he lost his patience with me. I should have not done it."

"Here, drink this," Constantin interrupted him and handed him a glass of champagne, leaving the bottle and another glass on the large tub's border. "Is it better?"

"Yes, thank you," Guntram whispered and drank the glass in one gulp, not tasting it at all. Instinctively he moved away to make room for the man when he removed his own bathrobe and slid into the water but did his best to remain still when he felt his arms around him once more and his lips over his forehead, kissing him with infinite tenderness once more while his hand petted his damp hair.

"You're wonderful for me Guntram. You make me very happy. Let's do not poison our relationship with other people getting in the middle."

"It was too much for me."

"I see it now, but you have to understand me too. I do my best to be as much as I can with you, but it's never enough. Here, drink some more, but slowly this time or you'll get a headache tomorrow," Constantin said with a sad voice, full of regret while he poured another glass for Guntram and one for him.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand what is wrong with me. This morning I was so happy when Yuri told me you were coming and then, I heard the news about Fefo and everything turned upside down," Guntram said tiredly and laid his head against Constantin's chest.

"You should have trusted me and called me the minute you heard about it. I would have cancelled the dinner as you were in no shape to go out. We should have remained here and let you process your grief. All was a mess because of your lack of trust."

"No! I trust you Constantin. I love you. I just didn't want to ruin your night."

"We are together for the good and the bad times, angel. I just wanted to introduce you to my family. I want them to know how important you are for me. The girls just loved you. Be careful or you'll get Oblomov jealous."

Guntram chuckled nervously, but was glad that their conversation returned to normalcy and Constantin was again his tender and loving self. He relaxed once more in the man's embrace and cuddled with him till the water froze.

Still shivering from the cold, the young man let Constantin dry and kiss him several times more, this time responding his kisses more truthfully than before. He felt relieved that whatever might have happened between them was over and everything was once again in place. He buried his face in the pillow, spooning his body against the Russian's and fell asleep almost on the spot.

* * *

Constantin looked at the sleeping form of Guntram. Certainly, the boy was drained from his training but he had taken it very well, finally understanding what was expected of him. 'He was almost dead after it. Time to wake up and check if he has really understood.' He kissed the boy's neck and he automatically returned his kisses, still half asleep and allowing the man to do as he wanted with his body. This time Constantin took his time with tender kisses and foreplay, noticing how Guntram was more submissive than in previous occasions and more sweet to him, like in the beginning of their relationship.

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Guntram felt once more reassured of Constantin's love for him and embraced him.

"I have something for you, angel. I got it this morning while you were sleeping."

"What is it?"

"Those nuts muffins you like so much from that place in Victoria Station. I don't know how you can eat them, but I got them for your breakfast, lunch."

Guntram jumped to his neck in gratitude because Constantin had remembered what he liked and had taken all the trouble to get it for him. "You're so good to me! I love you so much!"

'Only a few pounds worth in muffins and he loves me as if I would have given him a house or a car. I will never be able to understand him, but I love him nevertheless.'

* * *

They spent the rest of the Saturday together in the garden while Constantin worked in many things and Guntram did his best to write a paper, but although they were in a sort of honeymoon, he couldn't get his mind away from the previous night scene. Although everything was fine again, there was something he couldn't place well, nagging his brain. He decided to ignore the feeling and concentrate on his work.

Dimitri, the butler announced that Oblomov had arrived and Guntram was surprised to see him there. He greeted him and served a cup of tea for him.

"My wife likes you a lot. She wants to take you to Paris with her."

"Tatiana is an impressive woman, Ivan. You should be proud of her."

"I am. My mother-in-law is something else." He chuckled and spoke briefly in Russian with Constantin.

"Guntram, we have to discuss business. Can you please leave us?" Constantin said very seriously, looking fiercely at his friend.

"Yes, of course. Good-bye, Ivan."

"See you later boy. I hope I get a dinner invitation." Ivan waited till the young man gathered all his papers and went inside the house before speaking. "Big shit boss. Morozov is making Lintorff's life hard in Poland. We have to stop him before the German kills us."

Chapter 12

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
August 12th 2003

I still don't know how or why I'm still alive. The logical result would have been my death. I had all the odds against me, but I survived. I wish I would have died. It's been a month but I can't forget a single noise, word, touch, smell or hit.

I try to tell myself that it was all Constantin's fault but I know that I'm responsible too. I should have asked around; didn't you marry? Do you have children? Where do you go all the time? But I preferred to ignore all the signals because I was never so happy in my life than living with him. I was comfortably numb with my painting, my school, my part time job in Portobello Market, always waiting for his kisses or praises if he liked some of my works. Constantin was my best friend and I trusted him with my life and soul.

I had finished my working day at the Market that Sunday, July 7th, at noon and I was going to wait for Yuri at the corner where he would pick me up to take me home. Constantin was in New York and I was not expecting him till Tuesday morning. I said good-bye to Mrs. Smithers like always and she asked me to come back again on Wednesday to help her with some continental pottery. I worked my way through the crowd of street performers, colours and Indian food smells, trying to reach the corner where we meet.

Yuri wasn't there. There was another; Sergei Tretiakov, a man I never liked but he was working under Morozov and never had much contact with me. He told me that Yuri was sick and that he would drive me home. I suspected nothing as Yuri had been looking very sick in the morning, throwing up after breakfast. I felt bad that he insisted on taking me to work, but Mikhail was away and on Sunday most of the people had free.

Sergei drove me home—but I should say to Ilchester Place because this is not my home—and I was surprised that there were no maids at all. The man took me by the arm and steered me to the living room, pushing me to enter with a: "In there, you scum. Time to meet the lady in charge."

Sitting on the large couch was a brown haired woman, mid-forties, dressed with a soft grey business tailor suit, with very expensive jewels. Three men more were in the room, one tall blond called Stephanov, with the coldest gaze I've ever seen, and the other two were perfect strangers and looked like bullies. Who was this woman, freely sitting in Constantin's stances?

"So you're the little French whore my husband has been fucking for the past months. You don't look like much."

"Your husband?" I stuttered, opening my eyes very big.

"Constantin Ivanovich Repin. Did he forget to tell you about me?"

"Constantin is not married!"

"Married with me since 1984 and the proud father of four children; Sofia, Constantin, Vladimir and Ivan. They live in St. Petersburg."

"I didn't know he was married with children!"

"You didn't? It's well known that blonds are idiots but you're giving a new meaning to the phrase. A single billionaire? Nothing in his life? A rich man just jumping into your bed, telling words of love?" She mocked me and then directed her attention toward the blond man. "Darling, can you believe it?"

"The little prick believes that your husband is a respectable man," he smirked.

"Constantin?" She laughed. "How many has he killed in his war with Lintorff this year?"

"I know of twenty-seven killing contracts, my love."

I was speechless, trying to understand what they were telling, but my brain refused to cooperate. I could only look at her, his wife and mother of his children, realising that everything she was telling was true.

"My husband is a very successful businessman; he deals with weapons, drugs from Afghanistan, girls and boys from Central Europe and Russia, smuggling and fraud. His companies are only a front for much more lucrative activities, not that oil and transport are bad sectors," she told me with a humourless smile and I was feeling more and more lost.

"You must be wondering what I could want from a pathetic little thing like you."

"I'll leave this house instantly and will never contact him again. I swear madam that I didn't know about

you. I would have never been in the middle of a family. Please forgive me if I hurt you."

"Leaving him was an option a few months ago, but now it's impossible. Constantin is too infatuated with you to let you go. He would follow you like a puppy all over the world, killing everyone in his path to have you back, like that friend of yours, the one with the drugs problem. Constantin checks all your letters and conversations and hated him. He organized the whole set up and had him killed in prison. I know he killed the two girls who were flirting with you in Paris; Sergei was part of the team. Then came that Art dealer from Amsterdam and that student from your art class, so many that I'm afraid to forget someone."

"Don't forget that banker from France," Stephanov added solicitously.

"You're right my love."

"You don't love Constantin at all!" I said shocked, not truly understanding what she was telling me. Those were horrible and stupid accidents! Peter had the misfortune of being in the middle of a mugging gone wrong. He was never my lover. He only asked me to go in a date and I refused. He understood that I was in love with someone else.

"Of course I don't love him, but he's considering to divorce me and I can't accept that. I would only get two hundred million from the 7.6 billion he declares. He does not want to share even if I gave him the best years of my life. I need a more permanent solution in your case."

I was terrified of her now. She had said it such a cold way, as if I were a bug ready to be crushed.

"The cellar is soundproofed. We already tried it with your man, Yuri." Stephanov told me as I looked at him in horror. "You see, a bullet in your head won't do at all. We have to set an example, just in case Constantin finds a replacement for you. He has to pay for all the pain he put Olga over the past year."

I wriggled against my captor and fortunately caught Sergei unaware and could knock him down, exactly as Yuri had taught me, going for his weapon, a Glock 9. Before the other two would jump on me, I surrounded his neck with my arm, pressing as strong as I could because I knew I only had a chance, and put the weapon against his forehead.

"One step more and he's dead," I threatened. Idiot.

The man on my right fired and killed Sergei with a clean shot in the head, making the base explode, splashing his brains all over me. I was petrified. They had just sacrificed one of their own just like that. The dry sound of the body hitting the wooden floor and my heartbeat hammering my ears, are things that I won't forget. I took an involuntary step backwards but I couldn't pry my eyes from the dead form lying in a pool of blood.

"Well, more for us, don't you think?" Stephanov chortled.

I tried to run but one of the monsters jumped on me and knocked me down, hitting my head several times against the floor to stop my rebellious attempts.

"Stop!" She shouted and for a second I thought that she was having second thoughts and would let me go. "You're going to ruin the parquetry with the blood. I plan to have tea with my friends here. Take him to the cellar with his friend while you clean this."

The brute dragged me, throwing me the stairs down and I think that was when I sprained my ankle, I don't know. All the previous hits on my head were making me feel dizzy and stunned. My body hit with full force against the metal door and I realised that the thickness was not to protect the wines environment but to keep the cries muffled. That door was exactly as one of those recording studios. I tried to stand up but I got a vicious kick on my ribs and I felt my lunch coming to my mouth and I dry heaved.

"Don't you dare to throw up on me, piece of shit. I'm going to fuck your brains out before we kill you and hear me well, if you ruin my shoes, your death will be very slow and painful."

He opened the door and again took me by the collar as if I would weight nothing and threw me against a limp form on the floor. I recognised it as Yuri, horribly beaten and almost dead because he was almost not breathing. There was blood everywhere. I turned him around and I saw that they had burned his face with a cigarette. I don't know but I started to weep like a little girl for him.

"Guntram, your mobile, do you have it?" He croaked to my surprise and yes I had the second one, the mini or cockroach as I used to call it because of its size. I nodded. "Just switch it on. It has a distress signal." He didn't close his eyes, they just went glossy and I knew he wasn't here any longer. I did what he told me but hid the thing inside his pocket because I thought that they were going to throw our bodies at the same place. They are only three of them now and two bodies to get out in the middle of Kensington. They would have to wait for the night or leave us here.

I don't know why I had the flashback of Chano, my lawyer and legal tutor telling me that a torture

session is your most political moment in your whole life. There you understand the concept of power because you have to convince your interrogator that you have nothing that could interest him. He should know, he barely escaped with his life in 1977, as he was in the Peronist Guerilla. He was tortured for several weeks till a friend of his father, a colonel let him go because he was a middle rank cadre, never involved in military actions. He also told me that it's nothing personal, they want to make it personal so you plead and fall into the abyss when they do nothing for you. Don't talk to them; try to ignore them; there's a point when the pain nullifies itself and either they kill you or they stop and let you live to start again later.

Easy to say, not so easy to achieve. I don't know for how long they left me with Yuri, I suppose so I would be more terrified but his body was a source of comfort for me because I knew that he was in peace now and I remembered all the laughter we had together when he was taking me to buy a muffin at a stall in Victoria Station or when he was helping me to smuggle a Star Wars comic from Forbidden Planet—I think he also read them—or when he was sneaking my jacket out of the house to the laundry so Mikhail wouldn't know that I've been to the McDonalds' or another greasy place. His attempts at learning our “dialect” were truly funny and his impersonation of the Argentinean accent was very accurate. I caressed the side of his face and muttered “good-bye, my friend.” I closed my eyes because I've never felt so tired, defeated in my life.

“You're disgusting! Sleeping next to a body!” Stephanov shouted me awake, giving me another kick on the back. I rolled and tried to stand from my knelt position but he hit me again in the face with a lot of force. I nearly fainted.

“No! Not in the face my love. I want a beautiful body so Constantin knows what he has lost. Morozov wants him devastated with grief, unable to think. Lintorff will finish him off.” I heard the voice of the bitch. “He's an artist, focus on that, my love.”

“As you wish Olga, now let us work. This is for men only, dear.” He chuckled and I thought poor idiot, she will turn you into meatballs once she's finished with me. That woman is a predator of the worst kind. Sharks kill because they're conditioned by nature to do so; she kills for pleasure and power.

I heard her heels stomping over the concrete floor; going away and I braced myself for what was coming with the three monsters. As I have predicted they moved the body to one dark corner, doing their best not to touch it. Funny, you kill but you're afraid of a body.

They were very classical with me as they couldn't touch my face. They kicked me on the stomach and ribs many, many times. At some point I stopped counting the blows and huddled, trying to protect my head, but I didn't plead and that drove the two men mad. I was in maddening pain, my body burning in flames and every breath was a slow torture, but I didn't feel like crying.

“So you're a tough guy?” Stephanov shook me because I think I was fainting and I vomited or spat a lot of blood, ruining his precious shoes. He hit me on the stomach with all his force and I bent over myself with the pain, howling. One of the others ripped my jacket and shirt off and started to burn my skin with a cigarette. It was a horrible pain as you could feel the red point going through the layers of skin and the foul sweet stench of the burned meat. It's nothing like you have never experienced in your life. It's just unique. But I didn't plead, just like Chano told me to do.

They shouted something in Russian at each other and the two men looked very nervous about something. “We will try what the boss finds so good.”

I felt them tearing my clothes, but I was half conscious due to the beating and couldn't resist them as all my remaining strength was on my brain, trying to find a way to nullify the pain. One of them—don't know which one because I couldn't see well on my right side clouded somehow—threw me against a table making me face the wooden surface and the door that led to the wine cellar. I felt one hand securing me by the neck, burying his fingers and suffocating me. He penetrated me and I yelled when he did it feeling his satisfaction pour all over me. He fucked me very hard, and it was like being torn in two. He almost left me deaf with his groan when he finished inside me. He shouted something in Russian and all of them laughed. The second and the third came next.

But I didn't plead or make them stop. Stephanov took me twice, the second not even finishing it. As they were too exhausted to continue with the game and I assume I was bleeding in a very disgusting way, they decided to focus on the “he's an artist” part.

First they removed the nails, one by one from my left hand and later used a hammer to break the fingers. My throat was raw from my crying because there are no words to describe how you feel when your torturer toys with you, falsely attacking you, just to make you cry and finally gives you the blow or the pull. It's a game, a political game about showing you that he's in charge and you're nothing.

Wrong, you're something; you have what he desires, like Chano told me.

I only wanted to die to escape the pain, but they knew exactly when to stop to let me recover just a bit. I knew there that I was going to die but they will take all the time in the world to do it and I just wanted to avoid the pain.

"Water," I pleaded finally, knowing that they wouldn't give it to me, but having an idea of what could pass through their minds.

"Do you want a drink? Suck me and you'll get some. Bite me and you're dead." The dark haired shouted grabbing me by the hair. That was my hope. He put his filthy thing inside my mouth and started to ram it, keeping my head straight by fisting my hair.

I bit him hard, not to the point of tearing the member, but to the point of feeling the blood flood into my mouth. He yelled and fell to the floor from the pain. His friend jumped on me and stabbed me three times in the stomach, before Stephanov could stop him.

"Stop! We will settle the score with him later! Take Ivan out," he yelled and the other man did as he was ordered.

'Only one left,' I thought

"If Repin is half of what you told me, there would be no hole in this Earth deep enough as to hide you," I said, still spitting the blood on the floor. Whose one's? I don't know.

"Shut up, little fucker!"

"Do you realise that you're next? She only cares about money."

He jumped on me and put one of those Rambo knives out and yelled. "Shut up!"

"The second time you could do nothing. Getting old? I know now why you got this job." I truly wanted to end everything.

He knocked me down once more, getting all dirty with the blood freely flowing from me. Funny but I wasn't hurting anymore and there were so many bright lights dancing around. I believe he shouted something like "how do you want it? Your neck or your right hand amputated? Do you want to live?" and I think I said: "kill me."

I'm not sure, I heard a big detonation and I passed away, relieved that it was going to be over soon.

I woke up two weeks later, in a private hospital just to start the nightmare of surviving or living.

* * *

The security man couldn't believe his eyes: An emergency signal from one of the top members in the organization. He looked up the code and location and it was from Mr. Repin's boyfriend and from the house in London. "Shit!" he cursed loudly, getting his own mobile phone to warn his superior. "If the boy was playing with it, Oblomov will kill him."

* * *

Malchenko couldn't believe his bad luck. He had tried with Massaiev but the man was in Bucharest, working per his cousin's orders and he should speak with Yuri Rimsky, who was taking care of the boy probably painting or working at the market, trying to sell a sorry porcelain dog to an old American tourist lady. Yuri Rimsky didn't answer his phone nor anyone in the house seem to be there. The boy's phone was off. "Better be on the safe side, if something happens to Guntram, Constantin will kill me very slowly," he decided before dialling Gregory Kalashov's number in London.

"The question is, do I call Constantin or not?" Better not. I'll get Oblomov; he's with him in New York.'

"No, leave Constantin out of this till you speak again with Kalashov Probably it's nothing and if there's something going on, Kalashov should be able to deal with it. The Order wouldn't be so crazy as to attack us so bluntly." Oblomov said after he was briefed.

"Their man in Tbilisi is dead along with his family. Lintorff is very corporative in his thinking. He blames us and he will go against us."

"He wouldn't dare."

"Why not? He's furious with us. He lost a lot of money to save his positions in Central Europe. Morozov nearly provoked a default in Poland and Romania."

* * *

"Mr. Malchenko? One of my men went there, but he found nothing out of the ordinary." Kalashov said respectfully, still uncertain of the outcome of his investigation. He was perfectly aware that he was walking on thin ice as the original order of "speak with the bodyguard or the boy," had not been fulfilled.

"Did he speak with the boy or his bodyguard?"

"No, they're gone to Bath for the day. The little idiot forgot his mobile phone. The lady who spoke with him, told him that the ringing had driven her crazy the whole afternoon."

"Lady? As cleaning lady?"

"No, very elegant woman, with a real emeralds necklace, brunette and tall. Nothing cheap at all. "

"Shit!" Boris swore very loud when he realised that the only woman with such description was Olga Fedorovna. "Get a team and raid the house. Now!"

"Raid the house?" Kalashov repeated incredulous. "Mr. Repin's house?"

"Take a minimum of ten men to enter there; full equipment. I'm flying to London now. Whatever happens, no police at all. It's internal."

"Should we not wait for you?"

"NO! Move your ass before Repin kills us all for being such idiots!"

"But if..."

"I take full responsibility. Move now, and take whoever is there alive! No deaths at all! Mr. Repin will want to have a word with whoever is in his house!" he shouted before slamming the phone against his desk and dashing for the door.

* * *

Kalashov men were nervous. Raiding the big boss own house was a very bad idea, even if it was one of his most trusted henchman's order; Malchenko in charge of the Smolensk territory. Being family didn't make you immune to his well-known wrath and sadism. The seven men, including Kalashov looked at each other when Malysev finished to nullify the security system as indicated by Malchenko.

"Where is the fucking security team?" One of them mumbled.

"Sounds very bad. We go in and we shoot to kill." Kalashov whispered as they entered through the dining room door to the garden.

Very fast they secured the first floor and found two men in a bathroom. One of them fired first but he was killed in no time, and the other surrendered himself. "Wait, we're with Olga Fedorovna Repin!"

"Shit!" One of the men cursed.

"Where's the boy? Guntram."

"In the cellar, with Stephanov. It wasn't my idea, she forced me!"

"What did you do?"

"Stephanov did it. Killed the bodyguard and tortured the boy. She ordered it!"

"Malysev get that woman! The rest, follow me." Kalashov ordered

The gory sight of the boy on the floor, lying in a pool of blood, nearly dead was a very bad omen for all of them. While the men took Stephanov away, just hurt in the shoulder, Kalashov frantically thought what to do. A simple doctor wouldn't do as the boy was stabbed and obviously in shock, bleeding profusely. "We take him to St. Catherine's in East London. They won't ask questions."

"He won't make it. We need an ambulance." The man trying to stop the bleeding protested.

"No police at all. This is more serious than we thought. Besides, he's almost dead. We're only covering our asses when Repin starts to kill people. Shit! He liked that boy a lot!"

* * *

Kalashov paced the sterile hospital waiting room. The doctors had taken the boy to surgery six hours ago and none of them had come to tell a thing. The poor lad had been tortured and raped for over five hours and they had been especially vicious as Olga Fedorovna was determined to make him suffer. 'But the vixen was clever enough as to run away after she saw my man. I have no idea of where she could be.'

"Kalashov!" Malchenko greeted the tired man. "How is he?"

"I don't know Mr. Malchenko. In surgery. They're trying to close his wounds, I suppose. I've seen no

doctor so far.”

“Do we trust this place?”

“Belongs to us. Always takes care of my boys. They're good doctors. It's the best I can do.”

“I know. Thank you. Mr. Repin will be here tomorrow at noon.”

“We missed the wife. I'm sorry.”

“I'm after her. The others?”

“Secure in one of the houses. Lost one and there were two more bodies inside the house. My people are cleaning it.”

“The service, where were they?”

“It seems she sent them away for the day. The butler had the day free.”

“Mr. Kalashov?” A good looking woman dressed with green fatigues asked him. She was carrying a small cap on her hand. He nodded and she continued. “I'm Dr. Emily Harris, the surgeon. I treated Mr. de Lisle.”

“Is he...?” Malchenko asked already waiting for the worst.

“No, no. He's in the intensive care unit. It was a long and complex surgery, sir as his stab wounds were very deep. We had to remove the spleen and part of the liver as they were damaged beyond repair. It was a miracle the knife didn't touch other organs.”

“Will he recover?”

“It's hard to say at this point. My main concern is his heart as he suffered one heart attack during the surgery. We weren't aware that he suffered from a previous heart condition. There was no time to make any kind of pre surgery tests.”

“Guntram has nothing of the sort!”

“The cardiologist has just assured me that he suffers from heart failure due to hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Perhaps it went unnoticed because the symptoms are very easy to overlook. It's one of the leading causes in young athlete's sudden death. We managed to stabilize him, but he's in a pharmacological coma because of his brain injuries. He was severely beaten and has a skull fracture. Fortunately there's no brain swelling so far and we hope the coma will prevent further damages and reduce the stress from the pain. We estimate that we would need a minimum of five to seven days before we try to remove the sedation.”

“Can we see him?”

“No, I'm afraid not. Visiting hours start tomorrow from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. He's in a critical condition but stable, and that already gives us hope, gentlemen. If you'd excuse me.”

“What are his chances?”

“He's on life support systems. Perhaps you will have to make some serious decisions. Is there anyone from his family we can contact?”

“How many chances?”

“I can't give you a prognosis, but in his case the recovery ratio is less than 50% I'm sorry.”

“Thank you,” Malchenko whispered, feeling bad for the young boy. 'He's only twenty years old and never made troubles! I have a long list of people that I would love to see in his place!'

“What do we do?” Kalashov asked.

“Nothing. We wait for Repin and Oblomov. It's their call now.”

* * *

The flight had been a slow torture for Constantin. Boris had called him and just told him to return to London, that there had been an accident and Guntram was seriously hurt. “How badly hurt?” “I don't know. He's in surgery. We can't speak now, cousin. Trust me.”

Ivan Ivanovich knew something more as he had been permanently speaking over the phone in German, but he had told him that he knew nothing about Guntram's condition, a blatant lie in his opinion.

He couldn't wait to have his flight plan approved and took the first commercial flight back to London.

He hoped that Lintorff had not been in one of his killing spree days, looking for revenge for what had happened in Tbilisi just a week ago. He had never given the order and the mess with the Polish Bonds was not his fault at all. He had tried to speak with him, but Lintorff was so furious that he didn't want to hear him, shouting that he had disgraced their agreement.

Only five hours more to fly.

Oblomov was feeling something akin to remorse. Everything had turned out as he had always expected it would. He had told countless times to his stubborn friend that Olga would sooner or later take matters into her hands. Guntram was indeed a dangerous competition for her. She knew about the boy and how Constantin treated him as if he were like a real mate—taking him out publicly, meeting their common friends, living with him in London—not the type of relationship you have with a lover. His friend wanted the divorce, paying her the stipulated sum in their prenup and send her away, ruining her plans to finally control the organization.

'I never expected she would do it this way. She caught us unaware. A fast and decided strike, exactly as she's. Massaiev was away, his man was alone to defend Guntram, the service was on their free day and the remaining ones were sent away, the bodyguards were in league with her or dead. The bitch used the house even, knowing that that would be the last place we would be looking at. She bided her time very well.'

'Lintorff swears he has nothing to do with this and I believe him. It's neither his style nor Pavicevic's. How does he tell it? "I don't take the trash out for other people, Ivan Ivanovich. Rest assured I will have my revenge for Schäffer, but on my terms and with my own people." I need to convince Constantin that this was an inside job, Olga and someone else, but who? If Constantin attacks him because of Guntram, we all are dead. Lintorff will return the fire with everything he has. He's very paranoid.'

'I have to catch her before Lintorff does. I'm sure he wants to know her reasons and see if he can get something out.'

* * *

"Who is here, Friederich?" Konrad von Lintorff asked his butler, totally dumbfounded. It was more than 10 p.m., on a Sunday, certainly not the time a lady would call at a single gentleman's door.

"Madame Olga Fedorovna Repin, Sire." Friederich said with a deep disgust lacing his voice.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, your Excellency. She says that it's most urgent that she sees you. The lady arrived in a cab."

"This is most importunate." He complained as his much needed day off had been finally ruined. First Oblomov, spoiled his dinner, shouting vulgarly on the phone that he had betrayed their gentlemen's agreement by helping Repin's wife to personally attack him in London—probably the woman had destroyed a valuable painting making the Russian explode—because of "that incident in Georgia". He had had troubles to keep his temper down at the suggestion that He, the *Hochmeister* of one of the most powerful remaining brotherhoods was somehow involved in the marital problems of a couple of crazy Russians; that He would be in league with a petty adventuress to commit a felony and finally that He was using something as low, beneath his rank and breed, as women gossips to direct his actions.

"Keeping a woman waiting is not what I have taught you, Konrad," Friederich interrupted his musings and brooding.

"Yes, you're right. Tell one of the drivers to have a car ready for her. We can't kick a woman out, can we?"

"Even if she's not a lady," Friederich finished the conversation, making the Duke softly smile at his former tutor's diplomatic way of agreeing with his views. 'I swear he's related to the *Fürst* von Metternich.'

"I'll see her at the library. Tell the maids to go to bed."

* * *

On Monday morning, Malchenko stopped his cousin before he would ram into the ICU. "Wait Constantin, you can't enter till the afternoon. It's only one hour. We need to speak. There's nothing you can do for him. It's in God's hands."

* * *

"Good evening, Madam. What do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" Konrad said, deciding to keep the conversation to the minimum.

"Good evening, Duke. I'm most obliged that you accepted to see me with such a short notice. I apologize for my rudeness."

'That sounds more like a ruined Dali,' Konrad briefly thought as his hand indicated where she should sit.

"I confess that I'm intrigued about your visit, Olga Fedorovna."

"I need your help, Duke. My life is at stake."

'It's more than a painting, must be something really good,' Konrad considered and kept himself silent as he had the upper hand.

"My husband and I are at odds since a long time, Duke. He plans to assassinate me so he can freely lead the kind of lifestyle he likes so much. He knows that in case of divorce, he would lose our children's custody for his blatant homosexuality."

'With women like you, I'm not surprised he prefers boys. I also do, but the best is to keep everyone away as the minute they're in your bed, the trouble starts. All of them want something from you. Repin is going to learn that lesson now.'

"Do you have any proofs of your accusations, Madam?"

"Of course not! But it's a very strong rumour!"

"With all due respect, Constantin's dalliances are well known in our circles. He's not exactly discreet about them." 'The man has a flawless taste, in my opinion. Pity, you can't touch them. That Massaiev is a really good handler.'

"I'm willing to reach an agreement with you, Duke." She offered very seriously. "Vital information on Constantin's deals in the Caucasus in exchange for your protection."

"I will have to refuse, Madam. I have an agreement with your husband. A non-aggression pact since 1989. We might have our disputes over some minor issues, but we always solve them on the negotiation table."

"Information about the Chechen rebels: all of it, names, ranks, families, locations. Everything."

"That could be more useful to the Russian Authorities than to me, Madam."

"Constantin ordered the assassination of your representative in Georgia."

"Can you prove your allegations, Madam?"

"The man who gave the order, Morozov told me he did it by his orders."

"I see."

"Then, do I have your protection?"

"No, I'm not interested to get in the middle of a couple's fight. Divorces are truly a bad experience for all the people involved." Konrad answered with the same impassivity that he had greeted her. "What would I do with such information? Nothing. It's useless for me as I can't be sure that the new leaders would be good friends to the Order as your husband is. Morozov is too greedy to be reliable."

"If you send me back, he will kill me," she said very agitated. "Would you have a woman's blood on your hands?"

"I don't think your husband would do something so rash. A good divorce agreement is always better than having the police investigating why your wife is dead. Perhaps the conditions have worsened for you now, but I do not fear for your life. It's perfectly safe. Are you not the mother of all his children?" Konrad replied very innocently. 'At least of the three first because that mop of blond hairs from the smallest one is very suspicious.'

"Have you no chivalry? I'm completely alone," she asked with her eyes veiled with tears, perfectly aware that that was his weak point. Men like him, so bent into their old ways were always easy to manipulate if a woman knew how to show her vulnerability.

'Exactly as Medusa,' the Duke thought before feigning some remorse and doubts. "Madam, I would love to help you, but I'm afraid that this would lead us to a full scale war between our organizations."

"Please, my Duke. I beg you," she said, starting to weep loudly, the tremors shaking her slender body.

'Don't you dare to sully my grandfather's desk, you tart! Bismark used it!' He got his handkerchief out of his pocket in an attempt to save his desk before the tears could affect the wood, offering it to her. "Perhaps I could help you to improve your position, Madam." 'A small grenade in the enemy's field is always welcomed.'

"My Duke, you don't know him. He's ruthless and heartless. I'm useless to him now!"

"Perhaps I could use that information you offered me as you have confirmed my initial impression that Morozov was behind all this. In exchange I could give you a small account number your husband has in Luxembourg by one of our associates. Bank secrecy can be lifted in case of tax fraud or arms trafficking. Petrom has been very creative in its past tax declarations, Madam."

"Please, sir, you're perfectly aware that I have no chances against him!"

"As I said, we have an agreement. He has not broken it and I will continue to honour it. This is an internal affair and I do not wish to be involved."

"He broke the agreement the moment he ordered your man's murder!"

"Those were Morozov's orders as you said. The link of his actions to your husband remains unclear. This is my best offer, Madam." Konrad finished the conversation as the meeting was taking longer than necessary and tomorrow he had to take his plane at 7 a.m. to be in Frankfurt at 10:15 at the ECB.

"What guarantees do I have of your word, Duke?"

'Typical answer from a *parvenu*, at least Constantin has some class.' "I'll show you the files and documents. It's all on a memory card. Exactly like in the school when we were exchanging trading cards."

Olga doubted for a few minutes; letting Lintorff take just a glimpse of the information was a huge risk. Everybody knew that he was a traitorous snake with incredible intelligence. Only a few were safe from his machinations. Constantin feared him and a war with him like the one Morozov had started was his greatest nightmare. She silently extended a small memory stick and he only muttered a "thank you," throwing it in one of his drawers to her astonishment.

"If you'd excuse me Madam, I'll look for your safeguard. One of my men will drive you back to Zürich, I insist on this," Konrad said, rising from his chair and leaving the room, not waiting for her permission.

Some minutes later, he returned carrying a small laptop and the slim memory card. "Of course I don't have to tell you that I will keep a copy of these files, Madam."

"I was expecting it, Duke," she said disdainfully as she checked the contents, finding more than 2.7 billion euros hidden there. She had to do her best to keep her fury controlled at the sneaky bastard. He was preparing his escape because it was not his habit to have so much cash. 'He's more than obsessed with his little whore. I hope Volodia has killed him off.'

"Very well, Duke. I thank you."

"We could escort you to a neutral territory. From there you could negotiate better with your husband."

"I was under the impression you didn't want to be involved," she couldn't help to retort bitterly.

"I will not be involved. We will help you to reach neutral grounds, like Buenos Aires for example, I have several properties there. Perhaps you prefer something warmer like Rio de Janeiro or Montevideo, a small but charming city. I was there once, for business, of course. I should travel for leisure more."

"I'll go to Rio, Duke." Olga decided as from there she could easily go to her friends in Mexico.

"Perfect, my car will take you to the airport. I'm afraid that you will have to take a morning flight. Farewell, Madam."

"Good-bye, sir," she said, furious at the man casting her out so brutally. But it was to be expected. Maria Ivanovna had been with him once after a charity party in Berlin and he had taken her to a hotel for the most boring night in her life. He looked so well but in bed he was the dullest man she had ever known. "Do you remember that golden android from the 70's Olga Fedorovna? More or less like that! He doesn't kiss you, just throws you over the bed and does what he needs to do to achieve his release. You can have a deeper relationship with a dildo than with him. An iceman, a total waste in my opinion. Three times, each one worse than the previous. I hope he never calls me back." At least, he had a decent taste because he had sent her a panther brooch from Van Cleef and Arpels. A classical model.

* * *

"What can you tell us, Boris?"

"I'm no doctor. I think you should speak with one of them," Malchenko did his best to evade the answer his cousin was looking for.

"What happened? This you can answer!" Constantin almost barked while he paced in the hospital's corridor.

"We received a distress signal from Guntram in your house. First we hesitated, but as I couldn't contact any of his bodyguards, I had my doubts and sent Kalashov there. When he called me back at six, I realised that Olga Fedorovna was there. I sent a full team to raid the house but she wasn't there any longer. Only Stephanov and another of your men. We killed one more while we were securing the field."

"What happened to Guntram?"

"The details remain still unclear." Malchenko hesitated to tell the truth, "It wasn't pretty."

"Boris, we need to know what happened. Lintorff swears he had nothing to do with this," Oblomov interfered, taking the man by his elbow.

there.”

“What happened?” Constantin growled feeling the bile rose to his throat, but his cousin only fixed his eyes in the shinning floor without speaking.

“You can tell him, Boris.” Oblomov encouraged him.

“He was beaten, tortured, stabbed, and raped by her men. I don't know how many. His bodyguard, Yuri Rimsky, was killed in front of him. When we rescued him he was more dead than alive. The surgery lasted many hours and they had to remove the spleen and part of the liver as it was destroyed beyond repair. He had a heart attack and the doctors discovered that he has a previous and delicate heart condition, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, and fear that he might have some brain damage; this is why he's in an induced coma for five days at least. They need to reduce the stress and the pain as much as possible to give his heart a chance to recover, but there are not many. His left hand is practically destroyed, but the doctors will do nothing in the moment about it as they're more concerned about his internal injuries.”

“Where is she?”

“She escaped. My men are looking for her, Constantin, but I would need yours too.”

“Ivan Ivanovich, can you take care of this?”

“Of course, it will be my pleasure, my friend.”

“Don't touch a single hair from her. She's mine. I'll deal with her once I've recovered my angel,” Constantin said and sat in the chair to wait for the visiting hours.

* * *

“Oblomov,” he growled in his mobile phone, frustrated that after one full day of work and using most of his resources, nothing had come up. The brief vision of the boy hooked up to machines to keep him alive and the way he had been beaten was building up his rage more and more and he needed someone to vent his frustration.

“Ivan Ivanovich, I might have something that belongs to you,” Konrad von Lintorff said visibly upset at the tone the other man was using with him.

“Duke, I was not expecting your call at all. Please forgive my manners,” Ivan apologized hurriedly.

“My sources tell me that you lost something and are desperately seeking it.”

“Indeed.”

“Is it related to the London issue you phoned me about on Sunday?”

“It's linked, yes, sir.”

“I understand Constantin Ivanovich is under some stress at the moment.”

“We all are, Sire. Difficult times.”

“Indeed, perhaps you all should take a look at Ipanema beaches. They're very beautiful at this time of the year. Full with... impressive women.”

“I thank you for your advice, Duke. Most assuredly we will take a trip there.”

“Send my greetings to Constantin Ivanovich. I'm looking forward to hearing from him in two months when we're less stressed.”

“I will pass your message, sir.” Oblomov answered not really believing that Lintorff had helped them selflessly -'sure, pigs can fly-' and offered a two months truce -just to recover and kick you better- without asking nothing in return.

Chapter 13

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
August 12th 2003 (cont.)

On August 3rd the doctors finally decided to get me from wherever I was. I remember nothing about those two weeks. Nothing at all. No lights, no voices, no nurses or doctors around, like they always tell in the novels. I only slept and slept to wake up with many tubes attached to me, feeling very weak and with my life turned upside down. I was transferred to the intermediate care ward, where the nurses kept telling me that it was a miracle that I was alive.

I had two heart attacks, lost my spleen and part of my liver; the doctors were not sure that I would recover the full mobility of my left hand, although the bones seemed to be healing fine, and I would have to take medications for the rest of my life because of my heart failure, avoid stress under any costs, and forget about any kind of hard activities as my heart wouldn't tolerate more stress.

There was a nice psychologist woman who spoke with me very lengthy about my new life as a cardiac heart patient, sweetly informing me of the long list of things to avoid, like living for example. We never spoke about what happened that day and I was glad for it. I wanted the memories to go away and took gladly every sleeping pill they gave me. The doctors released me yesterday and they kept me in sort of "pharmaceutical cloud", stunned and happy. I was sleeping most of the time, almost not talking as it took a lot of energy to do so.

Constantin was with me all the time and I can't be furious with him even if I should. He slept on a couch and didn't leave my side not for a single moment. I think Oblomov was tired of bringing sandwiches and coffee for him. Mikhail came by several times but he wasn't staying, only speaking in Russian with the "boss".

I understand now the meaning of the nickname. It wasn't familiarity or camaraderie. It was his rank. If you make deals with a man like Lintorff and he also helps you with your finances, some of his own trash should stick to you. He's neither clean nor Constantin.

"Is it true what your wife told me?"

"Yes, my angel. I never wanted you to be involved with my world. I love you too much to hurt you."

"How could you lie to me? I loved you."

"I never wanted to lie for so long, but I was terrified that you would leave me the minute you heard about her."

"I destroyed a family, Constantin. I deprived your children from their father. What kind of trash am I? I'm going back home and I hope I never see you again."

"I will not let you go away. You belong to me and you're too sick to be left alone. I will look after you till you're fine again. Everything will be perfect again. I'll make my wife pay for this."

"Pay for defending her own children? You are the one who should be asking her forgiveness. I never knew you were married! You cheated on her all the time! This is how you take your oaths to God?"

"It was a civil marriage. No God involved at all. She always knew of my inclinations. We married because she liked my money and I liked her father's contacts within the Politburo in Moscow. Nothing else. We had the children just to keep a façade. Russian society does not accept homosexuality as well as in Europe."

"You're a mobster!"

"Not all my income comes from a legal source, Guntram, but that's very common in Russia. I'm trying to become completely legitimate."

"You deal with other humans' misery! You sell drugs to children, weapons to murderers and people to perverts! How can you live with that?"

"I don't do many of those things. Those are my business associates. I'm mostly into Transport, Oil, Energy and weapons. Over the years, I've left the other aspects of my business. I want to leave it. I want that you come with me and live with my children, in St. Petersburg. They will adore you."

"Are you crazy? They should be with their mother!"

"Olga Fedorovna will not come near them any longer. It's my decision. It's final. She dared to touch my most beloved possession."

"You can't do that!"

"You can't become too nervous. Rest now my angel as I will take care of you. I swear that no one will ever take you away from me ever again."

He left the room and immediately Mikhail was there to make sure that I would sleep, but it was useless because that brief conversation had just left me exhausted.

I've tried to reason with Constantin about letting me come back to Argentina but he's deaf as a wall. It's St. Petersburg with his children or London. I can't go back to that place. I really can't. I was so happy there but now the mere idea of returning makes me start to breathe like a raging bull and have an oppressive feeling in the chest. The doctors told me that those are the symptoms of an angina, a condition also included with this myocardial hypertrophy.

I'm in a hotel room in London, very elegant and expensive place but I feel very bad because I know that this is paid with the money he might have gotten from a guerilla group in an African country or some pills sold to stupid teenagers or a poor woman raped to death to make some extra dollars.

Today I was introduced to my personal physician. A Russian: Yuri Andropovich. He will be always with me in St. Petersburg and oversee my recovery. He repeated more or less the same speech that the doctors in the hospital gave me and told me that I was not to return to school for the next term, that I should rest as much as I can, that I would have to take like six different pills and I should relax as much as possible. He's not happy that we fly back to Russia as it could be very taxing for me, no matter if it's a private jet and he will be with me the whole time.

I don't want to go to St. Petersburg. I want to go back to Buenos Aires.

* * *

Mikhail felt very tired. Not because of the boy, who could almost not move, still in a lot of pain from the surgery, drained from his time in the hospital and utterly sad that his dream prince was a really ugly snake. 'Time to grow up, Guntram, time to grow up, my child.' No, he was tired of the continuous surveillance Repin had inflicted upon him and his charge. More security around than ever before, more pressures to present reports on the boy's doings, and the ban on leaving the rooms. Guntram had almost not reacted at anything and that concerned him very much. He was like a frightened automata; obeying every single command, only shouting a little when Repin had told him about his plan to take him to Russia; nearly having a third heart attack the minute they had been in the hotel lobby, full with a businessman convention, so much that he had had to take him to the suite as fast as he could. He ate almost nothing, refused to watch TV or read a book and only wrote in his folder for a long time. When he was hopeful that whatever he might have written could give them an idea of what had occurred in that wretched cellar, the boy had destroyed all the pages, throwing them to the toilet and flushing it.

Mikhail had brought his folders and pencils, the ones Guntram loved the most, but he didn't look at them at all; he just sat by a window looking at the street, and doing nothing else. Repin arrived for dinner and the boy refused to change. To his utter relief, his employer let the offence go unpunished. The boy fidgeted with the food all the time and forgot to take his night pills. Repin scolded him, but he did not pay attention at all.

At ten, Repin sent Massaiev away as he had decided to spend the night with the child.

* * *

"Come my angel, it's very late and you must be tired," Constantin whispered, not willing to frighten him as he was strongly reacting to any word spoken louder than normal, a noise or a simple gesture. His whore of a wife had done much more than physically hurt him; his angel feared him because of her lies. Guntram didn't eat properly, speak nor show interest about anything when before his eyes were always shining and looking everything in a mixture of awe and happiness. Not any longer; his sorrow was physically palpable.

Guntram stood undecided by the bed. Was Constantin planning to stay? Most probably as he was removing his jacket and tie. His heart started to beat very fast and he had to sit on the bed because he felt very dizzy.

"Do you need help with your clothes, my dear?" Constantin asked solicitously while he removed his own shirt.

"No, I'm fine," Guntram said so quietly that the man had to make an effort to hear him. "I'll ask Mikhail to help me with the buttons."

"Don't you prefer that I do it, darling?" Constantin asked sounding somehow upset.

'He will follow you like a puppy all over the world, killing everyone in his path to have you back, like that friend of yours, the one with the drug problem. Constantin checks all your letters and conversations and hated him,' Olga's words pierced his brain and Guntram realised that from now onwards he would be extremely careful

because the wrong word could awaken the monster standing in front of him. He gulped before saying out loud. "I'm afraid the doctor said no sex for some months, Constantin. My heart couldn't handle it."

"My dear, I know it and I would never do anything that could hurt you," Constantin said advancing and firmly catching Guntram by the waist, feeling a bit disappointed at the unwillingly breath intake from his angel when he put his arms around his slim frame. "I just want to sleep next to you and cuddle with you, like you love so much to do. Do you have any idea how horrible it was for me to see you lying in that bed, unable to do a thing for you, only one hour per day? Not knowing if you would be back at all? Let me help you, please."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise it was so bad for you too," Guntram muttered as he let the man remove, with infinite care his clothes, doing his best to avoid touching the plaster on the left hand and the bandages around his torso. The bruises had disappeared but Constantin was aware that the scars would remain forever. "Are you in pain?" "No, I feel fine. I want to start to leave the painkillers." "It's not a good idea, the pain increases your stress; you should take the pills whenever you need, the scar tissue is very sensitive." "As you wish, Constantin," Guntram answered meekly as the man finished buttoning his pyjama jacket. He escaped to the bathroom to calm himself down.

"Do you mind if I take the right side, Constantin? The doctor said I should not sleep over the heart's side and the plaster also doesn't help much."

"Of course," said the man, changing his place. Once Guntram laid down, he put his arms around him and checked that he was well covered. "My love, I was thinking about your refusal to come to Russia."

"Will you let me go back home?"

"Home? Your home is with me Guntram," Constantin clarified sternly, making the boy flinch. "I'm more thinking in a detour. We could stay for a few days in Paris till you feel better. You can start to draw again there. You always liked the city."

"I don't know if I can do it again," Guntram confessed. "She said that you loved me because of my art and perhaps this is for the best."

"Drawing is what keeps you alive! Never forget that!" Constantin shouted, jumping out of the bed while Guntram sat terrified, huddling against the capitonée headboard.

"I'll draw if you want, please don't be upset," Guntram said, fearing that the man would take revenge on someone else for his own stupidity. Had he not killed that poor French banker because the man was insinuating him during one party or that Dutch march and for trying to kiss him in the storage room?

"No, my dear, please don't be nervous. You understood it all wrong," Constantin said very sweetly, advancing on his fours over the bed till his body efficiently trapped Guntram's under him. "You can't stop painting now. Your exhibition was a success. Everything is sold and I wasn't buying it. We were in the hospital but Oblomov attended the vernissage. Your manager, Robertson was very glad. Ivan told me that the place was full with the best of London's society and many were very impressed by your paintings. Your teacher was also there and he was transfixed when he saw the series of nude women. "Glorious, just glorious," he opined. He told Ivan that he does not understand why you behave like an imbecile at class and then you can paint such things when you're alone. I saw many of the pieces at your studio, before they were packed away and they were wonderful. How can you give grace, make ethereal some punks sitting on a bench drinking beer on their social security money, it's beyond me. The pictures with children and poor people were a frenzy; sold on the first night."

"Really?"

"You should speak with the man tomorrow. I want to see it too. We can take the plane in the afternoon to Paris, my love."

"Constantin, I don't want to see people!"

"Just your manager. The man sent you two baskets. Don't ask me where they are, my men were hungry and nervous all the time," he chuckled, relieved that Guntram was showing some interest in something. "Be glad his cards survived them. Besides he has a check for you: Almost £56,000 from the sales."

"Keep the money, Constantin. I don't want it."

"Why? It's your work!" He shouted enraged again, but this time Guntram didn't react at all. "All right, don't keep it. You don't need it, but you could send it to the priest in Argentina. Are you going to let a rich merchant keep it so he can buy more champagne for his filthy rich customers?"

"No, you're right. They could use it much better than I."

"Exactly, besides you need nothing else as you have me and I will take care of you as I see fit, my love. You will be happy with me again."

* * *

"Guntram, come out of the car in this moment. You can't stay there for the whole day," Constantin nearly barked as he had been waiting for the boy to get down for more than five minutes in the middle of a crowded street. Guntram finally emerged from the big Rolls Royce, taking one step backwards when he saw so many people briskly walking past him. His breathing increased its pace and he needed to support himself in the car's roof, looking truly terrified.

"Now, we go in and see your manager. It's just Robertson. He's almost 80," Constantin huffed.

"I don't want to."

"Guntram, move. Do you want to abandon everything and paint only for me?"

"No," Guntram whispered and advanced toward the door but nearly ran away when the bodyguard overtook him to open the door.

'Have to tell the men. No rush moves and not coming from behind.' Constantin realised and gently took the boy by the elbow.

Once inside the gallery, Guntram looked around the familiar open white space and the complete silence was like a balm for his nerves. The receptionist recognised him and greeted him effusively asking him at full speed about his accident. He was only able to crack a nervous smile for her. "Guntram, why don't you show me around while this young lady goes for Mr. Robertson?" Constantin spoke.

They both walked around the two rooms containing his twenty-five paintings and drawings. Almost two years of work of a person he didn't know any longer. For Guntram, everything seemed so alien; had he ever thought that people were like that? Kind, luminous and good? No, they were money-driven, greed and dark, very dark.

"That charcoal with the hands was very celebrated," Robertson interrupted his musings. "I had several offers for it but it was sold almost immediately. A German colleague bought it. He wants to have you in Berlin. You had four good critics too and one neutral. You can't complain at all, my dear boy." He finished and carefully shook his right hand, making Guntram flinch at the touch. "It was a very bad car accident. I hope they catch the bastard."

"Thank you for your notes, Mr. Robertson."

"Don't mention it! We were all concerned about you. Ms. Smithers came here twice to check if I had news about you. It was after you left work, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was."

"Guntram is still very shocked about his experience, Mr. Robertson," Constantin warned the man. "Perhaps he could see the guest book."

"Yes, of course. Almost finished," the man replied, taking a small leather bound folder from a nearby table. "Not again!" he complained when he saw a young woman making a photo out of a pastel. "With flash on top! Excuse me; I have to get the bumpkins out. They can't read a sign and much less understand a simple logo. Madam!"

The Russian took the boy by the arm and started to look at the paintings, but Guntram said nothing but a few monosyllables in response to his questioning. The man's mobile phone rang and Constantin left the room, speaking very fast in Russian.

Guntram's attention was caught by a middle age woman, very simply dressed, looking at the series of children from the slum. She seemed to be in awe and he started to become restless under the close scrutiny of his paintings. 'It's just a school teacher, nothing else,' Guntram tried to calm himself down. 'She's just looking at your painting; she has nothing to do with you.'

"Don't you think it's nice?" The woman asked Guntram, nearly sending into panic. "You look so upset about it."

"It's fine."

"I like it a lot. A colleague from the office told me about it. She saw it during her lunch time. Pity there's no catalogue. I couldn't afford the pieces at all. Do you know something about the artist?"

"No," Guntram blurted out.

"There's only a leaflet with some of the pictures and says that he's from Argentina." She continued with her chat, fondling with the small booklet's pages. "Here, this one! Do you see these little children? They really look as 'porteños' and the cookies they're eating are the same I was having when I was a little girl! I'm from Argentina and you?"

"French."

"Did the cat eat your tongue? It's so rare to see something from my own country here, especially after the mess in 2001. People don't like us. Have you been to Argentina?"

"Yes," Guntram said starting to feel dizzy as his mind was working at full speed evaluating if that

woman could be a threat or not. Olga Fedorovna was an elegant lady and she had turned into a bloody monster.

"Really? When and where?"

"Long time ago. Excuse me," Guntram said desperately, clutching the book just to ease the tension and turning around to go back to the bodyguard standing by the door. "Hey, don't take the book away. I want to write something too!" He heard her shouting and coming to him, extending her hand toward him. Guntram took a step backwards and threw the book over a table, doing his best to avoid being near her, to return to Constantin.

"Freak," she mumbled, picking it up from the table.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
August 20th 2003

I have been for a week in Paris. Constantin stayed with me the first four days but then, he had to go away on business. I truly don't want to know what they're up to. I think he's in Zürich visiting the Hochmeister from the Order. They're at each other throats because of Morozov's attack on one of the members and making Lintorff lose a lot of money with some Central European country, according to Mikhail Petrovich, and he wanted Constantin dead. Boris Malchenko told me that Lintorff had offered a truce for two months, after my attack and the first month was over and they want to negotiate once more before they start to kill each other again. Constantin-Morozov lost the control of the gas in Georgia as Lintorff forced all the investors to withdraw their support and there was not enough time for find new ones. Something called Gasrom was also lost and that was a huge hit for Constantin as he was counting on it for balancing the bad figures he was getting in Moscow.

I do hope they fix their problems. I don't want that Constantin is hurt because of whatever they're doing. I don't love him anymore but I don't want something to happen to him. He betrayed me when he lied to me but he was always a good friend of mine. All those allegations about Federico can't be true. Why would he do it? He knew that I loved him and I would have never gone away with someone else.

No news about that woman and every time I ask, I only get an "it's none of your concern. Mr. Repin will decide her fate. She's alive."

Mikhail took me to the Louvre but I couldn't enter, too much people around and I just panicked. I can't stand unknown people around me. It's crazy, I know, but I just can't bring myself to go into a place full with other human beings. I feel physically bad, with palpitations and everything. He had to take me out. He tried again the next day with the Musée Quai d'Orsay with the same results. Just the huge entrance hall, full with tourists made me feel dizzy and short of breath.

Yesterday I was luckier with the Tuilleries; I suppose that the open spaces and great distances between people let me be more at ease, but not much. Mikhail has a lot of patience with me because he was silent all the time and discreetly sat next to me with a book in Russian and my backpack with my sketching things, which landed on my lap. I opened it and stared at the sketch pad for a long time, doubtful and afraid. My left hand is still useless, cased in a plaster but I feel no pain in the right one. I thought I could draw something, but not people. I focused myself on some sparrows and jackdaws looking for food. I miss the squirrels from Hyde Park.

A couple approached me and stood very close to me, examining my work and I nearly panicked. Fortunately, Mikhail asked them if they needed something with an expression I've never seen in him and that was truly terrifying. They left in haste.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. It's my line of business," he chortled. "It was hard to be part Russian and work at the French Embassy as military attaché. Neither side liked me. Glad to know I haven't lost my touch. Those birds are nice."

"Nothing that could be compared to before. Rubbish," I replied, tearing the pages down. I felt better after it.

"Guntram, the birds were fine."

"No, they weren't. Are you an Art Critic now?"

"Well, at least you react to something," He huffed, looking at me crossed. "Don't take it on me."

"Don't you think I have enough criteria as to know what's good and what's a piece of crap?"

"Watch your language."

"Sure, I'm the nice Guntram, the polite boy who happens to fuck a mobster but he has to be nice and obedient." I exploded at him. Faster than I could move away, he took my right wrist in a painful grip and squeezed it for a brief moment, enough to cause pain but avoid to leave a mark.

"Be nice, Guntram. We all want that you feel all right, but we will not tolerate any disrespectful behaviour from you. What you went through was bad and undeserved, but it's boss' call to fix it. You can do nothing, so save us all the prima donna moment. I hate hysterical boys and you will not like me when I'm displeased. Compose yourself and be nice. If you ever use the same tone you did just now with me, with Mr. Repin, what happened to you in that cellar would be a wild party compared to what he could do to you. Don't try his patience, boy."

"I'm going home."

"You're going nowhere but where Mr. Repin tells you. You're his lover and he loves you deeply. He will do everything in his hand for you but you must also put some of your part. The only thing you can think about is how to run away from him when he's your only friend!"

"I want to leave all this; I'm no part of this world. I destroyed his marriage!"

"That marriage never existed, boy. He thinks of getting rid of his wife since a long time, much before you came into his life."

"He has a family! Don't you understand it? I destroyed it! I only wanted to get a family of my own and ruined four children's lives!"

"You ruined nothing. If they're unhappy is because their mother doesn't care much about them—she only cares about herself—and their father is always away, avoiding the mother. They love more their nanny than their parents. Maria Ingratievna is always there for them. The boss wants to change it and wants to share his children with you. He's offering you a permanent place at his side! Guntram, come to St. Petersburg, give him a chance to mend what was broken."

"I don't trust him anymore. He lied to me."

"Because he loved you. He didn't want you to suffer. He's sorry for his mistake. He was with you all the time. Not many would do it for a lover. Guntram, you're not a child any longer. You have to grow up. Nobody is perfect and we all have faults. We have to find the way to cope with them."

"I don't love him any longer. He's not the man I thought he was. He's a total stranger to me. You also; look at you; you've just hurt me because you didn't like my tone!"

"No, I wouldn't hurt you. I just wanted you to realise where you're standing. We are your friends but you have to come back to us. Rejecting what we are will not change anything and will only cause you pain. You're not Russian or ever lived under a system like that. It's either being part of the Mafia or sweep the streets. They organise themselves like that. We both are French and we can't understand it. If he does not do it, someone else will. Many want his position, starting by his wife. If she went against you it was because she wanted to weaken him, not because she was jealous! She had support from someone inside our organization but she has not told us who."

"She told the men not to mar my face so I would make a nice body and Constantin would be devastated. It was Morozov's idea." I confessed. "I think Yuri suspected something because he made me carry the small mobile with me when he normally had it. He told me to switch it on if there was something wrong."

"Yuri was poisoned in the morning, this is why he couldn't be with you. According to the autopsy he died at 12:00."

"No, I spoke with him. He was barely alive, but he spoke with me at 3:00. I'm sure. He told me about the mobile. I had no idea what it was," I said very agitated.

"Don't think about it. I've heard many strange stories from combat situations. A battlefield is the perfect place to find God. Are you certain about Morozov?"

"I don't know any longer. If you say that I spoke with a corpse..."

"The estimated death time could be wrong also."

"I think she said it to Stephanov, but I could be mistaken. I was in shock."

"You did well in telling me. Mr. Repin will know what to do."

I'm still thinking about what he told me. I don't know. Perhaps I should give Constantin another chance. I was not always forthcoming with him. What am I thinking? I don't love him at all. Maybe I never did and was only happy to have him around, I don't know. I can't love him. He's dragging me to Russia when I don't want to go there.

I should tell it to him very clearly. We both agreed we could split the moment one didn't want to continue. We only swore to be true to each other. No hard feelings.

** * **

The only thing Constantin wanted was to be back in Paris. The meeting with Lintorff had been frustrating as his opponent was bent on blaming him for everything that had transpired. He wanted an impossible compensation (*carte blanche* in the Romanian privatizations, four billion euros to balance his losses and Morozov's head on a silver tray) or go to total war. "I even gave your wife back! I always respected our agreements and do you repay me like this?" He had shouted and Constantin had been very afraid that Lintorff could be interested in finding out his reasons for willing to kill his wife.

"Konrad, be reasonable please. Morozov acted all by himself. He wanted to depose me as you're perfectly aware. He came to you first."

"I refused his offer. I honoured my oath!"

"I had nothing to do with this!"

"Morozov is a rat who follows your every command. If you're not so much in power as I believed, perhaps it would be good that you're removed."

"I control my territory. Pray that I don't come to yours!"

"Please, gentlemen. We don't need to argue," Ferdinand von Kleist interfered. "Showing our tempers will not solve this misunderstanding."

"I had losses for over 4.8 billion!" Lintorff shouted enraged, ignoring his second in command and long time friend. He didn't want peace, he wanted to go to war and Ferdinand was delaying the inevitable once more. At least, Michael Dähler understood much better the whole concept. This Russian scum was blatantly testing his defence abilities, attacking his associates -provoking an uprising within the Order- and Ferdinand could only think on the costs of a war!

"My companies lost 7.8 billion thanks to you and many more in contracts!"

"Sell some of your paintings," the Duke retorted heatedly.

"Konrad, we never had troubles in the past. Why would I attack you now? It's suicidal for me!" Constantin tried to reason with Konrad once more but he always took very bad any kind of challenges toward his leadership. Treason was something that simply drove him mad and into one of his killing sprees.

"You betrayed my trust in you. Remember who helped you after 1991."

"I always allowed your brothers to work in my land. We shared our expertise with each other."

"I have an internal uprising and many challenges on my leadership because you killed Schäffer."

"I swear on my children's heads that I did not give the order. That was Morozov's reaction when you destroyed his company!"

"I'm far from finished."

"Konrad, what you're asking is impossible at the moment. I simply can't afford it."

"Your offer?"

"Morozov's head but with my own methods, my deepest apologies to you, Gasrom entirely handed over you and 1.5 billion for your losses."

"That's nothing."

"I'm trying to balance my own companies and associates. I can't control the four hundred groups operating in the former USSR without some cash. I need time to pay you 2.2 billion."

"It's four billion, Repin."

"I'll go to war then."

"As you wish."

"I hope you can contain my men when they ram into your territory, once I'm gone. It's a Pyrrhic victory what you will achieve,"

"What do you suggest?"

"A stalemate. Six months to clean our territories from traitors. Then, we will meet again and set new rules for us. I'll give you 2.2 billion as compensation, but I want free reign in Central Asia and Latin America."

"All right, you can have Central Asia. I like Brazil very much to leave it."

"I understand; we will coexist as we did before."

"Exactly. Central Asia is all yours. Stay away from Europe, unless you plan to invest your winnings with us. We resent the trust you're placing in the Americans for that matter."

"I can't force my associates to purchase your services, but rest assured that I will make my displeasure at their ways very well known. We should always remain with our friends."

"Very well, we have an understanding. We will see each other in St. Petersburg in mid-February."

Lintorff sealed the pact offering his hand, much to Ferdinand von Kleist and Ivan Oblomov's relief.

"I will be delighted to receive you at my house."

"One more thing," Constantin heard Lintorff's clear baritone voice and he suppressed a shudder. "Yes, Konrad?"

"I'm just curious about something. Why are you so furious with your wife? When she came to me she mentioned something about London. I rejected her, of course."

"She ruined something that was mine. It was the straw that broke the camel."

"Was it an artwork?"

"You can say so."

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's diary.

August 24th, 2003

Constantin returned yesterday evening from his meeting with the Hochmeister. He was utterly tired and defeated. I don't know what Lintorff might have done to him but it must be serious because he was the whole time engaged in a heated discussion with Oblomov and Boris Malchenko. They were even yelling at each other—and it's not the way Russians normally talk as Mikhail tells me—He came to bed very late and all the things I wanted to tell him died on my lips the minute I saw his sad expression. I could only move aside and ask him to come closer. He caressed my hair for a long time, kissed me tenderly on the lips and mumbled: "you're the best thing that ever happened to me."

We drive to the airport in two hours.

Chapter 14

January, 2004
St. Petersburg

"Well, Mikhail Petrovich, what do you think?" Oblomov asked the man standing in front of him.

"He's not getting better. In fact, he's worse than before. He does his best to hide it in front of the children and Repin, but it's a time bomb. He's permanently terrified. Boss should let him go. Not even two months ago he tried to take his life. He does not speak at all, barely eats. The only time when he acts normal is when he's with the children. The smallest one, Vania, loves him very much. The girl, Sofia Constatinovna is learning to paint with him. When the boss is at home, he's nice to him, never shouts or is nasty, but he's very sad. He wants to go back to Argentina and leave everything behind."

"Repin will never allow it. He cares for the boy. I think he's secretly happy that he's so sick so he can control him much better," Oblomov considered as he made a gesture to Massaiev to sit in front of him.

"Mr. Repin should understand that this is a broken toy. The boy I brought from Argentina is dead. He will never jump to his neck again. The doctors say that he can do nothing in bed. I have troubles to save all his drawings from destruction. That oil portrait of the children? I had to keep it in my room every night so he wouldn't destroy it. I count his material every morning so he can tear nothing apart. This man, the one in London, Robertson sold several of his latest drawings and paints and sent him a check for £11,600. I had to force him to write the letter to that priest he sends the money to. It's almost impossible to take him anywhere outside the house. More than five people in the room and he has a nervous breakdown."

"And the boss?"

"He takes great care of him. He's with him every time he can, praises his paints. He was very happy when he got the portrait with the children as a Christmas present. On the other hand, he does not let him speak about leaving him. After Guntram cut his wrists open, he threatened with taking revenge on those poor people he likes in Argentina. The boy is very frightened about it, thinking that the boss will waste his time with a priest and some lousy devils."

"This can't continue any longer. It's not good for either of them. Constantin is very nervous and we need him with a cool head if we want to survive this internal war."

"Ivan Ivanovich, even if this would be an act of mercy, I can't do it."

"NO! We have to find the way to send the boy away, somewhere Constantin can't touch him."

"He's too sick to travel or fend for himself. He can't work and needs constant medical care."

"Perhaps we should return him to his own people," Oblomov pondered.

"Argentina? He would be dead in less than two months."

"No, his real people, you understand me."

"I see your point, but how?"

"I don't know. I have to find a way to convince Lintorff that this is the best deal of the year, like I did with Aliosha Antonov."

"He's not Lintorff's type, Mr. Oblomov."

"Quite the contrary. I'm convinced that Guntram is exactly what he wants," Ivan said with deep satisfaction. "Lintorff would do anything to piss off Constantin and who knows? The boy is good looking and he kind of grows on you. Even Massaiev can't lay a hand on him. If he took Aliosha, he can take Guntram too. The irony of life. Lintorff starting a NGO for Constantin's former lovers!"

"Well done Massaiev. Leave it into my hands," Oblomov dismissed the man. When he was alone in his office, Oblomov let a long sigh escape through his lips. He was sick of this mess and felt responsible for Guntram's "accident". He had warned Constantin several times, but the idiot had disregarded each one of his words. He only cared about having Guntram for himself no matter the consequences; and here they were smacking his face. A boy, a little older than his own son, good tempered and docile had been crushed like a cockroach because of an intrigue made by a stupid woman and a greedy man. 'I would have killed Morozov with my own hands!'

"The boy will be a hundred times better in the Order's territory than here. Constantin is one step from exploding if he doesn't improve. Those are brutal and crazy Germans, but they stick to their codes and Guntram is one

of them. Lefèbre told us that his own father offered the boy to Lintorff in exchange for his life and he accepted the offer. He thinks that they were looking for the child for two or three years, but finally they thought that he was dead too. Exactly like in the Middle Ages; one hostage to prove your loyalty and good will. Those Germans are truly crazy!

'A lunatic with codes is a hundred times better than a sane man without codes.'

'I wonder how Lefèbre could know so much about the Order if he was never a member. That Frenchman knows much more than he tells us. He must have inside contacts at top level, much better than Malchenko's. He understands and predicts their moves much better than anyone we know.'

* * *

Ferdinand von Kleist's Diary
February 17th, 2004

Once again my idiotic friend has done it. I can't believe it. He only needed to see the boy for two minutes and boom! He falls in love like a horny teenager. No matter what he tells me, I know he's in love, infatuated, obsessed or whatever you want to call it. I should have hit him with a champagne bottle or something like that to make him come to his senses!

I'm an idiot too!

It all happened in St. Petersburg. Repin had a party at one of his houses there. Nice place, elegant and with good looking girls and boys too. I can't deny that he makes fantastic castings for his places. It's an old residence on the outskirts of the city and we all were invited, Konrad, Goran, Adolf zu Löwenstein, Georg, Cohen and me. The idea was to take a look around, have a drink or two and go home as no chance in hell any of us would make a free video for Repin. Perhaps one of the bodyguards, but I'm not sure if they want to.

It was crowded with people from the government and industry. More than a whorehouse the place looked like the Parliament. Some people would tell me that the Parliament is a whorehouse, but I have some respect for its workers and I think they should not be insulted with this kind of comparisons. After all, it's a good service what they provide. Konrad and I were thinking to leave the party and we went up the stairs to tell good-bye to Oblomov, busy with two girls and several Russians. We spoke briefly with him when it happened. While Oblomov was elaborating on the situation in Romania, Konrad looked transfixed toward the entrance, from our position we could dominate the whole foyer. Oblomov knows how to pick his grounds, when Repin entered the room, steering a young boy, no more than twenty and looking very out of his normal environment. Hell, he looked like just out of school and was dressed in a conservative, sober way, nothing like you could see there.

His face was what nearly made my heart stop. He looked very similar to Roger de Lisle, Konrad's former lover and the biggest snake I've ever met. Perhaps I'm being unfair to the boy. He looked similar true, but he was much younger than Roger, his face was perfectly symmetrical and his features more delicate, not so well defined as Roger's, the hair a very light brown almost blond and looking at everything in a mix of awe, embarrassment and barely concealed horror. I noticed that Repin put an arm around his waist and protectively pulled him against him and whispered something in his ear, making him smile like a child. Obviously, this one was a lover, not a professional. Perhaps one of the artists he likes so much to adopt.

However, Konrad was looking at the boy as he would have seen a ghost -nothing would have pleased me more than that, alas the bastard is still alive- and Oblomov noticed it.

"Incredible, isn't it? Boss is with that one for almost two years and totally in love with him," he said.

"Who is he?" Konrad asked.

"Not for sale, Duke. Belongs only to Repin and I don't know what he's doing here. He was never in a place like this. In fact, he almost never leaves the house. He's sick and can't run around much."

"Who is he? I sense a good story behind," I smirked.

"There is a story, indeed. Boss has been after him since he was seventeen and in school. Comes from the other side of the world, but lived in London. Let's make a bet, Duke. If you can guess which one of the paintings in this room belongs to him, I'll tell you the story."

The bloody place was full with those abstract things or erotic things. All cheap in my opinion. "Ivan Ivanovich, that is very difficult. We're bankers, not art critics," I protested.

"That one over there. The one with the bathing woman over the sink, It is a good pastel," Konrad said before I could tell him what a fool he was, Oblomov laughed and patted him on the shoulder.

"Remind me never to bet against you again, my Duke. You are right. How did you find it out?"

"It's the only one who has some mastery behind. The one who made it has talent. You said that the boy has been his lover for two years although he's sick, therefore useless for this business, so he must be an artist and a good one for having retained Repin's favour for so long. Normally, they don't last so long. The hand that painted that woman, also painted the portrait of your wife. I'm surprised that he has already a recognisable style. How old is he?"

"Yes, the boy painted my wife's portrait too. He has some talent. I discovered him, so to speak, in 2000, when he was in school."

"In school? I didn't know Repin liked that," I said shocked.

"No, no, boss is not into such things. He likes them young but not to the point of changing diapers. I was at Christie's Buenos Aires buying some lands with him and I saw a watercolour of a landscape a woman had there. It was breathtaking and reminded me a lot to my own birthplace. I wanted to buy it, but the woman didn't want to sell it."

"That doesn't sound like a happy ending story," I chortled.

"Nothing happened, relax von Kleist. Boss saw it too and liked it a lot. I offered up to \$10,000, but the little slut was only telling me that it belonged to her husband. Finally, she agreed to speak with him. We went to her house in the Pampa, a big Estancia, not bad but full with tourists and in need of a total renovation. However, the couple had many more drawings and I—as Boss had let me play boss for this time—bought several of them, including a series of ballerinas that my wife adores. I paid around \$5,000 for the whole lot. Repin bought the rest for a similar amount convinced that they were from a well seasoned artist. The Dollenberg man laughed at us and told us that they were made by a sixteen year old brat; a friend of his younger brother. We thought it was a joke."

"Boss ordered me to gather information about the artist and it was true. He was an eighteen year old boy working as a waiter in a bar. Boss fell in love with him the minute he saw him and was after him for several months till the boy noticed him."

"Playing hard to get a better price?" Konrad snorted. "I thought Repin knew better."

"No, that's the funny part. The boy never saw him or acknowledged him, till boss nearly shouted with him. He lives on another planet, like all artists do... and he comes from another planet too. He's a decent lad. Honest to the point of being an idiot, although he's very intelligent. Had it not been for Olga Fedorovna's meddling, he would still be happily believing that we are serious businessmen from Russia, that Repin is a respectable society member. He was studying Art History in UCL, London till seven months ago."

"What happened?" I asked while Konrad smirked. I think he knows something and forgot to inform me. Once more.

"She felt jealous of him and attacked him. Nearly killed him, but he survived."

"She never cared about Repin's adventures before."

"When they are adventures women don't care, my Duke. The problem arose when she found out that Repin had installed the boy in the London residence, the one in front of Holland Park, throwing her out of the property. She went ballistic and arranged that the boy would be attacked, raped and killed. Fortunately, his bodyguard—between you and me his job was to make sure that the boy was not playing around the corner—could get help before they would have stabbed him to death. In the hospital the doctors nearly finished him because no one knew that he had a previous and serious heart condition. He suffers from heart failure and they had to operate on him, provoking a heart attack and since that time, he's still in recovery. Can't have any kind of stress, so boss took him out of London and brought him here."

"Is that the reason behind Stephanov's death?" Konrad asked coldly as I was horrified. I know she's a difficult woman but to order this when she could have offered money or just tell him to beat it was too much for my standards. The boy didn't look like he could be a force against you, or there was something more that Oblomov was leaving out of the picture.

"An eye for an eye. Boss is still considering the divorce express option. The children are the only stopper. Guntram, that's the boy's name, changed a lot after the attack. Before he was a good trusting lad, kind to everybody, happy in his limbo and now he's afraid of people the whole time, never speaks unless you speak with him, depressed, utterly sad and more shy than ever. He only paints the whole day or writes."

"A near death experience has that effect on people," Konrad retorted.

"Boss takes great care of him. He lets him play with his own children and they like Guntram very much. Specially the youngest one, Vania." There it's. Olga Fedorovna has a replacement. I'm not surprised she wanted to kill him. It was she or he. Anyway, there are good poisons for that matter. No need to be so brutal and slow. It can

only end badly. Too many loose ends. Fast and clean is the best.

"What is his last name?" I, the idiot, asked.

"That is the funniest part, gentlemen. He is from noble birth, a distant cousin of yours even, Duke." Why was Oblomov smiling so much and since when does he gossip with us? True we share information but nothing of a personal nature.

"I have no relatives in Argentina."

"He is not Argentinean. He's French and partly German. His father worked for you even," he said to our utter astonishment.

"I don't follow you, Ivan Ivanovich."

"Easy. His full name is Guntram Philippe Alphonse de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen. His father was Jérôme de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen and his mother Cécile Dubois Strinberg. Are the Lintorffs not related with the Guttenberg Sachsen? According to boss, they were the main providers of wives and husbands for the whole European nobility. All of them good looking and too silly to make troubles. Good to have one around when the blood was too contaminated by marrying your cousin and producing too many monsters! Endogamy is good for the fortune but bad for the species."

"Not silly, they are known for being very generous and kind hearted," Konrad replied automatically as he was digesting the news. The boy was Roger's nephew! That explained the resemblance.

"Yes, that was Guntram like before the attack. Can you imagine that he was going to a slum every time he could to help in the communal kitchen? Repin had to bribe the local Mafia boss so he would kick the boy out. He didn't want to come with Repin because he didn't want to leave the children behind. He still sends part of the money he makes to the priest there. That boy has no malice or pettiness in him," Oblomov laughed. "Electrons and protons." Did he wink at me?

I looked again at the lad, almost clutching onto Repin's arm, and noticed that he was doing his best to control his ragged breathing, looking truly afraid of something. Konrad was also inspecting him with that fierceness I know that leads to big troubles.

"That's a side effect. He can't be around too many people for too long; specially men. He can't stand it. Boss will take him away soon or send him home," Oblomov shrugged. "Ten to twenty minutes is the limit."

As Oblomov predicted, Repin whispered something in his ear and the boy smiled nervously and dashed to the door to be intercepted by a giant with his coat. "That's Mikhail Massaiev, his bodyguard. He'll take him home. He's getting better. Lasted twenty-three minutes."

The rest of the night, Konrad was like absent. Working as usual and effectively dealing with Repin and his people, but I knew his mind was somewhere else that wasn't the peace agreement we had reached with that slug. Back in our hotel, I thought it was time to stop whatever he was planning because it has taken a great toll on us to keep our positions in Central Europe against Repin's advance and Gasrom.

"Konrad, spit out what you're thinking. You're up to nothing good."

"I? I'm only tired from the day."

"Of course, seeing Roger's nephew has nothing to do with the fact that you're distracted and ignoring me."

"He really looks like him."

"Not at al. Roger was always the centre of attention and this one was scurrying to the darkest corner. He's shorter, blonder and looks much better than him."

"I had no idea that you were checking him so thoroughly. Should I be jealous, Ferdinand?" he mocked me.

"Idiot! Of course not. Hear me well: this boy has a "property of Mr. Repin" sign tattooed on his back. He's been his lover for the past two years. I don't want more troubles with him. Morozov's story costed us around 4.8 billion!"

"And it took 7.3 billion plus the loss of the Georgian gas monopole for Repin. Not to mention that the Authorities are after him, now."

"Repin cleaned his backyard and offered his apologies. Do you want to start a real war with him?"

"He attacked me and I'm the offended part. He's even asking for my support to survive the internal fight unleashed by his own greed. Perhaps I should ask for a guarantor in order to secure my own position."

"Konrad..."

"Besides, the boy belongs to me. It's part of a previous agreement made by his father on his behalf."

"Please, you can't be serious about it!"

"Jerôme was cleverer than I thought. He is exactly as promised."

"Pity you didn't respect the other part of the agreement. The one about not killing the uncle? For the past thirteen years you've been after his throat."

"Did I touch the boy? Did I touch Roger's family? No, only exiled them. Löwenstein can consider himself lucky his niece and her daughter survived it."

"Konrad, for Christ's sake! It's his nephew!"

"His father gave him to me as a replacement for Roger. I only swore to wait till he would turn eighteen and refrain myself to press him into doing something against his wishes."

"You don't even like young boys! You're the first person to tell they are little dodos unable to utter a full sentence!"

"I can change my mind, can't I? We always have to evolve Ferdinand," the asshole sauntered.

"You have been fucking every woman that came around. Lord! Do you even keep the numbers? I don't remember many boys like that one. You like dark-haired men, over thirty, not blond."

"Perhaps I have issues of my own. Since Roger, I can't be near a blond. I don't like them. Maybe it's time to put that unreasonable belief aside. It truly narrows the hunting."

"Excellent. Finally you agree that you need therapy and you want to have it with the favourite plaything of a vicious mobster. Truly Konrad, you need a real shrink."

"It seems you oppose my idea, Ferdinand. Remember he's a member of the Order since birth and his father paid with his blood his right to be readmitted."

"I hardly doubt that this was on Jerôme's mind when he made the pact. He hated and despised us!"

"Nevertheless, the boy is mine and I don't like people touching my things and we need a guarantee just to keep Repin under control for a while. My decision is made, Ferdinand. Find out everything you can about him. End of story."

I want to resurrect Jerôme and kill him once more! He gave his brat to Konrad in exchange for his brother's life and his own and now Konrad wants to collect that old debt!

I still don't know how, but Konrad managed to be invited to Repin's house on Saturday. Confidence building measures, my ass! However, there we went, with Goran in tow, upset that he was forced to attend a "social meeting" with the slug, his little slugs, the slug wife and everything. Repin's residence was exactly as I remembered. Big, luxurious and good taste. Must be the Arseniev in him, nothing like those pompous houses from Russian nouveau riche. Do they think they're going to die if the plumbing is not made in solid gold? Don't they have enough money as to build a garage that they need to park everything at the entrance? Maybe they're planning to set a used cars business in the yard. I fear one day, I'll find a price tag attached to the Venus in the living room.

I should have known something was wrong the minute, Repin didn't come to greet us and Olga Fedorovna was nowhere to be seen (or heard) Instead, his four children—from the girl, Sofia, 13, I guess, almost a young lady, Constantin 10, Vladimir 9 and Vania 5—were loudly playing blind man's buff in the garden with the boy, trying to catch them. All right, Olga would not accompany us.

Konrad stood there, examining him again as if he were a horse—silent. "Let's go inside. Repin should be here in any minute." I said, willing to get him out of trouble—as if it ever had worked fine!-

"He has to solve the issue at Novosibirsk. Might take some time Ferdinand, don't you think Goran?" He smirked to me.

"Indeed my Duke."

Those two were plotting at my back again! We don't need extra heat in the moment and the Serb had been up to something!

"Konrad..." I started to give him a piece of my mind, but the jackass went to the children and let himself be caught by the boy who seemed to hesitate at having something so big on the hook. "Mikhail!" he guessed, removing the blind to almost die of shame under Konrad's intensive gaze.

"Wrong. My name is Konrad von Lintorff," he introduced himself, catching him by the arm and the boy nearly jumped away. He's certainly nervous.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I didn't notice you were here. Come children, we go inside," he said in a hurry, with the smallest one clinging from his leg.

"Mr. Repin invited us but he is nowhere to be seen? Should we go away?" Konrad continued with his happy grabbing of the boy. Konrad, you're not buying tomatoes at the market!

"I'll call Mr. Malchenko in a minute, Sire," he said, finally disentangling himself from Konrad. They all went inside the house.

"Well, it seems we wait at the door," Konrad shrugged.

"It has improved, my Duke. Before, Russian noblemen were releasing the dogs and asking questions later," Goran smirked. "You almost gave him his second heart attack, Sire."

"He should be less nervous around people," Konrad observed.

"If I would have been repeatedly raped by three goons, beaten to the point of death, my left hand destroyed with a hammer and given the opportunity to choose between amputation of the right one or be killed, I would also be nervous around people," Goran informed us looking very sombre. "He was only twenty when it happened. Like my brother. Not surprisingly, he tried to commit suicide two and a half months ago."

"How do you know it?" I asked in disbelief.

"Milan Mihailovic is very good for Public Relations, von Kleist. The one who looks after him, Mikhail Petrovich Massaiev, told him the whole story last night. That woman was really bent against him. It seems Repin forced her to watch how they did the same to her lover with the difference that he got a shot in the head at the end. I would have not been so merciful. Since that time, the boy lives here with the children and they're very fond of him. Of course, they know nothing about it. Only that he's an artist and very sick in the heart. He's a good boy according to Massaiev, generous but a little silly. Imagine, he feels responsible for what happened! He even told Massaiev that it was his fault that Repin was having an affair with him! He wanted to leave him so he would return to his wife!"

"No!" I blurted in disbelief. NO ONE can be so stupid!

"He even lectured Repin on the sainthood of marriage."

"No doubt he's suicidal," I laughed.

"He's one of us, Ferdinand. He respects our Church and God has placed him in our way so we would take him back to where he belongs."

"Indeed, my Duke. This place is not safe for him. His line's crimes against the Order were cleaned with his father's blood," Goran joined the party. Fuck! Those two in tandem considering themselves doing the Lord's work? If they get Michael's support, I can eat my own vote. Shit! "Repin cannot guarantee his safety."

"Goran. It's an internal affair. Not our business."

"He's a Guttenberg Sachsen. Should I remind you that your bloodline saved your family from certain misery? What would happen to us if we start to forget our own vows?" Goran said. "I agree with the Griffin and Dähler does it too. The boy comes with us."

"Do you plan to kidnap him in front of Repin, Goran?" I asked him sweetly. Does he plan to play big brother with a total stranger as it seems? The nerve of him!

"No Ferdinand. Repin will give him to us," Konrad intoned. "Follow my lead, please," he ordered me when he saw Malchenko, Repin's man in Smolensk and a member too, approaching us, very agitated.

"My Griffin, I'm terribly sorry you were kept waiting here. Guntram told me of your coming just a minute ago!"

"Is it customary to keep your Hochmeister standing like a servant?"

"My Duke, I offer you my greatest apologies. It was a misunderstanding. Mr. Repin had to leave due to an emergency, but please, do come in."

"Repin is not here? I came to speak with him about the terms and he's not here?"

"He will be back in a few hours and I can speak on his behalf."

"Do I have to negotiate with a third grade member? Incredible. This is an insult to all of us, Malkovich. We leave, now," Konrad said, turning around to my horror. "Tell Repin I will not support his cause."

Konrad wants to send me to an early grave. Without a doubt.

I shouted with him in the car. I shouted. He remained impassable and Goran did the same.

"I'm only improving the terms of our arrangement," was his pathetic justification.

At noon I was furious with him. He had the nerve to send Oblomov home after speaking with him in Russian! All for a boy!

At eight he jovially announced to me that he was hungry and going to have dinner in a restaurant. Goran was coming too. I should have known. He goes nowhere but the Königshalle! He hates local food and here we were standing in front of a sushi place. Last time we were in Japan, he took Jean Jacques along. He eats nothing that he has not tried during his childhood. I was surprised, but said nothing as I do like to try new things. I'm not such a conservative prick!

Inside Repin was sitting in a corner with many of his goons around... and the boy, Guntram, sitting next to him. He looked perplexed at Konrad but quickly returned his attention to his untouched dish. Konrad instead of doing the only reasonable thing, went in a straight line to Repin's table. Oblomov was there and he didn't look surprised upon our arrival.

"Sit down, Konrad. I'm afraid I wasn't able to see you this morning," Repin said in English.

"I felt most disappointed, Constantin. I was looking forward to our meeting."

"Perhaps we could have it now."

"Perhaps". Konrad sat in front of Repin and I next to him. I noticed Goran going to a nearby table.

"I still don't understand this change of heart from you, Konrad. Normally, your word has some value."

"My word stands as long as you don't try to deceive me or the Order."

"How so?"

"You have something that belongs to me, Constantin. Give it back and we will continue where we were. I don't like to be toyed."

"I have nothing that belongs to you. We had agreed onto the territories. This is my land."

"Please Constantin, don't insult my intelligence. You have asked me my support to save your neck from the authorities and I have given it to you. Two billion dollars, untraceable by the authorities. We had to break the money box, at good rate, I might add, and do you repay me like this?"

"Twelve percent interest, Konrad. Almost usury. I'm no fortune teller. Tell me what you want now."

"I resent that you associate with a member of the Order."

"Clean your own backyard. I have enough with mine."

"Don't play the lamb with me. He," Konrad said pointing the boy. "He is a de Lisle. He belongs to me."

"I don't belong to you!" The boy said in shock, but one sharp look from Constantin made him silent again. Good training.

"His father gave him to me in 1989 to atone for his sins against us. Return him to me."

"No! You have no claims over him!"

"Then, I will ask for an extra guarantee for the loan you need so desperately. One of your children will be fine. Give me the smallest one. Shouldn't matter to you."

"Lintorff leave this place before I shoot you dead."

"My men will kill all your family if you try it. Won't they, Goran?"

"We want revenge for what happened in Georgia. Morozov's death wasn't enough, Sire. The house and this place are surrounded."

"So Constantin, the boy for a small reduction in your rates. How about a seven percent? It's a very generous offer. Give me the boy or one of your children as a guarantee for the loan's year. After lying to me so blatantly, I can't be sure you're going to pay me back. I'll send the child to the best school and get a Russian nanny if you prefer it."

"No, don't touch the children," the boy spoke softly.

"Guntram, be quiet!"

"The girl could go to a boarding school. If her mother has taken a leave of absence, then it's a good time to teach her manners," Konrad continued as nothing would have happened. He had found the breach in the dam and was going to flood the place.

"Why do you want Guntram? He has nothing. Whatever his family did in the past, it's over since ten years! Killing them all wasn't enough for you?"

"What?" shouted the boy.

"His father placed him under my protection in order to save his life. I took his offer."

"My father committed suicide! He was never part of your Order!"

"You must carry a golden cross with your name and a date that's not your birthday. It's the day you were accepted into the Order and baptised. The cross is very special, not the usual type. It's a Crenel Cross and has small lines that make it look like the turrets from a castle. The order adopted it in the XVII century and it means "militant from the Church" because it represents a fortress. We are warriors for the Church and only a few of our members still have the right to carry it. Only the founding families. Should I tell the date? It was in your third month of life."

"December 8th," Guntram whispered, looking very sick.

"Our Lady's festivity. You're one of us, Guntram and under my protection. We never knew where you were all these years. I had the utmost respect for Jérôme. It's a pity he took that decision. I never blamed him for what

his brothers and father did."

Did I hear well? Jérôme despised Konrad, disapproved of his relationship with Roger like the good prude he was, always resembling to a big vulture perched on his corner, brooding. True, he was nothing like Roger or Pascal. Konrad, you gave the man a month to put his affairs in order and kill himself!

"Your understanding of the word "mercy" is very peculiar, Lintorff. You destroyed their bank, set the house on fire, killed the old Vicomte and his eldest, along with all his family and you're still trying to get rid of the other brother. Something else Lintorff?"

"Did you know about my family, Constantin? Who they were? Why did you never tell me a thing?" The boy looked at him truly hurt. Oops, someone has a skeleton in the closet.

"It was all history. Back in 1989, some members decided to replace their Hochmeister and revolted. Somehow they were betrayed and Lintorff found out everything, killing most of them and now he wants to finish the job with you."

"No, Constantin. I plan to honour my oath to his father. I will not touch a single hair from his head. Why would I do it? His father was the one who put Ferdinand on the right track of the traitors. We found it out several months later when his papers were discovered in a safety box in a Geneva bank. There's a letter for you even, Guntram. Right, Ferdinand?"

"Yes." Fuck you Konrad. The letter you have it from before (Shit! He didn't destroy it as he promised me he would. The obsessive motherfucker was thinking all the time to check on the boy!) and the papers were found after putting all the parquetry out of his flat, searching for his account numbers, would have sent you for twenty to thirty years in jail... if there would be a judge in this Earth willing to read them.

"I was only defending myself Guntram. I didn't give the order as I was in the hospital as the only survivor of a shooting." Konrad explained. (Sissy, it was only a scratch in the shoulder what you got) "Your grandfather ordered it. Now, will you come with us quietly or should I ask my people to proceed?"

"No! Don't touch the children!"

"Guntram, be quiet! Keep your money Lintorff and leave my country."

"All right, as you want Constantin. Don't complain when the Russian Authorities arrest you on tax evasion charges. They're very crossed for your dealings with the Chechen. Very bad boy. Olga will be very happy to get a fast divorce from you."

"Constantin, you can't go to prison," Oblomov interfered. "You're dead if so."

"I'll go," the boy offered and I admired his guts. Well, he tried suicide two and a half months ago. He can't be too sane. Lives with Repin.

"Guntram, he's bluffing. He has not a single evidence to back his words."

"I don't have them. Your wife has them. I provided them for her. Your whole structure goes down with you. She wants to make an arrangement with the Russian Authorities. I could stop that too."

"Olga Fedorovna would do anything to ruin you Constantin," the boy said sounding truly sad for the slug.

"It's only a year Constantin, till you pay me back. I will return him in one piece, solve your marital problems and reduce your rates. What more can you ask from me?"

"I swear I'll destroy your life Lintorff."

"You already tried and failed. Next time, I will not go for a settlement. Move boy, my plane awaits."

"It's for the best boss. Our position is very frail at the moment." Oblomov said.

"Guntram can't do it. He's very sick!"

"I will be fine, my friend. I survived it once," the boy whispered clutching Repin's hand. "Think on you and your children. If you go to jail, who's going to look after them? It's only a year."

"I will let you write to him or with the children. I'm not such a heartless man," Konrad said. Pardon me?

"I don't believe for a minute you have anything against me, Lintorff."

"5897354-CLX Does it remind you of something?" Konrad just said. That looks like an account in Luxembourg. Repin paled. "So boy, say good-bye to your benefactor and meet me in the car," Konrad finished.

I don't know what those two said to each other, but Goran came to the car firmly holding the boy by the elbow. The poor thing looked really sick and on the brink of a collapse or a heart attack. He entered the limo and sat in front of Konrad and I, with Goran next to him. He breathed raggedly and I saw him taking a small box out of his jacket pocket and putting a small pill inside his mouth.

"What's that?" Konrad asked.

"It's against high blood pressure. I have a chronic heart condition, sir. I need to get my medications, please."

"A doctor will assess your condition in the morning in Zürich. Give your pills to Pavicevic. I will not have you taking anything we have not controlled first."

"Sir, it's only nifedipine and a calcium antagonist. I suffer from MCH and already had one heart attack. Nothing to get me high."

"I'm not concerned about drugs abuse in your case, but you have a history of suicide attempts. I prefer to be on the safe side. You are my collateral for a year at least."

"At least?"

"If Repin pays me back, you return. If not, you stay. Will be interesting to see what he loves more: you or two billion. I would be surprised if he has some money left to pay for the interest in a year."

This is how we "acquired" Guntram Philippe Alphonse de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen. I had no idea Repin's wife had such material, but she has it, and according to Konrad, Goran should take care of the matter. After all, you never know with such things. Traitors and snitches are bad for business. The Serb is more than happy with the commission. I hope he's not transferring his feelings for his dead brother, Pavel, into this boy. The circumstances are pretty similar.

Konrad is after the boy. I can see it very clearly now. He was looking at him all the time in the plane, even if the poor child went to the farthest corner and stayed there, motionless, speechless, like a frightened animal. Guntram refused to eat or drink anything from the stewardess, although we were having dinner (German cuisine, of course) and Marie was very nice to him. He didn't want to join us and Konrad left him alone while we ate and worked. We took off at 11 p.m. and those were the longest 7 hours in my life till we got home. I pitied him because he was alone, sick, afraid, going to an unknown destination with the man who had executed his whole family.

Even Goran took pity on him. Around 1 a.m., when we were wrapping up the matter with Gasrom, he came to the boy and offered him a Mars Bar he had in his pocket—never pegged Goran as someone who would carry such a thing—and the boy, after hesitating a while, took it, muttered a "thank you" and ate it. He was then fast asleep, exhausted from the tension. I noticed Konrad standing up from his desk and going to him to recline his seat and cover him with a wool blanket.

"Are you sure about this? Repin will not give up."

"He has to pay for what he did to us and I want some guarantees that he will return the money. I'm not going to be the idiot who gave him two billion for nothing so he can rebuild his power. I prefer him on the top because he keeps the Russians in line, but make no mistake Ferdinand, the minute he tries something against me like that pre default scenario in Central Europe, he's dead."

"What if he does not pay? What would you do with him? Kill him?"

"As I said, he very much resembles his uncle, could be very entertaining for me, although he lacks Roger's spirit in bed. He looks more like a little lamb or a kitten."

"Great."

"We'll see if he can't get the snake out of the hole where he's hiding. I want to terminate that business too."

"I would like to see you try. This one is terrified of men."

"Adds some flavour to the hunting. Whores are fine, but you eventually tire of getting everything effortlessly. Ferdinand, we're getting too old to be running from one hotel to the next. I'd rather have something fixed at home."

"Speak for yourself." I turned around and went back to my own seat, ready to sleep. Fuck him!

** * **

*Guntram de Lisle's diary
February 16th, 2004*

My life took another turn for worse two days ago. On Friday morning, I was playing with Constantin's children and there was this German from the previous days. I know now who he is. The infamous Griffin, the Hochmeister from the Order, Konrad von Lintorff, Herzog von Wittstock, rich banker from Switzerland and the

murderer of my family. He swears that he had nothing to do with it as it was decided by the others members to stop an internal war; that my father gave me to him in order to save me from something called the "old Guard" and that he looked for me over the years but never found me before. He says that I'm not safe with Constantin as the attacks of his own wife had proven. He wants my well being as I'm part of the Order since I was a baby; He tells me he will let me pursue my artistic career if I want and support me even because he thinks I have some talent.

What is the difference between him and Constantin? His businesses are all legitimate, nothing murky and he effectively controls governments. No one would touch him, but he's a mobster of a worst kind than Constantin. He had no problems to murder, threaten children and women or taking me with him just to weaken Constantin. I hope he's fine and solves the problem with his wife.

He promised to let me speak with the children if he's satisfied with my behaviour. He will let me write with Constantin or send him my works if I want, within reason, of course. Lintorff didn't let me bring a single thing from Russia, not even my pencils or medications. Nothing at all. It's not like I'm going to have a bug in my pencils box or a hidden camera in my jacket!

Lintorff has a private jet, a Boeing if I'm correct. Bigger than the one Constantin has. Lord, I miss him so much already. This place is so big and dead. Like a Mausoleum. Gloomy and perfect, nothing like at Constantin's with the children laughing and always into some mischief. The house in London was big, but full of light and he was always there to listen to me, hold me and kiss me. His eyes lit the moment I was entering the room and he did his best to look after me after what happened that night. He loves me so much even if he knows that I can't love him any more. He never reproached me anything. He just stood by me.

As I was telling, Lintorff has a jet. Inside were he, another German of his age, two more guys, I think they're bodyguards and a medium size man, a Serb called Goran who was nice to me. Constantin told me before leaving him that I shouldn't worry because I was his angel and he loved me more than anything in this world; that he would get me back as soon as he could; that it was only temporary. I truly hope he fulfils his promise.

We arrived to Zurich at noon, for lunch time. We had breakfast in the plane and the minute we landed I was sent to a big black armoured Mercedes limousine and forced to drive with Lintorff. The German man, Ferdinand von something and Goran took another car, also Mercedes. With us were the driver and a bodyguard in the front seat.

"Guntram, as you have understood so far, you are under my tutelage for the next year. You're my pupil so to speak as your father wanted and I will treat you accordingly. Behave, obey and respect me and we shall have no problems. I will look after you, provide for you and if I think you're reliable, will send you to school. I was informed you were studying in London before this incident."

"I can't return to school. I can't stand people around. I have panic attacks when I see them."

"Nonsense. There are medications for that. Dr. Wagemann, my personal physician will evaluate you as soon as we are at home. During the week, you will be taken to a Clinic and further evaluated. For the time being, you will remain at home. Make a list of the materials you normally use for painting so you have something to do."

"Can I speak with Mr. Repin, please?" I pleaded to the rock.

"As soon as I deem it proper. You have to adjust to your new environment."

His house is a big castle in the middle of a large forest. Very beautiful and full with plants. An interior courtyard with trees inside, an old tower complemented with four wings built around in the XIX century. It looks like a fortress, more than a family residence. When we arrived and the chauffeur opened the door for him, I remained in the car, frozen in my fear. "Come, Guntram. It's too cold for you to remain outside," he told me, somewhat using a warmer voice than what I have heard previously. I gulped and followed him through up the marble stairs to the big door, with his coat of arms on top of it. In the foyer, all the servants were waiting for him as the temperature outside was well below zero and very wet. I counted seven maids, three more men with cooks uniforms and four butlers, one very tall and aristocratic, looking like the boss of all of them. He was looking at me perplexed, almost in shock, as if he would have seen a ghost.

"Guntram, this is Friederich. He's the Manager. Anything you might need, ask him," Lintorff told me, showing me the big serious bird. "Friederich, Guntram is Jérôme de Lisle's son, do you remember him?"

"Certainly, your Excellency," the man answered, gaping at Lintorff.

"He will be staying with us as my charge. Guntram, do you like blue or yellow?"

"Blue, Sire," I answered totally clueless.

"Good choice. The blue rooms are in the tower under my apartments. The red one is too girlish. Friederich, have it ready for after lunch. Guntram might need some rest after the flight."

"As you wish, your Excellency."

"Dismissed," he only said and the army just disappeared silently, only he, von Kleist and the Serb remained in the room.

"May I have a word with the Duke?" the butler asked.

"What is it Friederich?"

"In private, Sire," he said.

"Ferdinand, can you show Guntram the library or the winter garden? Ask for a tea or something hot, the boy looks sick," Lintorff ordered.

* * *

"Konrad, I've been your tutor for over forty years and this is the craziest thing you've ever done," Friederich started. "De Lisle, as in Roger de Lisle?"

"Nephew, son of Jérôme. Remarkable resemblance, don't you think?" Konrad answered, impassable as always.

"Are you out of your senses?"

"His father gave him to me as you already know. I found him interesting and taking him away from Repin was a punishment on a personal level. Don't worry, the boy is harmless, in fact he's terrified of everything. Bad experiences in Russia."

"You can't be thinking on that. He's just a boy! How old is he? Does he know about your past?"

"He might be around twenty-one years old. He's an artist and a good one. I have taken him as a collateral guarantee. He will be returned to his master in a year, if he pays me back, of course."

"Nothing else? Don't lie to me Konrad, I know you better than your own father."

"Well, I admit he has some charm on his own. Nothing like the uncle and probably couldn't do a third of what the uncle was doing in bed. He doesn't look very proficient in such matters. Besides he has a heart condition and is in recovery from a heart attack, a suicide attempt, several rapes by Repin's wife men, tortures and so on. Russia is not the best place to be."

"Do you say it like this? Have you no heart? He's only a child!" The old man asked horrified at his former pupil's coldness.

"I took over with twenty-two. Take care of him; he's nothing like the uncle. He's a shy and kind creature. You have to take him to the clinic the doctor Wagemann will inform you, get him some clothes, paper or whatever he uses for painting. I'm naming Alexei Antonov as his guard. He's not supposed to leave the Castle alone or unsupervised. Ah, tell the cook to be easy on the salt. He has a heart condition. No fat at all in his diet. If he behaves, he'll go to school or take painting lessons."

"As his Excellency wishes," Friederich chewed his acceptance.

* * *

The man, Ferdinand took me to the library and told me to sit by the fire. "Are you feeling all right, child?" he asked me and I nodded, unable to speak. The Serb followed him and they started to speak in German. I only stared at the flames while the warmth was giving me back some confidence.

"Guntram. I'll take you today to the city if you want," Goran told me. "Perhaps you'd like to buy some pencils for working later."

"It's not necessary, Mr. Pavelic."

"It's Pavicevic, but you can call me Goran."

"Thank you."

"I understand that you feel lost, but believe me, this is for the best. Olga Fedorovna would have not stopped until your total annihilation," Goran said. "You'll be fine here. The Duke can be a generous man."

"I would be better at home," I whispered.

"It can't be. You're one of us little brother. How could a good boy like yourself be entangled with Repin?"

"I didn't know who he was. I loved him till I knew how he was. I wanted to go home but he didn't let me because I was too sick. I tried to escape, but Mikhail caught me before I would have succeeded. I didn't know you need warm water to keep the blood flowing. The doctor brought me back."

"Why was that? Your life is a gift from God and you have a talent for making beautiful things. Oblomov told me you also like to help people. Why did you want to throw everything away?" Goran asked me softly.

"I can't stand the memories."

"They will fade away with time or they will be replaced with happier ones. I know what happened in London. Repin punished those men who touched you. You have to continue with your life and forget it, if you can. Life is too short to live it in pain or sorrow. Think of this as a new opportunity. A fresh new start, away from Repin," Goran said and I truly wanted to believe him.

"A brand new start, with your own people," Ferdinand added. "No one knows what happened or where you come from. The Duke has introduced you as his ward and believe me, no one will question his decisions."

"Constantin said he killed my family."

"Please, do you believe in a mobster's word? The old Guard made the decision when he was incapacitated in the hospital," Ferdinand told me. "We never had anything against your father. In fact, he discovered his brother's and father's plot against us. He always considered that Konrad was the best option as Griffin and Hochmeister."

"I don't understand it."

"Do you think your own father would have given you to the man who killed his family? Didn't you father love you, child? He gave you to Konrad, and we can prove it, because he believed he would protect you from the old Guard. You were only a child in 1989. We searched for you all over Europe, but we never found you, till now. Tell me, why Repin never told you he knew about your lineage?"

"I don't know."

"Because he knew that the moment we would have heard about you, we would have taken you back with us. We would have never left you in the hands of a gangster! Look what his wife did to you just to protect her credit card!"

"Constantin was very generous with me," I defended him.

"But for how long?" Goran said. "That he loves you doesn't mean that he has the integrity to have you."

Lintorff entered the room and both men stood up. I did the same without realising it. "Gentlemen," he indicated them that they could sit again and we did. "Guntram, my doctor will see you after lunch. He will give your prescriptions to Friederich."

"My Duke, may I take Guntram to Zurich this afternoon?" Goran asked.

"It all depends on the doctor's word. If he agrees, you can do it, Goran. Tell Antonov to come by later. Ferdinand, do you want to stay for lunch?"

"No, I'll go home."

"I will be back at four with Antonov, Sire," Goran said and both men dashed to the door, leaving me alone with the monster.

"It seems it's only us for lunch," He shrugged and went to the big desk, sitting there. I stood up to leave him but he only barked. "Grab a book and sit by the fire. No need to go away." I obeyed him because I didn't know where to go or what was I allowed to do in this house. "The art section is over there." He indicated to me and I took a volume on medieval wood carving. I was fascinated by one carver, Till Riemenschneider, how he was making the figures, a Renaissance man in the middle of the Gothic. He was not even applying a polychrome on them. I looked at it for a long time, lost in the hands details or the folds in the draperies or the long silhouettes from his virgins.

"The Madonna in the Chapel was made by him. You will see it tomorrow when Pater Bruno comes for Mass. Are you a Catholic?"

"Yes, Duke. I was rose a Catholic. I used to work for the Church in the slums back in Buenos Aires. I couldn't attend Mass in Russia because of my health."

"You will attend the ceremony tomorrow with me. Pater Bruno will be delighted to be your Spiritual Director. From which order was the priest you were helping?"

"No order. He was a priest. Pater Patricio was in the Third World Movement of Priests, nothing else." I answered. "He was our religion teacher in the school and used to take us there to teach us some empathy."

"Did he succeed?"

"I was going every time I could. I try to support him every time I can."

"With the other students, boy. I know that with you was very successful. Massaiev told my men that Repin had to pay the local dealer to shoo you. Is it true you preferred the mud to the London cobblestones?"

I felt very bad. Did Constantin really do it? That would have explained Cucho's sudden change of heart. He never had problems with me before till that day. His daughter liked me and was crying when I left. "I don't know. I was very happy there," I whispered.

"Perhaps you could help my cousin Gertrud. She's Ferdinand's wife and the President of the Lintorff Foundation. We mostly finance charity projects from the Church, but we have some of our own. She always complains that she has not enough people to help her with the choosing. We have to find something for you to do here. Something that is not too stressful."

The serious butler entered and announced that lunch was served.

I got hospital food for a change. Apple juice and mineral water. It seems the doctor was already speaking with the chef. However, it tasted fantastic even if there was not an ounce of salt in the whole thing and it was a chicken breast.

After the main dish was served by Friederich, he left the small dining room and Lintorff started again.

"I don't understand why first you were studying Social Work, visiting popular areas and then you registered for Art History in UCL. I thought you liked it."

"Mr. Repin insisted on the change. He said that I needed to acquire a broader artistic background to paint better. According to him, I should explore on my own boundaries, and a sound academic foundation would be the best. I took some classes with a private teacher, but I never got along with the rest of the students. I'm too classical and dull for Modern Art."

"I saw the portrait you made of Repin's four children at his office. Very beautiful indeed. Also the one from Oblomov's wife. It's true that you're very classical but you already have a style."

"I can draw, that's all."

"We will look for a teacher for you. You should not loose your practice. Perhaps we could register you for the University in the spring term."

"It's not necessary. I will not stay for so long, Sire."

"We'll see."

The doctor, a man in his sixties, came after lunch and checked me and my medications. He decided to maintain what I had previously taken as he confirmed my diagnosis; heart failure due to hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. He left several samples and told Friederich, the butler to take me on Monday to the Hirschbaum Clinic where I should see Dr. van Horn and he would adjust the doses. He left a diet and the indication of no stress at all for me. As it would be so easy.

"Mr. de Lisle, would you like to go to Zurich with Mr. Pavicevic and me?" The man asked me after showing the doctor out. Lintorff had disappeared into his library after eating and remained there. "If you're too tired from the flight I can ask the tailor to come over here in the late afternoon."

"No, it's all right. I'll go. No need to trouble the man," I said, and the butler attempted to smile at me for the first time.

"As you wish. We'll drive at 4:00 when Mr. Pavicevic arrives."

"Excuse Mr..." What was his last name?

"My last name is Elssäser but is sufficient to call me Friederich, sir."

"It's about that. No one ever calls me sir, it drives me nervous as I'm not used to it. People call me de Lisle or Guntram, Mr. Friederich."

"No need to use a title with me. His Excellency does not tolerate the slightest informality around him and he has introduced you as his ward therefore you belong to his family and should be treated accordingly. Besides, if I understood correctly, you're the Vicomte de Marignac and your grandfather's sole heir."

"It's hard for me to call you only by your name. You're my elder. I don't want to be disrespectful."

"You will not be. I could call you by your Christian name when the Duke is not around, but the rest of the service will address to you as sir. You will be under my personal care for the moment like the Duke is. Once you're settled you might choose, if you prefer so, another butler."

"Thank you, but I don't want to trouble you."

"You will be no trouble at all, child."

"The Duke told me I can attend Mass tomorrow. Is the Church far away from the house?"

"The chapel is crossing the courtyard, around the castle. I will inform Pater Bruno of your coming. Do you want to go to confession, Guntram?"

"Yes, I do."

"The service is in German, do you think you would be able to follow it?"

"I speak not a word of German. Does the Pater speak English or French?"

"Both languages. I'll look for a service book for you so you can take a look tonight, child," he told me, using a grandfather voice, making me feel less nervous around him.

"About the tailor, I have my clothes still in St. Petersburg. Mr. Repin will have no problems to send them here..."

"The Duke forbids you to have anything more from that man, Guntram. He does not belong to our entourage and will never be one of us like you are. It's unfortunate that you were living with him for so long, but fortunately this has not provoked any further damages in your well being. I'll show you your room now."

It seems the butler really rules in this house.

The famous blue room in the tower was on the second floor of the tower part, as the first floor had been transformed into some offices, the second was divided in the blue and the red rooms and on the top was the duke's private area. My room was painted in a beige colour but the draperies were blue, the covers on the bed also blue, the carpets in blue and the chairs and chaise longue under the big window overlooking the gardens were blue. I had a desk and a bathroom. According to Friederich it was a guest room for the family. My schedule was going to be the following. I should be ready at 7:30 a.m. to have breakfast with his Excellency in the dinning room, after that, he would go to his work in Zürich and then, I was free to do whatever I pleased for the moment till 7 p.m. when the Duke would return home and have dinner with me or with other guests if something had been planned. I'm supposed to be quiet about anything I might hear in a conversation within these walls. Many top people from finances and politics come here almost every night the Duke is in the city. During the week, Friederich would speak with Pater Bruno and will find something for me to do (?) I was ordered to rest till 4:30 p.m. when we would drive away.

Being alone in that room nearly made me cry like a baby. I never felt so alone since I knew about my father's death. I sat on the bed uncertain of what to do. Escaping was out of the question as the place is a fortress. I saw several men walking around on the outside part of the house. There are video cameras discreetly placed everywhere, the windows are bullet proof and the guards are armed. The nice one, Goran, was carrying a Walther P99.

Constantin told me once Lintorff was rich like the devil and paranoid to a crazy point, seeing betrayals everywhere. His personal fortune was twice as much as Constantin's and he had hedge funds, banks worth five hundred billion, without counting the extent of the Order's illegal operations as they "process" the money coming from every gangster in Europe, reinvesting their winnings into industry and finance. They were even working part time with the Russians till the problem with Morozov.

I heard a soft knock on my door and I opened it to find Lintorff standing there. I was shocked, but moved aside to let him in. He inspected the room briefly but thoroughly.

"Is everything to your liking, Guntram?"

"Yes, sire. Thank you."

"Anything you might need, ask Friederich. Are you sure you want to drive to Zurich now? I've just spoken on the phone with Dr. Wagemann and he informed me that your condition is more serious than I originally estimated. You should have not even travelled for so long. You should rest today and tomorrow. I apologise for my rudeness last night."

"Sire, I don't want to cause any more troubles than necessary. I'll go now and rest tomorrow if you agree to it," I added the last part as no matter how polite and nice he sounds, he's my jailer.

"As you prefer Guntram. Perhaps it would be good if you go with Goran and choose some painting material so you can stay inside the house for the next week. None of us knows a thing about pencils or papers. The doctor says that you should not be out in the cold. It's only till your body adjusts to the weather."

"I understand, Sire."

"You can call me Konrad. We are going to live under the same roof for some time and the best would be that we reach some sort of understanding between us. I have no ill thoughts against you or your line nor a bad disposition toward you personally. I give you my word that I will do whatever is in my hands to make you feel comfortable around us. My problems with Repin should not affect you."

"What will happen if you don't collect your debt in a year?"

"You're very mistaken if you're thinking that the minute he does not pay me I will kill you and send your body to him. This is not the Russian Mafia. I will consider that he has lost any claims on you and keep you with me. You're a member of the Order and have never risen against me; therefore it's my duty to protect you. Regardless of

what that criminal might have told you about us, we operate under strict codes and harming a hostage is a very serious crime against our beliefs. Not all of our brothers are involved in finance or industry. Some of us are placed in governments, scientific organizations, universities or the performing arts as they play a key role in our society. We will find something for you to do, Guntram.

"Thank you, Sire."

"Konrad," he corrected me mildly, but in a scary way. He's not a nice man no matter how polite he looks. Constantin says he's vicious when he kills. "Pavicevic will come in an hour with your personal bodyguard. You will obey all his commands if you want to leave the residence. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sire... Constantin, Konrad I mean." Old habits die hard. Constantin bosses me exactly as him.

"Try not to mistake me with that man. Rest till four," he ordered coldly and left the room. I collapsed on the bed, never so tired in my life but at quarter to four, I rose and washed my face, ready to continue with the charade. Unsure, I took the stairs down and stood at the bottom of the stairwell, not knowing what to do or where to go. Fortunately, Friederich in "civilian" clothes, a dark brown tweed jacket and matching trousers and an aristocratic expression, came out of nowhere and told me to go to the library as the Duke was already with Pavicevic and Antonov. He must have taken pity on my lost expression because he led me through the long corridor, passing the big living room, the ballroom and dining room, toward the library, a room with large windows overlooking the garden and the snow. Lintorff was sitting behind his desk and the other two men standing in front of him. One was a huge blond, with a baby face and contagious smile.

"Come over here, Guntram. This is Alexei Gregorevich Antonov and he will take care of you. Obey him in everything. He received medical training in the Red Army as your health is so poor at the moment. He will be with you on a permanent basis and will be staying in the rooms next to yours."

"How do you do, Mr. Antonov?" I said, gulping at the thought that the giant, well jailer would be with me all the time. There's no chance I can outrun him and speak with Constantin.

"Hello Guntram. I'm pleased to meet you."

"Antonov will stay here while I speak with him. You can go now with Pavicevic and Friederich, Guntram," he dismissed me.

"Thank you... Konrad," I added in haste after he looked at me with certain fury for not using his name. Lintorff's short temper is well-known. It even reaches Russia.

The butler sat next to me in the big Audi and took me to the tailor's shop but it looked more like an atelier. Friederich gave me in the car a small book and showed me the things I should look from the highway. Goran and the driver were in front and silent the entire journey. I caught him inspecting me several times in the rear view mirror. The shop was in an elegant building near the big lake and the train station. It had no front window at all, and when you entered it was like an elegant flat. Friederich and an old man went with me into a private room and the tailor only took measures from me as the butler was softly speaking with him in German. I have no idea of what they said to each other but at some point he told me: "Guntram, do you want to take a walk around with Mr. Pavicevic? Mr. Arendt has to organize the packages and it might take some time. It becomes very cold after sunset."

"Yes, Friederich."

Goran silently led me to a near stationary shop. Very elegant and full of expensive things. He simply ordered me. "Get what you need for painting at home for a week or two. You will be staying in the castle till we organize your activities."

"What should I get?"

"Whatever you like. Pencils, paper, chalks or acrylics. I don't know."

"An A4 ream and 12 colour pencils would be fine. I can use old newspapers," I said, after meditating and he growled at me, yes he did.

"Madam, could you give him a good set of pencils, over ninety colours, some sketch pads in different sizes, charcoals, a set of graphite pencils. Do you prefer watercolours or acrylics? Friederich will kick you out of the house if you bring oil paints in your first week.

"It's too..." His killer's look made me be quiet. "Watercolours," I whispered.

"Add the proper kind of paper and brushes for that, too." He finished the shopping under the woman's big opened eyes. She looked for the things and made a big pile... ten different size pads? Does he plan to make me paint the Sistine? Without looking at the final number, which must be really high because the pencils were Caran d'Ache and it was a wood box set of one hundred twenty-four colours and the watercolours also, Goran signed the receipt and took the three bags.

"Do you want a coffee? No, you can't have one. A tea or a chocolate then," he asked me, surprising me a little. He's not supposed to be nice to me. I'm his hostage or guarantor as they called me last night. "Friederich might be busy for some time. He'll call me when he's finished."

"I don't know."

"Good, we go to Sprüngli. It's around the corner and all tourists love it. The cherry cake is good."

I followed him meekly. I know better than to argue with one of them. He ordered me a tea and some cherry cake. "Chocolate might be too much. Once the doctors clear you, you can have it."

I took care of my cake and kept silent while he studied me. "You're truly quiet. Were you before like that or is it because you're nervous to be here?"

"I don't talk much and hear less. Don't want to know what all of you are up to," I replied and he chuckled.

"Good idea when you're around Repin. You really didn't know who he was?"

"When I met him, he was the owner of a big oil conglomerate and several transport companies. I never asked what he was doing as it's impolite to question people about money. He told me he had a foundation for helping artists and likes art a lot. He didn't want me at the beginning because he said I was the type who wants to stay for long. I don't know how, but I fell for him and when you're in love, you don't ask much. You just want people to be perfect and he was for me. He was always very considerate to me and supported me much more than financially. Sometimes, I think that the heart attack was more due to finding out who he was than because of the attack," I whispered and I still wonder why did I tell those things to a perfect stranger.

"Don't you love him any more?"

"That's none of your business!" I growled but he only looked at me. "I used to love him a lot, but now, I don't know any longer. I dislike and hate his private ventures. How can he sell weapons that he knows are going to kill women and children in Africa? What about those poppy seeds? And the prostitution? Lord, some of them even buy children for that! But you're no better than them. Only look more legal and respectable. Happy now?" I said contemptuously and he remained silent for some minutes, musing about something.

"Pavel, my brother used to think like that. He was a good pianist, but he was killed during the war in 1995. He never wanted to be in the Order and I respected his wish, although my uncle Mladic made an enormous pressure to get him in. He was twelve years younger and I took care of him since he was thirteen when our father died in an ambush against the Duke in 1989."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to hurt you."

"You didn't. It's over. You two are so similar, not physically but in the way you think, your experiences and how you act. You remind me of him a lot. The Croat tortured him and left him to die in the forest as revenge to me. He was dead when I found him and I have prayed to God many times for a chance to redeem myself for his death. He was a truly innocent boy and had nothing to do with my business."

"It's horrible," I whispered, feeling very sick but sad at the same time.

"There are no neutral grounds in this, Guntram. You have experienced it already. You were in love with Repin, but his wife decided to get rid of you and you paid the consequences of his infidelity and lack of vision. It's true that we have to deal with some people like Repin but it's not the norm. We get money from them, but the main objective of the Order is to support its members in their legitimate business. We keep them under control and they obey us. This is a safe place to live compared to other places in the world. Among us, you are safer than with Repin even if you don't want to believe us. They're gangsters and we are not."

"Forgive me if I can't tell the difference," I smirked.

"We live under a code and we respect each other. None of us would go against a brother because the punishment is terrible. What you suffered is unthinkable in our brotherhood."

"Constantin told me that the Duke was almost deposed when Morozov went against him. He also told me that four of his associates were murdered. My whole family was killed too."

"Executed for treason, yes, not sadistically raped or forced you to choose your own execution method. We don't cause pain unless it's necessary. Under our codes, your relationship with Repin would have been a private matter and never be judged. Olga Fedorovna got help from Repin's associates because they wanted to weaken him. She didn't act alone. You're a target for them, especially now that he's very weakened after the Duke attacked him because of Morozov's little war. His execution only stopped that his Excellency would have gone one step further. They're at a stalemate, recovering and bidding their times to attack each other again, Guntram."

"Why do you tell me all this?" I said desperately. This is not my game at all!

"So you know the game. You're part of it now, whether you like it or not. You can't leave it, only choose a side and pick your allies. I'm willing to help you and the Duke too. We took your side in the voting to take you in or not, Guntram. Trust him, he has a lot of integrity and is a good friend to his friends, but you will have to earn his trust, too. He considers you part of our circle—if not he wouldn't have said "ward" to refer to you—and our first rule is no lies among us."

"Why would he do that? He killed my family."

"Your family, not your father. He committed suicide as he was very sick with cancer. I have his medical reports from St. Sulpice hospital in Paris. The same type as your grandmother had. He saved the Duke's life by telling Ferdinand von Kleist where to look for traitors. We found it out when we got his personal papers, hidden in a safe box in Geneva. Your uncles sold the whole Order to some press reporters and attacked his Excellency. My own father died in that ambush trying to save his life. It's an irony that the same people who took a part of my life, give it back now. Our Lord's ways are unfathomable, Guntram."

"Mr. Pavicevic, we leave now," Friederich interrupted us with a very stern face and then, he said something in German to him.

"I'm glad you share my view Mr. Elssäser," Goran said very seriously and threw a fifty francs note over the table.

Back in the Castle it was about dinner time and Lintorff ordered to have it in the small dinning room like lunch. Again I had to sit at his left side while a butler served us.

"Did you like Zurich?" he asked casually.

"Yes, it's very beautiful, sir, I mean, Konrad."

"Did you walk around?"

I pondered for a second about lying to him, but it seemed to be a bad idea. Probably the other would tell him later. "No Konrad." He seemed pleased that I had used his Christian name. "I had a coffee with Mr. Pavicevic. He told me about his dead brother, that my family killed his father, that you had taken me into the "inner circle" and would not lie to me."

"I'm surprised that Goran has spoken so much. Must be his longest talk of the year. Normally, he only tells a few words. He must be very fond of you."

"Is it true?"

"What?"

"That you won't lie to me?"

"Yes, I have no reason to."

"Did my father go against his own family?"

"He was against the ones who tried to depose me. Their ruling might had been much worse than mine. He realised this and put Ferdinand on the right track. He never said a word against his family. We discovered it thanks to him, but technically, he never informed me. In fact, he gave you to me as a way to atone for his deeds against the Order and I took his offer because I didn't want the others to attack a small child. When I informed the Council about my decision, I said that you were going to be my ward; therefore you were officially part of my line; untouchable so to speak. Your father was many things but never a traitor."

"What kind of a person was he?"

"I don't know. No one knows. He never spoke about anything, but worked fine as he was a brilliant lawyer. Very stern, determined and serious. Lived almost like a monk and we could never find what he had done with the money he was obviously earning at the bank. How he got it into Argentina for you is a mystery that he took to his grave."

"Why didn't he tell you where I was?"

"I don't know, perhaps he didn't trust me enough. After all, he didn't know me at all. We were never friends. He was some sort of outcast by his own family as his father was furious when he rejected to marry a very rich woman from Germany at about your age. I know she went after him after your mother passed away, but he dismissed her once more, telling her he was already married. Many would have not resisted such an offer. He must have loved your mother very much, a love that lasts to the grave."

"I never knew her. Did you?"

"No, she was not from our circle and he never introduced her to any of us. Ferdinand knew your father better than I. Strangely, you look more like his younger brother, Roger. Must be the Guttenberg Sachsen blood in you, because Jérôme looked exactly like the Vicomte."

"Could I have my photo album from Russia, please? It's the only thing I have left from my family, but you don't want anything from there."

"I will try to get it from Repin."

"Could I speak with him, please? He must be worried about me."

"No. If I am satisfied with your behaviour, I will let you speak with him in the future."

"Please, Duke, only a call to tell him I'm fine. I couldn't say good-bye to the children."

"All right, perhaps tomorrow night, but I will be present," he conceded.

"Thank you, Konrad," I said softly, unsatisfied, but what else could I do?

After eating, he insisted that I remain in the library reading or drawing, as it was too early to go to bed and he had some papers to finish. I went to my room to look for a sketch pad and some pencils and found Friederich organizing some clothes in the closet. Back to the library, Lintorff ordered me to sit next to him on the big couch and I obeyed him, trying to put as much distance as possible. He left me alone for an hour or more, silently reading his papers first and then drinking and deeply thinking, probably a way to continue his war with Constantin or another person.

I think he's a twisted bastard even if he looks great for his age. He can't be more than fifty and has very noble, aristocratic features. His face is not symmetrical but very masculine and his ice blue eyes are very inquisitive. Very tall, much more than Constantin, perhaps 6 foot 2 and a powerful body. I wonder if the story about him killing a man with only one brutal punch to the face is true as Mikhail told me. There are so many stories around! They even say that Constantin killed a woman in front of a man and forced him to eat her heart because he had betrayed him because of her! Probably is not true. Gangsters are like children, blowing everything out of proportion. Mikhail even told me once that one of Lintorff's men refused to behead a man and dared him to do it... and he did the three awaiting for "execution" plus the frustrated executioner. Lord! Things they tell! He's a bastard for forcing me to come here but come on! He looks like a prince who would have a nervous breakdown if his bespoken jacket or his Italian shoes were stained with blood!

"Guntram, go to bed. You must be tired. Breakfast is at nine and the service at ten. Pater Bruno will hear your confession after it."

"Yes, good night, Konrad."

"Good night, sleep well."

Chapter 15

Konrad von Lintorff was mildly upset with his Spiritual Director. He understood the sacrament of confession very well and really didn't need a lecture on it, exactly like the one Pater Bruno was giving him after lunch. He had only asked what had transpired during the full seventy-three minutes the boy had been locked in the library with the priest and there he was getting a long speech on the matter only because he had wanted to do things right. He could have perfectly asked for the tapes and be done with it but no, he did it in the proper way and he was being told off in the best "Friederich way". 'I swear they train this in the Jesuit seminar. Time to end this before I kill him,' he mused.

"Pater Bruno, I'm afraid I didn't express myself properly. I would never ask you to break the sacrament of confession. I'm only concerned about Guntram's lifestyle in St. Petersburg. Many disturbing news reached me about his time with that man, Repin. You're perfectly aware of who he is. I wanted to know your impression of the boy and ask for your advice on how to do the best for him. After all, he is one of us."

"My son, Guntram is a gentle soul who will obey his Mother Church. He spent most of his youth helping those in need under a priest's guidance. Rest assured that he will follow every command issued by the Church."

"This is what disturbs me most. How a child, because he was eighteen when he met that man, could have ended like his favourite plaything?"

"He believed all this man's lies. He's very confused about his attentions. He thinks he loved him, but not any more. He would like to return to his own previous life in Argentina and leave this nightmare behind. He has paid a very high price for his mistake, but still doesn't blame those who did, but himself. His story is a very sad one indeed, my son."

"I took him from Russia because I feared he would try to commit that sin again. He will carry those marks on his wrists for ever."

"He's truly repentant of it, he sees now that it was cowardice and that he should have had a stronger Faith in Christ. He will not repeat it."

"What is your impression about him? Could his repentance or his character be faked?" Konrad asked very softly as the priest was cooperative.

"No my Duke. He has a very troubled and pained soul. He was only happy when he was helping the others; he would never take advantage of people or lie. You can see it in his eyes. He truly needs your help and support to stay away from that man and will be truly grateful to you if he gets a second opportunity to live his life as he originally thought it would be; working hard and helping his brothers. He has a real social conscience moulded after the Church's teachings," the priest said, quickly adding the last sentence as the Duke's views on Socialism were very well-known.

"I understand, Pater. I am willing to send him back to school, but I think he should continue with his artistic career, what do you think about it?"

"Art can also show us God, I see no inconvenience or danger in that, but he will be better away from some of temptations some so-called artists can present him. Guntram is very vulnerable and easy to be influenced at the moment. I'd like to take him, if you don't oppose my Duke, to help twice per week at the depots the Lintorff Foundation has. We have so many donations and so little people helping to organize things. It would be good for him to start to relate again with good Christians. Most of the volunteers there are good women, so he would not feel threatened at all. To sit here idly can't be a good adviser for young people."

"I think that is an excellent idea as long as his poor health condition does not suffer."

"I will tell Friederich to arrange it. It was his idea, after all."

"Why am I not surprised?" "What about arts, should he go back to study Art History at the University?"

"That is very far in the future my son. He needs to build his trust in mankind again, especially in men. Perhaps some drawing lessons with not many people around."

"It will be done as you say, Pater," Konrad dismissed the man, but it was impossible to move him from his chair.

"Konrad, my son, there's also a lesson in all this for you," the priest intoned seriously. "I know who he is and from where he comes from. Whatever offences committed by his family against you and the Order, he has nothing to do with them. He's truly a kind soul; the Lord has granted him with enormous patience and optimistic view toward

men. He truly believes in the inner goodness of men and in salvation for all of us, even for those who offended him grievously in the past. Do not waste this chance the Lord has given you to redeem part of your sins,” Pater Bruno finished, looking at the Duke with great intensity. “Friederich also agrees with my view. Helping this little lamb can erase many of the injustices perpetrated during your rule. You have accepted him as your ward and you're his guardian. Perhaps, he will help you to close your inside void when you learn to let go offences. To love is to forgive too.”

'Those two train together, no doubts about it.' Konrad thought but kept silent just to show that he was pondering on the words. “Thank you Pater Bruno. I will do my best for Guntram and I trust you show him the way again.”

“Certainly my son,” the old man promised, thinking that once more his Duke was trying to fool him. 'As if I didn't know him since he was twelve years old. Still the same, but this time Lintorff, it won't be easy for you to get rid of this boy.'

* * *

Guntram's diary.

It was strange to go to Mass again and to Confession. I thought I would never do it again when Constantin took me to Russia and it's so good to be back. Pater Bruno was very kind to me and heard me without judging me. I was expecting he would tell me a lot of things because of my relationship with Constantin but he didn't seem to care about the homosexuality. No, he focused more in that night and when I tried to kill myself. It was a huge relief to let everything out of my heart. I told him about my time in Argentina, what I was doing with Father Patricio what had been my goals before I met Constantin and how I was attracted to him. I also told him that I was unsure about my love for him even then, but I've accepted his proposal because I also couldn't let him go. I enjoyed his friendship more than anything as he was the first person who really spoke with me like an adult person and as an equal and there I said it.

“I'm not sure if I loved him as I used to think before, Father. I have him in my greatest esteem even after he lied to me about his ventures and who he was. I'm grateful to him and would have done anything to please him, to repay him for all his support and love. That makes me almost a prostitute, doesn't it?”

“Were you trying to take advantage of his love for you?”

“No never. He was always giving me so many things and almost forcing me to accept them that I wanted to give him something in exchange so he would be happy. My paints, my body, my companionship, everything I had. After the attack, he was simply wonderful to me, even if I told him that I didn't love him any more. He's not the bad person everybody says he is.”

“Guntram, you were misguided, but not a prostitute. The best thing would have been to speak with the truth from the beginning and be forthcoming with him.”

“I did but he kept coming onto me and I started to enjoy his touch.”

“Concupiscence is never a good adviser, my son. Do you repent of your acts?”

“I regret staying for so long. I can't shout now that I was a young deceived maiden because everything I did with him in the bed was on mutual accord. If I could turn back time, I would not repeat it. I regret the pain I caused to his wife or his children. I never intended to split them apart or go against God's sacrament of marriage. I regret that I tried to take my own life when it wasn't mine at all. I wanted to escape from the memories of the attack and his house. I felt like a prisoner there.”

“What you endured was a very traumatic experience and you have to find the way to live with the consequences. The ways of our Lord are mysterious and we can only pray for the faith and strength to accept them. Take this new opportunity to do your best to follow his Law. You have to learn to carry on with your life with joy and in service of your brothers.”

He's right. I can't spend the rest of my life in fear of that night. It can't lead the rest of my existence. The priest said that my talent is a gift from God and it's my duty to develop it for his service. I don't think I'm talented at all, but he's right I have to do my best to help the others.

I was happy after speaking with him. Not happy to the laughing and singing point; it was more like when you see that even if you're surrounded by crap the sun still shines and everything is beautiful, regardless of the your circumstances or when you see a poor child's eyes lighting up.

The Pater stayed for lunch along with Ferdinand von Kleist and his wife, a very tall blonde, who ignored me. I suppose she knows who I'm: the former lover of a Mafia boss. One step on top of the street whore and one below the cleaning lady. I don't blame her for despising me. A lady of her status should have never been forced to sit at the same table as I. Lintorff, on the other hand was kind enough as to ask me if I was feeling all right with the cold weather and if the ceremony in German had not been too much for me. I noticed that Friederich was only serving him as the other two butlers took care of us. I got again "special food," much to my chagrin. These Germans are too much. I know that I have to keep a diet but a little of sauce or wine won't kill me! If only once per week.

After eating, Ferdinand (he told-ordered me to call him like that) and his wife went home and I was left with Lintorff. Alone. I didn't know what to do and just when I was going to escape back to my room, he said: "Change your clothes and I'll show you the forest. It's warm enough as to walk." Going away with him was not my greatest wish, but fighting with him was a bad idea. I only nodded and over my bed there was already laid out one casual outfit; grey wool trousers, light blue shirt, blue jersey and a wind-proof jacket Barbour like and trekking shoes.

I dressed myself in no time as Lintorff didn't look like someone who would wait for you. He was already standing, also casually dressed with a similar jacket and a scarf with gloves, at the bottom of the stairs. Switzerland is cold even if we are in March, there's still some snow around. "Close the jacket, is very cold out there and the temperature drops by two or three degrees under the trees. We even have a small stream running across."

"Is there a park around here, Konrad?" I asked, puzzled that he was so dressed to see a few trees around.

"No, it belongs to us. It's closed to visitors. I like to keep my privacy and avoid having people around. The forest that surrounds the residence is about sixty acres. You should not go alone in the night because the guards have trained dogs, but during the day you can come with Antonov and perhaps draw if you want. If you don't like it, you can stay in the garden or in the greenhouse."

"I understand," I answered. He's crazier than Constantin about his security. Dogs and armed men around? Shit! I can forget to escape on foot. My initial evaluation that this was a mausoleum is wrong. This is a fucking fortress or prison."

"Antonov will start on Monday. You will like him and he will stay in the red bedroom, next to yours. He is Russian too and speaks English very well. Former KGB." I paled there. I know those guys; many work for Constantin and they're efficient, cold and deadly. "He's fine to have around and also likes art. He can drive you to a Museum if you want. He also has medical training, but I hope we don't need it."

Lintorff went for the main entrance and I followed him, zipping up the jacket. Friederich was already there and opened the door for him and gave me a brief smile. We crossed the pebbled courtyard and I gaped like the idiot I am at the tree with the white flowers, not knowing what it was and to the other two standing in the middle.

"That one is a cherry tree, the other is an apple tree and the last one is an oak. To plant them was a good idea. It takes away the fortress ambiance." He told me as a matter of fact as he was going to the exit toward the garden I've seen from the library. I think it's English but I don't know. Must be nice in the summer and the ivy around the walls is also nice. He walked away from the castle, using a small path that crossed what originally were the stables, now transformed into a garage, a pond with some ducks. "Its intended use was washing the horses, but now it belongs to the ducks. They come and go. The water comes from the stream I spoke about. I use to read here in the summer; but it's very rare that I have some free time."

"I understand you run many companies."

"One private bank, two hedge funds, some insurance and industries in Europe. I try to stay in Zurich as much as I can but travelling is unavoidable. You look different since you spoke with Pater Bruno." He observed as he walked and I trotted after him. Being a giant allows him to be much faster than I.

"I feel better after speaking with him. He was very understanding and helpful."

"I'm glad. You should trust us, Guntram."

"Could I speak with Constantin today?"

"After we walk a little. You can't be the whole day in the house."

"I see."

"Tell me about your life with him. How did you meet him?"

"I know nothing about his deals." I stopped him. "I don't want to know."

"I'm aware of that. I'm not making intelligence on him through you." He laughed with all his heart. "I just wanted to start a conversation," he added. "You should be less nervous around people. Not everybody plans to hurt you, Guntram. All right, let's change the subject. Why did you study Social Work in Argentina?"

He took me by surprise. Forget it Guntram, he's playing the "good cop", nothing else. "I thought it was a way to help people, but I'm no saint because I started Economics too and I was more interested in finishing that one. I used to help in a poor people's area, in the communal kitchen or taking care of the children."

"You never considered becoming a painter?"

"Never. I like to paint but it becomes too much sometimes. I forget the rest of the world." I shrugged and nearly bumped into him because he stopped without further notice. I was going to apologise when he shushed me and his hand quickly caught something on a log covered with moss.

"Look, it's one of the first to be out this year. We might have a hot summer." He opened his huge hand to show me a brown-greenish grey toad. It was no bigger than 8 cm, and sat still on his palm. "Give me your hand, you can have it and then, we put it back on the tree. It's an Erdkröte, common toad. They emerge from hibernation late February and return to their original pond." Very delicately he coaxed the toad to jump into my open palm so I could take a good look at it. It was very nice and I looked at it for a long time, trying to memorize its every detail so I could draw it later. I put it back in the moss and it jumped away.

"Did you love him?"

"What?" I asked totally lost. I was in my own nirvana and he had pushed me out just like that.

"Repin. Do you love him?"

"I'm not the best collateral if that's what you want to know, sir."

"Konrad and I don't need a guarantor to persuade Repin to pay me back. It's a simple question."

"It's none of your business." He looked at me and I knew that I had to answer him or face his wrath.

"Constantin was very keen on me. He loves me and does the best he can."

"That's not what I asked. Do you love him?"

"We were together for two years!"

"Still not the answer I'm looking for. Yes or no, Guntram.

"I loved him, yes. He's my best friend."

"I don't go to bed with my best friend. In fact, I would kill myself before kissing Ferdinand."

"I love him if that's what you want to hear."

"You lie very poorly. You're very young and still have to learn. Why does he love you?"

"Would you mind your own business?"

"There must be a reason. Repin was always changing lovers like he changes shirts. I'm just surprised that you lasted for so long. Two years must be a record, especially if we consider that you have been out of business for the past six months."

"Constantin enjoyed my painting and my company. I also did." I huffed wishing that he would stop his prodding.

"You remind me of someone from my past. Physically because you're not at all like him," he said out of the blue and I just stared at him. "He was much older than you when I met him. More than twenty-seven years old. We were lovers for almost seven years." I could have died from the shock. Lintorff was gay? No way, Mikhail told me he was the whole time screwing around girls. I was rendered mute.

"I would like to have your friendship Guntram," he told me softly and I didn't know what to say or think.

"This is impossible Konrad. You are my enemy."

"I am not. I want to look after you, exactly as I promised your father I would. He was a good man. You look very pale. Perhaps we should return to the house. The doctor says you need to rest as much as you can."

"I feel fine," I answered perhaps drier than necessary. I'm tired that everybody thinks I'm a cripple.

"Where did you go to school?" He switched again topics to something more amiable.

"A private boarding school outside Buenos Aires, St. Peter's. All boys."

"You were studying Art History at UCL?"

"Yes, I finished the first year and started the second. I also took painting lessons with a private teacher in London, but I was not achieving much. I have not much talent, contrary to what people say."

"Why did you study Art History when the logical choice would have been to register you in St, Martins or something similar?"

"Constantin thought that it was the best because I had such an old approach to things. I was fighting non stop with the other students at the studio. They didn't like what I paint and I thought that they were wasting canvases and oil tubes with their "experimentation". I can't do it. Why deform nature when it's so perfect?"

"You don't deform nature, you give an interpretation of it. I saw Oblomov's wife portraits and even if

they show her features very accurately, you can see much more than the physical aspect. The other one, a naked woman combing her hair was truly beautiful, almost hypnotic in its simplicity and delicacy. I still don't understand what it was doing there."

"I threw it to the trashcan and Constantin rescued it."

"Why?"

"I didn't like it. I dislike most of what I paint and I still don't know why I keep doing it."

"That happens since your encounter with Olga Fedorovna?"

"Could be, I don't know. Mikhail counts the pages so I don't destroy them and takes them away. Constantin ordered him to do so, but it's no good."

"We should look for a teacher for you so you don't loose your practice, besides idle youths are bent to get into trouble."

"It's a waste of money and time."

"All right, I'll take the pencils away from you." He said very seriously and I felt as if I've lost another part of me. "Exactly what I thought." He chuckled. "I'll ask Monika to look for one. She's my private secretary... and we will also count the paper so you stop destroying everything. Should I be concerned about my own art collection in the house? You were looking very carefully at the Madonna in the altar."

"No, I only destroy my things," I whispered.

"She's from Riemenschneider. It's funny that you like it, perhaps there's more in the genes than we think."

"I don't understand."

"Riemenschneider was very active in Würzburg, Franken. The Guttenberg Sachsen comes from there and they were mostly into wine production and farming. They still have their residence there. Your grandmother was one of them and you take many of their features. That family married twice a Griffin since the Order was established and several times more in the past. From my line even. Perhaps it's in the genes." He smirked a bit but not in a derogatory way. I didn't know what to say because the conversation was taking a very strange twist once again.

"I don't know much about my family. I only met my father and very briefly as he was always travelling, coming once per month to visit me."

"I think I have a photo of him with me. I'm not sure. He was our head of legal affairs in Paris and Geneva. Excellent lawyer. I think the ones who replaced him still copy from his work. He told me you were going to be an artist, like your mother and I didn't believe him because at that time you should have been six or seven years old. Jérôme was more intelligent than I estimated."

"Could I have that photo, if you find it? My family album is still in Russia."

"Of course. Must be in the safe box with my personal papers. I can look for it after coffee."

"Thank you."

Thank God he decided to leave me alone for the rest of the walk. I enjoyed the forest very much, lost in the trees and the light over them. They were truly beautiful; glistening with the water left from this morning's and you could hear the birds singing. I was so distracted that I failed to notice when he had started to study me again, gauging me and realising the kind of idiot I am. Nothing comparable with the boys he usually plays with, like Constantin, Oblomov or Malchenko just to name a few. I blushed and started to walk faster when I felt his piercing gaze fixed on me. If he's gay, no bisexual, he must have no problems in getting anyone in his bed. He certainly looks very well for his age. He must be around Constantin's age or perhaps a bit older. His eyes are something and that dangerous-commanding aura around him makes him also sexy. Shit! Guntram what are you thinking now? He's the man who killed your whole family and you find him sexy? You're crazier than you thought.

"Normally Sundays are a stress free day. I don't work and stay in the house reading or watching a film. I wanted to be a historian but the family business got in the way and I studied Business Administration here in Zurich and made my PhD. at the London School of Economics when I was already managing the bank at twenty-eight. I had to move for two years to the London house so I could work and study at the same time. It was hard to keep my identity secret because most of the teachers dreamed to get a job with us."

"Must have been hard," I smiled softly.

"The only good think about it was to go to Eric Hobswann's lectures even if he's a Marxist. He has a very broad approach on times. Almost like Toynbee.

"I only read the book about the Bourgeois Revolutions in the University."

"He has many more. You can take them from the library and read them. I also like Art History a lot, but I

must confess that if I buy something Modern is only as an investment and because my adviser has driven me mad for several weeks about buying it. I reached the Impressionists and the rest was too much for my taste. I refuse to pay several millions for a Coca Cola can or a comic illustration."

"Those are icons of our culture. Perhaps is the culture what you don't like."

"True. I'm forced to live these times, but I would have preferred to be in Early Middle Ages." He confessed, looking at me more carefully than before. "Perhaps you have your father's intelligence too. Not many understand me so well after one talk."

We returned to the castle and he camped in his library with a book, totally engulfed in it as I found my graphite pencils box and a sketch pad left there. At some point he left the room and came back much later.

"Here, I found it," he showed me an old picture with my father, Ferdinand von Kleist, Lintorff and a man who would look very much like me if I ever turn thirty-five. My father was looking very serious and formal with his tuxedo and the place looked like an elegant hotel restaurant.

"It was taken in Paris, at the Ritz. We used to have the bank's annual party there. The other man is your uncle, Roger Armand de Lisle. Do you know him?"

"No, I never saw him in my life. Only a photo of him with my father when they were children. He never cared about me."

"You don't know where he is?" he asked, fixing his gaze upon me.

"No. My lawyer tried to contact him through the French Embassy in Buenos Aires, but they never answered any of his calls. He tried with the police, but no luck at all. I know nothing about him. Was he married?"

"I think so."

"I have an Aunt too."

"Don't count on it. Why would she be interested in you if her husband didn't care?"

"Yes, you must be right," I admitted, feeling very bad. I thought for a second that I could get a family too. Idiot!

"The resemblance is remarkable indeed."

"Pardon me?"

"Between you and your uncle. You almost look like twins, but you're shorter; your hair is a lighter shade of brown and your temper is very different from his."

"I don't know. My father used to say that I looked like my mother."

"No, the bone structure is his. The hair and eyes colour not," he said, taking my chin with some force to inspect me once more. "You truly remind me of someone I met years ago."

** * **

On Monday morning, Antonov the big Russian who "takes care" of me took me to a fancy clinic with Friederich in tow. He spoke with the doctor in German, Lucius van Horn and the physician examined and then ordered several tests done on me. Lintorff will not be happy when he sees the bill for all the things he ordered. I sincerely hope he doesn't charge this to Constantin. He wanted a CAT even! After I was prodded all what they wanted during the morning and the afternoon (it was a full 9-5 routine) at 5:30 p.m. I got a full preaching from the doctor telling me that my condition was worse than estimated and reported to him from "the Russian doctors" and that it was criminal refusing to give me anti-panic medications when it was so obvious that I needed them. I should be a nice boy and remain stress free. I would like some suggestions on the matter; live at your enemy's house as a collateral for some pocket money he lent to a mobster-; follow the diet (no salt, no fat, no spices, no alcohol, no coffee) I wonder if I'm going to get some food besides boiled chicken wings... But those have a lot of fat in the skin; Don't get cold because it's extra stress for heart failure patients; Do something you like, like painting or reading but something light like a novel; Don't carry weights—by that he means something more than 2 kg—; Take all your medications; you will see a psychiatrist for your problem; You are one step from having the next heart attack or getting a brand new pacemaker; "your body retains a lot of fluids increasing your blood pressure; we have to be careful on how much water you take till this is stabilized. With your condition a diuretic will worsen it." I got four fucking different pills in three colours; white, yellow and deep red.

In the evening I had to dine with Lintorff and he informed me that he had already spoken with the sadist doctor and I should remain in the house for the week till I was feeling better. I tried to convince him to allow me to speak with Constantin but he refused.

“Next Saturday if you behave.”

Chapter 16

Guntram de Lisle's diary
February 23rd, 2004

This morning Friederich took me to Zurich and Antonov drove us there. I was expecting him to put me in the tailor's shop or to another doctor. Since I visited Van Horn, I've stayed in the Castle only walking in the afternoon over the forest or the garden. I'm "officially resting" from the flight and the stress. Luckily, Lintorff disappears early in the morning for work and returns in the evening when he has important people over.

On Monday I was able to escape the dinner because I had a horrible headache due to high blood pressure (Antonov's dixit) and needed to rest, but on Wednesday the Duke had enough and ordered me to be at eight, dressed with a dark suit, tie and the whole regalia in the living room as he had guests (six; two bankers and wives and two industrials from USA visiting his bank) for dinner. "Staying in your room will not solve your sociability problems." Friederich chose the outfit and checked that I was doing nothing crazy like not combing the hair or putting on a Metallica T-shirt... after all I'm a mobster's former lover crazy artist. I was introduced as "my ward for this year, Guntram plans to continue to study Art History at the UZC next spring," (???) and sent to the end of the table with one of his "preventive warning looks" to be quiet. "Ostermann has accepted to be his teacher."

"That's incredible. He never takes anybody. Markus and I have been trying for years to convince him to accept our nephew who was among the first places in the École de Beaux Arts," one of the ladies spoke.

"Perhaps that's because he has no talent at all, my dear." Markus, the banker, retorted sweetly. "Ostermann knows what he does. I pity you young man, your lazy days are over with him. His temper is legendary. Do you know that he had a public fight with Sotheby's Modern Art Director over a Damien Hirst two months ago? He said that it wasn't even an original! The piece was unsold when it was one of the hottest items."

"Markus, I wouldn't have paid for it regardless of what he tells. It was hideous. One of these days, this man will spread some chicken livers over a canvas, call it "Brueghel Symphony," and we will be expected to pay millions for it."

"Konrad you can be so naughty some times!" The other lady laughed. "He's one of the most successful artists nowadays. It's absolute madness every time he has an exhibition!"

"It's also collective madness when the sales season starts but I don't participate, my dear."

"You're incorrigible!" she scolded him, partly laughing.

"That's why I leave my shopping list to Ostermann. I don't understand Modern Art nor like it."

"Clever man, you're not dragged to these places like the rest of us," the American tycoon said. "Claire wants me to accompany her to some vernissage in New York...or was it a museum party?"

"You have my sympathy, Alan."

Lintorff knows how to move and by hearing speaking with these people, you would never guess who he is or what he does.

I was very surprised to find Pater Bruno at the entrance of an old building outside Zurich. He warmly greeted me and told me that as I had experience with such things, I could help with the packing. "It's an easy job Guntram. You only have to help to classify the products in the boxes. We had the food drive on the Supermarkets a few days ago and the worst part is to organize everything. We will distribute them over the immigrants and send the rest to Caritas. Marie Claire is in charge of everything and she will tell you what to do."

Inside a big room were several dozens of big wired boxes full of different packages and about twenty-four women and two young boys sorting them out by product and brand. My heart started to beat very fast and I took several breaths, but the Pater Bruno took me by the elbow and told me to be at ease. "Don't worry, we are not forcing you to count them," he joked. "It could be much worse; sorting out the old clothes container, that's hard. I did a supreme effort to calm myself down and the bloody pills against panic attacks must be working because I could control myself. Marie Claire was a tall woman in her sixties, with white hairs and striking blue eyes. She greeted me in German but immediately switched to English per the priest's orders. "Guntram will be helping you till the afternoon. Mr. Elssäser will pick him up later. Can you explain him what to do, Claire?"

"Yes, of course Pater. He can help Peter and Jürgen."

"No carrying heavy weights. He has a heart condition. Classifying will do."

"As you wish Pater. Come Guntram, I'll show you what to do."

She explained to me that the idea was that I should take over one of the big baskets; get the products out, separate them in noodles, cans, rice, milk powder, cookies and etc. and take them to the tables where they had the big piles. Later we will pack them, organizing them by brand and expiration date. I worked in the sorting out station with four or five girls more, very nice and polite all of them, but more busy with their fast talking in German than really doing something. I think they were glad that I was there working fast and understanding nothing about their dealings.

Against my impression, three hours later and four big baskets emptied, Marie Claire returned and shouted them something in German. "Come Guntram, this is impossible! They do nothing and let you do their work. Pater Bruno will speak with them later. I'll put you in the boxing section. Are you from Argentina?"

"Not really, madam. I'm French but I lived most of my life there, in Buenos Aires."

"That's nice. My husband and I were planning to visit the country at some point. He just retired and we have a lot of free time on our hands. Well young man, keep up with what you were doing and don't imitate those lazy girls. Separate them first by brand, type, hypoallergenic, non hypoallergenic, age and then, put them in the box and write brand, consumption age, type and earliest expiration date. Milk is the most urgent thing to have ready to send."

I was left in front of a huge pile of milk powder cans from every kind. Around 1 p.m. a woman came to me and told me that they were having lunch and I could join them. Very nervous I sat in a corner and kept myself eating the sausage (I guess Friederich will shout with me when he finds out what I was eating) and bread. I left the mustard alone. For once, I was having a good day and I didn't want to ruin it with a heart attack. I was very busy the whole morning and afternoon feeling that for once I'm not being a useless bump only drawing and keeping a man satisfied. Around 4 p.m., I got a cup of tea and some cookies and praise from Marie Claire because most of my pile was done.

"If you continue with that pace, you're going to empty the place all by yourself," she said and I blushed not truly knowing what to answer her. I drank my tea and returned to work, engulfing myself in it.

"Pater Bruno will have to explain to me why you're still working," the deep voice of Lintorff made me jump to the ceiling and I looked at him, shocked that he was there, standing like a king. "You started at nine according to Friederich and it is seven and you're still there. Are you planning to implement Stajanovism in this country?"

"I didn't realise the time, sir. I mean, Konrad," I said, asking myself what the hell he was doing there.

"Friederich told me you were here and I decided to pick you up before going home. Claire tells me you have been working non stop and she is very pleased with you. Get your coat and we go home."

"Thank you."

Outside was the monster he has for a limo, a Mercedes with one bodyguard standing by its side. He opened the door for him and Lintorff motioned me to go in first.

"Did you like the work, Guntram?"

"Yes indeed, Konrad."

"You can come here on Tuesdays and Thursdays when you have no painting lessons then. Ostermann will have you from Monday onwards from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. You can drive with me or with Antonov. The other days you can come here and help. There's always something to do and it's good that you don't loaf around the house."

"Thank you, sir." I was very happy because I don't want to be trapped in there too.

"You can have lunch in the bank or with Antonov. At five you come to the bank and stay there till it's time to return home. There's a library too. Ostermann thinks that you can study your subjects pending since 2003 and take the tests in June." He informed me how he had rearranged the rest of my life just like that. When did I agree with it? I don't remember it at all.

"I don't want to return to the university," I said as firmly as I could.

"If you can work like you did today, with more than twenty people around, then you can sit in a classroom and finish your schooling. Repin will agree with my view on the subject. After all, it was his idea to send you there and according to your files you were doing it very well till that incident. Do you plan to live miserably for the rest of your life, Guntram?"

I was shocked that he could be so cold and insensitive to my disgrace. I was terrified of people most of the time and it was beyond my control. "I don't want to come back."

"All right, you have expressed yourself. On Monday you start with Ostermann and with Arts and Architecture and Current Methodologies. Those two, according to him, are mostly reading and studying, not much practice involved. He also thinks that you should come with him to his valuations trips. You will learn more in a week

with him than in a full month at the university. Speak about it with Repin this Sunday, if you feel so miserable about my decisions.”

“You can't order me around like one of your employees.”

“Yes, I can or do you prefer that I treat you like one of my enemies? Ask Repin about that too. Guntram, hear me well. I will not tolerate you depressed and depressing people around you. It's too much for my taste. This is a second chance you get; take it and rebuild your life and stop whining like a little girl. Repin has spoilt you too much. Pampered more than what's good for you. You're not a pet, although he would love to have one. You're a de Lisle and a Guttenberg Sachsen.”

“I still have many memories of it.”

“I know, but they will not go away if you cling to your misery. This way you only wallow in your disgrace while what you need is a radical change. Work and study. You're under my protection and I'll do my best so you feel welcome here but I will not pamper you. The less I need in my life is a boy toy near me. Your father would be very ashamed too. He was a hard working man.”

“I'm also. Regardless of what you believe, I used to work hard to make a living. I went to the University, paid my own flat and lived alone since I was eighteen. I had a job in London even if Constantin hated it, at an antiques shop and I paid with what I was making part of my fees and the private teacher he insisted me on taking. I always bought my own materials. I refused to have a scholarship from him and never asked anything from him. I did my best to avoid being a burden. I'm not an expensive whore. I stopped working after the attack mostly because I was physically and mentally devastated. He took me to St. Petersburg and made me live in his house with his children. I was too crazy to look for a job, but I would have done it the minute the doctor would have given me clearance. Keep your remarks to yourself, sir if you don't know the whole story,” I half barked.

“Good. Do as you're told.” He finished the talk, getting his blackberry out and starting to type who knows what. Asshole!

We had dinner in deafening silence, without exchanging words between us (not that I was the greatest talker in the world) Even Friederich, serving us both, realised the heavy and dense ambiance. After we finished dessert, I stood up and said good night to him, but the bastard only ordered me to go to the library. Chewing my fury, I followed him and he sat at his desk, taking a folder left there to read. Friederich came in with a tray with his cognac and he complained that again he was not getting the one he liked so much—despite his size and short temper, he can be a sissy—and again it was such a hideous thing. I engulfed myself in the book I was reading about Roman frescoes; he's a despicable man but his library is excellent. I'm not sure if he reads them, but he buys them and that's all what matters to me.

“Guntram.”

“Yes, sir?”

“I've been thinking over our discussion this evening and I would like to apologize for being so prejudiced against you. I let my opinion of Repin interfere with my personal evaluation of you. I know that you were self supporting yourself in the past, had good grades in school and in London. You hardly classify for the “kept boy” category and it was most rude of me to call you that.”

I was speechless as I was not expecting him to apologize or anything. “Thank you sir. My answer was very rude and vulgar too. I offer you my sincere apologies,” I said.

“Please understand that if I was hard on you it was because I believe that you need to restart to live again. Pater Bruno told me that you were working very hard and not afraid to be with other people around. You need to overcome your fears Guntram. Not everyone wants to hurt you. What you suffered under Olga Fedorovna was horrible and undeserved. In my house you will meet respectable people. The women you will see at Meister Ostermann's studio are all society ladies, many are wives from my peers. Despite you think that we are like the Russians, we are not. Olga Fedorovna was never a lady. She's a social climber who married Repin just to increase her power and fortune. He married her to hide the fact that he prefers young boys to girls. The man who used to “protect you,” Mikhail Massaiev, is Repin's best “trainer” or “handler”. He chooses boys and turns them into pets for Repin's entertainment. He kills them or sends them to the houses when they grow old or don't catch his fancy any longer. His boys don't last more than two or three months and their fate is horrible. I still don't understand how you avoided such a fate.”

“Constantin is a good man no matter what you tell, Konrad. I only received kindness and understanding from him. I gave him my friendship because he deserved it.”

“Nevertheless, you tried to cut your wrists open.”

"It was a moment of weakness. I still don't know why I did it."

"Such an act has always a reason behind. Which was it?"

"I don't know. I just stood there and knew I couldn't stay any longer the pain, being hooked up for life to medications, the shame and..."

"Finally becoming Repin's favourite pet?" he suggested and I felt my soul leave my body.

"Yes," I whispered, looking truly ashamed.

"I see. Don't worry; you will never be my boy toy. I totally hate the concept. You have to earn your keep here, helping Pater Bruno, going to school or painting and selling your pieces. You're my ward and if I say something to you, it's with best intentions. You have already experienced how cruel can be our world. Follow my guidance and you will be fine and happy with us, Guntram."

"Would you let me speak with Constantin, please?"

"On Sunday as agreed. I always keep my word, Guntram. You're doing very well so far. You attended two of my dinners and today you were working the whole day with more than thirty volunteers around. If you could refrain from destroying everything, I would be very satisfied."

"Thank you, Konrad."

"I truly want to earn your friendship Guntram. You seem to be a sensible young man who had the misfortune of crossing his path with the wrong persons."

"You're not the person I thought you were too," I whispered.

"I believe my press department does not reach Russia," he laughed openly.

"Mikhail told me that you're blood thirsty and implacable when you're crossed; that the Order is far more powerful than they will ever be and that you control your territory with an iron fist."

"First, I don't have a territory. That's a gangster's term. The Order nucleates most of the financial and industrial European world. We are not directly involved with drugs, prostitution or other criminal activities. We take their winnings and grant them permission to operate in our land. Sometimes, we have to use our connections to protect them too. The money we take from them is reinvested into the legitimate economy creating jobs and welfare for all the people. We cooperate with each other just to protect our markets and our way of life and I don't mean our riches. The members are forced to give fifteen percent of their winnings back for charity. I have to be implacable to keep the shadiest parts of our scheme under control. You have seen many of the things that happen in Russia, but not here. It's simple; I don't allow them."

"Europe has one of the largest population of paedophiles, Konrad. People here even organises tours to visit Asia or Argentina to get children."

"I know, I try to keep that filthy vice to the minimum, but I can't forbid people to travel. Here is not as bad as it could be," he said with real sadness in his voice. "We do our best to create new jobs and keep the welfare state running as well as we can. I would love to have every child in school or loved at home with her parents. Unfortunately, we can not disregard the vast resources generated by the illegitimate industry, and we have to do our best to return them in a positive way for good people."

"Is it not hypocritical to take money earned on people's suffering and give it back to alleviate their misery?"

"Guntram, people will not stop using drugs, visit whorehouses, exploit immigrants, sell weapons or abuse each other. It's in their nature and these Christ forgotten times are the worst. No one is generous to his brothers; they all expect a reward. A selfless heart is something very rare nowadays."

"Things would be easier if we would help each other."

"I saw you working today and you were happy to do it. Piling up cans is not a dream job. Why?"

"It's something useful. Powder milk was always expensive and difficult to get. Many times what the government was sending was overdue or in bad conditions. All the things there were fine and I was glad that it would help people."

"It will be beneficial for you to help Pater Bruno at the moment. My cousin Gertrud directs our Foundation, but she concentrates more on rising money for other organizations, mostly belonging to the Church. We have some projects of our own, but she doesn't like to run them, as it's too much work for her. I would like to change that in the future and that we decide by ourselves how to invest our money."

"Give them a job or a credit to start anew," I said out of the blue.

"Perhaps. I have to think about it."

"Giving things is good, but they have to learn to get them. They need a chance, nothing else."

"Then we agree on that. I dislike lazy people living off their welfare benefits. I would put my money a hundred times in a school project for women in Africa or in micro enterprises before than in a detox clinic. Do you see Guntram? We have more in common than you think. Know more about me before you pass your judgement."

"Constantin told me that you're going to kill me as revenge after he pays your money back."

"Do you see my point, now? That's something he would do and has done several times. He killed my representative in Georgia and his family."

"You killed my family."

"No, the previous counsellors ordered their execution. I was against it as we would have won nothing out of it. I swear that I'll do nothing to you if you obey me and don't try to escape. Give me your word and you will have mine, Guntram."

"I can't run away. I have no chances against a former KGB agent," I whispered.

"I will not harm you in any way as long as you behave according to our rules, so help me God."

"I will not go against you or run away, Konrad."

"Finish the oath."

"I beg you pardon?"

"We ask for God's guidance to fulfil our oaths," he said with little patience.

"So help me God?" I babbled.

"Exactly. You were not properly educated to be one of us. Friederich will tell you more about us. Good night, Guntram. It's very late for you, child."

"Good night, Konrad."

** * **

March 1st

Lintorff fulfilled his promise after lunch. He allowed me to speak with Constantin, with him present and checking every word I said. The only rule: you say nothing of what you might have heard or seen in this house.

Constantin answered the phone after it rang only once. "How are you, my dear?"

"Hello Constantin, I'm fine and you?"

"I'm concerned about you my angel. Does Lintorff treat you well?"

"Yes Constantin. I can't complain at all. He took me to the hospital and then, allowed me to work in his Foundation for one day. I'm supposed to study with a teacher; Ostermann and continue with what I had left from last semester in London. I refused, but he doesn't take no for an answer."

"Guntram, do exactly as he tells you. He's dangerous and could explode at the slightest thing."

"I will. How are the children?"

"They miss you enormously, especially Vania."

"I also miss them and you too. Can you give them a hug for me?"

"Certainly. I will get out back as soon as I can. Not having you with me is terrible."

"I'm fine Constantin, don't worry about me," I said, not knowing what else to say. I mean, I miss him but strangely I'm not in a hurry to come back to Russia or London. My memories are very bad and I long for another start, chance, or whatever you want to call it.

"Never doubt that I love you and I will not let you down. You're my angel, Guntram. I'm divorcing Olga as my lawyers found a way to neutralize her," Constantin told me very gently and I heard Lintorff chuckling softly.

"Constantin, I don't want that you lose your children's custody. No judge will ever give them to you if he finds out that you want to live with me," I said with a mix of worry and desperation. "They love you and will suffer if you leave Olga. She's their mother!"

"They were happy with us and my decision is made, angel."

I saw Lintorff coming to me and he extended his hand toward me and I hurriedly said. "I have to go, Constantin, good-bye." I wanted to say something like I love you or kisses for you or I want you, but Lintorff's piercing gaze killed the words in my mouth. I faintly heard his farewell as I returned the phone to him, feeling very sad and embarrassed at the same time. He spoke in Russian with Constantin while I moved to the window, feeling depressed.

"You have done very well Guntram. I have accepted to let you send part of your drawings to Repin every

two weeks. You can also write to each other, but all your letters or e mails will be monitored by me. If you try to smuggle a letter out, all contact will cease. Is that clear?"

"I understand, Konrad." Once again, he has reminded me who's wearing the trousers.

"It's for your best. Talking or writing with him could be counterproductive for you. In a week you made many progresses and I don't want them ruined by Repin's manipulations."

"He doesn't manipulate me! He's worried about me and I am about him! He wants to divorce his wife! I don't want to be in the middle if he loses his children!"

"Is it because of that or because you don't want to commit yourself into a more serious relationship with him? If he's free, he will take you as his own. I can see that he really wants you all for himself. I understand the man."

"No! It's not like that! I was living with him before in London. I just didn't know that he had a wife and children."

"Small detail to leave out of the picture in a "serious and committed relationship" like what he wants now," Lintorff mocked me. "I heard him declaring his love for you, but you didn't say anything more than I miss your children, Guntram. You're quite disappointing as a lover. Normally they tell much more."

I had to refrain myself to shout "fuck you!" and only turned my back on him. I didn't want to participate in whichever mental game he had organized now. I was too tired and sad for it.

"Do you love him?"

"None of your business, sir."

"True. In a way I pity Repin. I was in that place once with someone very similar to you. At least, you're not abusing or lying to him and for that he should consider himself very fortunate."

"If this person didn't love you, why did you stay?"

"Because I didn't realise that he despised me till the end when he went against me and everything I had. Betrayal is something you don't overcome easily. It's easier to recover from heartbreak than to admit it." He said very seriously and looking into my eyes. "Love is chaotic and destructive; you pay a very high price for a few moments of happiness and live the rest of your life remembering those fleeting instances."

"It's not like that. Even we had many obstacles, I still appreciate Constantin with all my heart. I worry that he might lose all what he holds dear."

"You never loved him Guntram. You liked him, wanted him and felt good around him. Nothing else. If you would have loved him, you would have never forgiven him his betrayal because hiding a murderous wife is irresponsible and only served his purposes of having you no matter the costs, proving that he's only infatuated with you and not in love. Would you have lived with him if you would have learnt in advance about her?"

"I don't know. In theory no, but we change our minds with time," I answered, feeling more and more nervous. I had thought in those lines many times in the past, but I forgave Constantin because I knew he truly loved me and I only wanted the best for him after all what he had done for me. All right, I also felt guilty because I couldn't return the same feelings.

"If you love a person, his or her well-being comes before anything. You live, breathe and see for that person, Guntram. You want the best for him and sacrificing your own desires is a small price to pay for his happiness. You live literally from his words, smiles, small gestures, counting the hours to be with him. You're forthcoming and don't toy around with his feelings no matter how unpleasant it could be to admit your own faults in front of him. If the person truly loves you back, he will accept them and love you more for them."

I was speechless. I didn't know what to say.

"What you and Repin had was a convenience relationship. Nothing wrong with it as long as both partners don't hurt each other, but it's not love. You embodied all what Repin ever desired and he was the paternal figure you so desperately seek in every man."

"If the person you loved hurt you so much, then you also had no love at all," I retorted, willing to hurt him as he had hurt me. I miss my father but I never had incestuous thoughts about him!"

"I realise now. I loved, but I was not loved back. Perhaps removing you from Repin's company is beneficial for him too," he mused. "Guntram people have sex and enjoy it, but it doesn't mean they love each other. Someone should have told you this many years ago."

I only turned my gaze toward the window and looked at the garden bathed in the spring sun. He remained there also lost in his memories and thoughts.

Chapter 17

Guntram de Lisle's Diary

Contrary to my original impression, this Rudolf Ostermann is not as bad as my previous teacher. He has a horrible temper, that's for sure. He looked for a long time all what I've done in the previous week and said "mostly rubbish, don't waste paper if you don't know what you're trying to achieve. The ones I saw from your time in England are much better. Have a little respect for the trees!"

According to him, I can draw "reasonably well," but I have no idea of what I want to do. "Chaotic and childish. The only way you start to organize yourself is if I give you an object to copy and work with. Here, familiarise yourself with this and don't loaf around!" I got a horrible Chinese "greeting cat". The blasted thing moves its right paw permanently! Way to achieve perpetual movement! Why did they have to paint it in golden with red and blue? It's simply hideous.

At least he's not telling me to "leave all Academics behind and look for new ways to express yourself," By the end of the day,—nine to six, with one break for lunch with Alexei in a nearby restaurant and the guy specifically ordered no salt at all in my food. Bastard!—he had destroyed over sixteen studies on the thing and I wanted to skin him alive, the present ladies preventing me from taking justice into my hands. His verdict? "You're not properly capturing the object's essence. Forget it's a Modern toy and look for its intrinsic harmony."

The next lesson was the same and after he destroyed view number seven in the morning, I had enough and decided that if he wanted classicism for that wretched thing, he would have it. I used the background of Leonardo's Philosophy class and instead of Socrates and Aristotle; I put two of the nasty cats, greeting each other, all in pencil.

When I was expecting his explosion, he only carefully inspected the drawing for a long time. "Perhaps, I could still make something good out of you, young man. Now your drawing starts to reflect partly you. We will start to work with oil colours. A classical portrait of your feline friend." I swear he enjoyed the last sentence!

At least, he left me alone today as he had to travel to Paris for some appraisals. He makes his money as curator-commissar, writing Art books and making the life of young artists miserable. Fortunately, he's not quoting Koons or Warhol every two minutes like the other pest.

Am I allowed "to loaf" NO, this morning Friederich gave me several of the text books for Architectural History and a "they arrived yesterday morning, when you were with Pater Bruno. The Duke wants that you start to read and study them. There are some recommended assignments included. Do them and Meister Ostermann will read them before you send them to the Assistant Teacher."

Lintorff was serious about making me study and taking the tests! The whole thing is here. I'm not surprised he's an old spinster with no children around. The poor dears will run to the judge the minute they can speak. Anyway, it's better reading or studying than coping with him. At least, it keeps my mind busy.

* * *

'The only good thing about this new position is that I can check on Jean Jacques. The new boy in the kitchen is exactly what he likes and he's willing to do everything the chef tells him to do.' Alexei Gregorevich Antonov mused for the tenth time during the week he had been ordered to look after "Repin's favourite toy," as Guntram was called by the Duke. He was partly torn between his duty as "jailer", 'and his conditions are much better than those in Afghanistan, but it's the same', half confident "try to elicit much as you can from him, Antonov; he probably knows much more than we think. Keep him away from my papers too; and nurse, "he suffers from hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and had already one heart attack, courtesy of Olga Fedorovna Repin. He had it almost as bad as you when you had your disagreement with Repin."

'No, he had it much worse than I. I was trained for this and knew how to evade the pain or neutralize the effects. I was physically broken, not mentally like he is. I never thought about suicide; revenge, yes, and still do.'

The Russian bodyguard continued to eat his trout, sitting with Friederich and Guntram, also having lunch at the former guard's hall.

"How's everything going, Guntram? Do you need something more for your studies?"

"No, thank you, Friederich," Guntram answered very quietly.

"His Excellency suggests that you start to read and summarize the chapters. The examination dates are due in June. Will it be sufficient time for you?"

"I think so, but I will have to study instead of painting," Guntram suggested, hoping to be excused from the lessons with the old teacher.

"I will speak with Pater Bruno to keep your visits to once per week; on Saturday mornings, as his Excellency is also busy at that time.

"I do like going there!" Guntram protested feebly but the butler didn't flinch at all.

"My child, you know it's for the best. Once you're rid of the tests you can return for longer periods. In July, for example."

"I don't want to stay here!"

"Guntram, your health does not allow you to do much more. You've heard the doctor. Last week you were two days indisposed. You can study in the mornings, paint in the afternoons and go to Meister Ostermann's studio three times per week. Perhaps, Mr. Antonov would like to take you to Zurich to see the city or its Museums," Friederich spoke with a certainty that left no place for rebellion.

'Poor boy, he doesn't even look like he could fight with a fly. Repin really broke him. I wonder how he could last so long in his clutches. I was never living with him, only brief meetings for three years and that was enough to make Olga explode. I'm sure she planted that information against me. I'll ask Goran to be a part of the team. The Duke can babysit Guntram for a few days or Holgersen can do it too. I would love to settle part of the score with that witch. I don't believe for a minute that she's out like Oblomov told me. She's only bidding her time to finish off Repin. The boy was just a mild blow to him. The Duke is right with his decision. If she comes up, it would be chaos for all of us while the others try to depose her.'

"Guntram, do you want to come with me to *Altstadt* today? I can show it to you," Alexei asked, picking up the cue from Friederich.

"No, Mr. Antonov. I prefer to organise my things here."

"It's Friday, boy! Most teenagers disappear from five onwards!"

"I'm almost twenty-two years old, Mr. Antonov. I was never very popular. I used to make extra hours in the coffee shop I was working on Fridays or Saturdays."

"Then, I'll take you to the cinema. You choose, but please, nothing from Star Wars."

"Excuse me, but I don't like to be around much people."

"All right, I'll choose for you. It's DreamWorks Factory time!"

"I don't speak German at all!"

"It's in English with subtitles. Mr. Elsässer, could you inform his Excellency that I will be back with Guntram around 10 p.m.?"

"Certainly, Mr. Antonov. Guntram, don't pout; it's very unbecoming and childish."

* * *

"Will you not have troubles with the Duke, Mr. Antonov? I think he expects me for dinner," Guntram tried to talk Alexei out of his idea with a veiled threat, invoking Lintorff. He was very apprehensive as a cinema meant hundreds of people, a shopping mall perhaps, lights, share the space with them.

"He will not mind, and don't expect he shows at home. Fridays is major hunting day if he's in Zurich. We'll get a hot tea for you before we drive away," the Russian said with a big plastered smile.

"I don't want a tea!"

"Yes, you do Guntram! Now, move to the kitchen and ask for your tea."

"Why?"

"As a personal favour? Do one for me, and I'll do another for you. One hand washes the other, as they say."

"If you want a tea, why don't you ask it for yourself? The Duke can't deny you that."

"You can be very dense when you want, can't you?" Alexei huffed taking Guntram by the arm and steering him toward the stairs leading to the service area. One final push sent Guntram inside the ample industrial kitchen where the chef, Jean Jacques, was supervising Saturday's dinner. "Guntram doesn't dare to ask for something, Jean Jacques." Alexei sauntered to the more than hostile looking small man.

"Really? What is that you want? I'm working, Antonov," he said with a belligerent tone as he was getting sick of his boyfriend's jealousy, coming to check what he was doing in his own kitchen, as if he were an amateur, not a three Michelin Stars Winner and author of many books. 'Does he think that I'm still jumping on everyone that comes here? I only did it with him and since that time, he thinks I'm banging every cook or waiter that crosses that door. God, he might be even jealous of Friederich!'

"I'm sorry to bother you, Monsieur. I only wanted some tea..." Guntram said very sheepishly, completely hating to be in the middle of something he couldn't still understand.

"*Bien sûr*. Peter, make one and try to remember the difference between boiling and scalding water. Use leaves."

"I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"Please, don't worry. I know whose idea it was," Jean Jacques answered very fast in French. "Do you come from Poitiers?"

"I was born in New York and lived in Buenos Aires." Guntram answered in English.

"I spend many years in Poitiers when I was around your age. There's one chef there who's a genius. I learn many things there. He has a restaurant at St. Épine. He only works with natural products from the area and traditional cooking methods. If he decides to use pumpkins, you'll find about ten to twenty different kinds in the day's menu and you will not tire of it. Every time I go to France, I do my best to pass by his establishment. I adapted several of his recipes for you as you have a very strict diet. What did you do to your doctor?"

"Your dishes are fantastic, sir. It doesn't taste like hospital food at all."

"Can I use that sentence for a title? If you survive me then, I would like to write another book, one for cardiac patients. It's awful what they get! It's no wonder that they run to the first restaurant they can find the minute they're released," the cook chuckled much to his helpers' astonishment at seeing his usually grumpy boss chatting in a jovial tone.

"I'm glad to be helpful."

"Going out?" Jean Jacques asked, making a small sign with his head to the casual sport attire the boy was wearing, a light pullover and shirt without tie or jacket, nothing like what he was wearing on normal days or when the Duke was around.

"I'm going to the cinema it seems. The Duke doesn't come home tonight."

"No, he has a dinner for nine people, including his official flame; Stefania di Barberini and her girls. If I were you, I would run away as fast as I can. They won't miss you. It's a meeting for some traders," he chortled showing his disgust.

"Stefania di Barberini? The name sounds familiar. Who is she?"

"The epitome of good taste, elegance, chic, *charme* and idiocy. She's a TV hostess in the RAI and comments on fashion. Eons ago, she was a relatively known model, but now she's retired and in need of fixed income, one that only a husband can provide."

"Jean Jacques, please! Ms. Barberini has been a friend of the Duke for the past..."

"Ten years? Alexei Gregorevich lasting in a bed doesn't mean that you're going to get a fixed position. She will bring some models along and even you can imagine her task for tonight. I only regret to waste some good truffles on them. Perhaps, I should open a caviare can from the supermarket and serve it along with some ready made toasts and Philadelphia cheese. They wouldn't notice the difference."

"This is none of our business."

"Already sweating Alexei? Relax boy. Your boss is not here, and believe me, he shares my evaluation too. I bet that he ordered you this morning to get Guntram away for the night as he should not mix with such people," he smirked. "Antonov, take out Guntram this afternoon as I have a sensitive business meeting with people from outside our circle. Return at ten," he impersonated the Duke's voice and accent very accurately. "You have still so much to learn, boy," the chef added evilly while glancing around to check what his two helpers and sous chef were doing. "Do you dare to call this a *vol au vent*?" he shouted to one of the boys, removing something from the oven. "*Merdel*!"

Guntram gulped the rest of his tea while the cook shouted in German mixed with French to a man already looking abashed. "Let's go, please," he whispered to a very upset Alexei, after his game had been so easily discovered.

"Tomorrow at seven, Alexei." The Russian heard the moment he closed the door. He only increased his pace toward the main entrance and barked the butler for their coats. Once he started the car, he felt his nerves cooling

down just a bit.

"That was my boyfriend, Guntram," he explained very softly to a bewildered boy.

"Are you gay?"

"Yes, what's so strange?"

"Nothing," Guntram muttered.

"We met in 1996, when I arrived to Zurich. We had something going on for a few months, then, he came to work here and we stopped till three months ago. I had to ask permission to date him again. I'm working as hard as I can to get something more stable and better than a bodyguard's position, so we are more serious about things. He's used to going out a lot and I don't like it at all."

"I understand, Mr. Antonov."

"Call me Alexei. We live next door so to speak."

"All right."

"I'll take you to McDonalds after the film, if you want. Do you like "Monsters"?"

"I've seen many in the past years."

"No, the film. It's from Disney, I think."

"It's full of people. Can we not go to a café and stay in a corner?"

"Nope. We go to the cinema and watch the movie. I'll get you a chocolate bar or candies if you want. Look, it's dark, you shouldn't be afraid of people. Watch the film and forget about the rest."

Guntram started to hyperventilate in the line but Alexei smiled at him and lightly squeezed his arm in a soothing attempt. Guntram gulped and centred his gaze on the children and parents making the line in front of him. 'I can do it, I can do it. It's just a silly film.'

* * *

"Thank you so much for your company tonight Stefania, you're charming as always, my dear," Konrad said while he stood up in the emptied living room where the people from Templeton and some girls had drunk coffee. All his guests were gone and three of the men had offered to deliver each one of the ladies to their hotels. He had heard from the main door's direction some partly repressed chuckles at around 11 p.m. in the middle of his lecture about Emerging Markets Perspectives and a strange urge to kill Antonov had engulfed his soul. The man was one hour late from his established arrival time; the boy had been running in the cold weather and now he was laughing like a child in the corridor. He would certainly have a word with the Russian in the morning.

"Will you show him to me, Konrad?"

"I beg you pardon?" 'Not now, Stefania, I'm not in the mood for fucking and much less here. She should know that by now. Never at home.'

"What you brought from Russia, dear. It's quite the talk."

"Ah, you mean the small Kandinsky. It's not here, I'm afraid. At the bank, in a vault. I can order my people to show it to you tomorrow or the day after. It just does not fit with my decoration. I was considering buying two Tiepolo's drawings I saw in the latest catalogue, but perhaps it's too much to put them in my bedroom at Venice."

"No, nothing so exquisite, Konrad," she said with an acid but sweet voice. "I understand that he paints too, or at least tries to."

"Ah, you mean Guntram. He should be in bed by now. You'll see him some other time, dear. He's very shy and hides at the first sight of people. Nothing to have around VIP's," Konrad shrugged.

"Is it true that he was the lover of the owner of Repoil Inc. and the one of RusTrans?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"It's quite the talk. I think my friend, Sofia della Croce heard your cousin, Gertrud von Kleist speaking about him during the Help the Children Annual Dinner in Paris."

"I don't ask such questions to people, dear. It's rather personal, don't you think?"

"If he's your pupil, you should know who lives under your roof. How old is he?"

"Almost twenty-two years old and he's my ward, not pupil. His father asked me to take care of him when he was a small child. He has a serious heart condition and I would appreciate that you don't contribute to the rumours."

"Two billionaires before twenty-two? Should we sign him up for the Guinness Records Book?"

"Only one my dear; Repoil and RusTrans belong to the same man, among many others. The weather in

St. Petersburg is too wet for him. For your information, he had a scholarship in his foundation and lived with him in London and St. Petersburg for two years. He's studying here with my own curator, Ostermann and that already proves that he has some talent. His grades were always very high and..."

"Apparently the wife caught them both in bed," Stefania gloated causing Konrad's cold fury to increase at the rude interruption.

"As I said, I don't ask about such personal matters. For me is enough to know that he's honest, serious and hard working. None of us can cast the first stone regarding good sexual behaviour, don't you think Stefania?"

"Well, living off a rich man and later coming to the next, establishes a certain pattern, Konrad, don't you think?" She fired before she could choose her words better.

"My driver will take you home. Good night, Stefania," the Duke barked and directed his steps in a straight line to the door and opened it for her.

"I was hoping that you would do it, dear," she said in a vain attempt to fix what had been broken. Men were always so sensitive—especially this one—in their male pride. No one was supposed to challenge their views.

"Another time perhaps. I had more than two glasses tonight. I can't drive. Good night."

"Good night, Konrad," she answered, totally furious with him.

The Duke didn't wait for the car to go away to put his phone out of the drawer in the library and dial Ferdinand's number.

"Ferdinand, that you don't live with your wife does not excuse you from maintaining a certain order within your house!" he barked at the man before he could greet him.

"What has Marie Amélie done now, Konrad?" his friend said tiredly, convinced that his youngest daughter had been into some mischief.

"Not her! Your wife! She was telling everybody that Guntram was living with Repin! I clearly said that no comments on that at all! And my own cousin starts to spread lies about him! It can come only from you Ferdinand!"

"I said nothing! I'll ask her from where she got the story."

"I knew you were against us in this, but this is very low. What do you win by ruining this boy's reputation?"

"I ruined nothing! And he was in Repin's bed all by himself!"

"I'm very disappointed with you. Guntram has done nothing against you and you stab him in the back? Where's your honour?"

"I said nothing! Women gossip and you know it. I will stop it."

"It's too late. Even Stefania di Barberini knows about it. Your wife can be very glad to have ruined his chances to be respectable again!"

"He's not a bloody maid and we are not in the XIX century. Should we ask Armin how many adventures he had already? Or my own boys? The lad had a lover, so what? It's not as if he were a street whore! Really Konrad, think before you cry to me!"

"His reputation should be unquestionable and you know the reasons!"

"No, I don't know them. Care to explain, Konrad?" Ferdinand asked as all his internal alarms sprang to life.

"A clean name is mandatory to be in our Order."

"No, no, no, my friend. Don't give me that. We've known each other since we were nine years old. The "highest reputation" story is only required for a certain position within the Council and we both know which one it is."

"Your wife has directly disregarded an order from her Griffin," Konrad barked, furious to be trapped.

"I will speak with Gertrud and she will apologise to you. It's the other thing that worries me. What exactly are you planning to do with Guntram?"

"Nothing, he's my ward and part of my family."

"Shit! Don't go there! He's the snake's nephew! Do you think that Löwenstein will let you have him? After you exiled his niece just because she was married to Roger? You ruined her medical career and now she's in a God forgotten African country vaccinating everything that moves. And you're considering now to get the boy in your bedroom? As Consort? Shit!"

"I can trade with him. Her full pardon for his support."

"I will not let you. It's an obsession what you have! There are hundreds of light brown hair and blue eyed

boys in this world. Fuck them all if you have to. But stay away from Guntram!”

“He’s nothing like Roger and I’m getting tired of your permanent nagging about getting a Consort and children. I’ll be forty-six in November. It’s time to settle down.”

“Fuck! Fuck! Settle down? With the living image of the man who nearly killed you and robbed everything you had? Besides, how do you plan to have children? He’s a man in case your brain was too busy drooling to realise it!”

“Modern Science has advanced dramatically. There’s a good legal framework in the United States. I could also get a wife if the council prefers the traditional, but less efficient way.”

“No, no, no. Löwenstein will not allow it. I will not allow it! Albert will not allow it!”

“I can get the votes from Goran, Michael, and the others don’t care at all. They will do anything to get their bank accounts fatter.”

“I can’t believe it! You’re serious about it! What do you think will happen when you go and merrily announce that you want a boy for consort? Do you have any idea of all the shit Repin had to cope with just because he was gay? Since when do you like boys again?”

“You know I always preferred men to women. I simply don’t understand the later. They’re a permanent source of trouble.”

“Yes, Roger was a candid dove,” Ferdinand snickered.

“This one is. There’s the antecedent of my predecessor Klaus Friederich von Lintorff in the XVIII century. He named the Prinz Otto von Olomuc his consort and married a woman too. Otto is buried in the same vault as he. Let’s do not forget how many of our knights had many long lasting relationships in wartime and that our founder, Theodobald von Lintorff had an affair of twenty-six years with a young bishop from Italy, illegitimate child from Pope Innocent... and finally, least but not last, my own father with—”

“We don’t know about that, so, leave it!”

“Please, it’s very clear for me and the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I don’t know what I would do without him, Ferdinand. The best counsellor I’ve ever had, even if he never got the title.”

“If they never made it public, you must respect their reasons.”

“He has even moulded your character, Ferdinand. Do you see my point now?”

“No!”

“Fix the problem with your wife, Ferdinand. Relax, I’m not going to name him or anything like that. I should be certain of my future actions. I will only speak with Löwenstein, and if he agrees, then, I might proceed.

Konrad hang up the phone before Ferdinand could explode as he was usually doing every time they had a disagreement for the past thirty-five years. His mind returned at once to what had been nagging him since coffee; the good time Guntram and Antonov seemed to be having. ‘He likes Russians and Alexei Gregorevich wouldn’t say no, if I know him a bit. Time to put an end to whatever those two have been doing.’

* * *

Guntram was feeling something akin to happiness in a long time, more than he could remember. First Alexei had taken him to watch a cartoon, “*Monsters Inc.*” and he was able to control his panic in the theatre, in the shopping mall and later in the McDonalds. He had been very surprised that the normally very stern Russian was so funny, enjoying the film like a child and then, joking with him or going to a place full with noisy teenagers—his size was enough to convince several boys pushing each other of the benefits of respecting the line—and telling him “don’t worry I know CPR. No Friday evening is a funny one if you don’t visit the E.R.”

The Russian was funny indeed and was nothing like the former KGBs he had met in Constantin’s house. He had told him about his time in Afghanistan or his many travels around the former USSR.

While Konrad was standing in front of Guntram’s bedroom’s door his hand ready to knock, he heard the boy laughing loudly.

“Do you think this is the right position, Alexei? I don’t remember something like this.”

“There’s always a first time, Guntram.”

“It’s large, no doubt about it.”

“Big or burst. That’s what we always say back home.” Konrad heard Alexei’s deep voice chuckling. ‘I’ll kill him if he has touched the boy. So that was his revenge; fuck Repin’s favourite boy!’ he thought before his hand froze in mid air when the boy laughed: “Who knew that there could be so much fun in a banana!”

Konrad opened the door to find the boy in pyjamas, under the covers and Alexei sitting by him—on the chair, with all his clothes on, including shoes—and something like a scrabble board in front of them with an empty case looking like a banana. Antonov jumped to attention while Guntram did his best to stabilize the board and the letters.

“Good evening, Gentlemen,” he said eating his own fury at his own stupid mistake.

“Good evening, Duke,” both answered in unison.

“It's more than one in the morning, Antonov. De Lisle should be resting now.”

“Yes Sire, Good night Sire.” The Russian left the room very quickly while Guntram gathered the small stones and placed them back in the strange looking case, still smiling at himself.

“What were you doing tonight?” Konrad barked, making the boy flinch.

“We were playing bananagrams, Konrad. I couldn't sleep and Mr. Antonov suggested playing this game.”

“And before?”

“We went to the cinema and later to have dinner, sir. We returned at eleven.”

“Good. Go to bed now. It's late for you.”

I was not expecting it at all.”

‘Letting you out. I'll certainly have some words with that man. I specifically ordered him to keep the boy away from me tonight! Not walking him around!’

“I never thought I could be again inside a movie theatre, Konrad. Thank you,” Guntram whispered, washing away the older man's fury. “It's as you said; I'm starting to feel better here than in St. Petersburg.”

“I'm glad you feel comfortable around your own people. I didn't lie when I said that you were now a part of my family, as your father wanted,” Konrad intoned, deciding to cash some points for his own account and drop the killing for the morning.

“Will you tell me what happened in 1989?”

“Yes, but not now. It's not a happy story for either side, Guntram.”

“I understand.”

“When you're feeling much better. There's no rush. We have a lot of time in front of us.”

“Good night, Konrad.”

“Good night, Guntram.”

Chapter 18

Thursday, April 8th, 2004

Although the temperature was becoming warmer and warmer, April was cold and the springtime elusive, Goran was glad that he was out of the office early. He felt trapped among the boisserie panels, heavy furniture and carpets. It wasn't his environment at all. He preferred the forest and the fields; the smell of the wet earth to the expensive perfumes the women favoured. He was a hunter not a courtesan; nothing could be compared to the thrill of the hunting, of lying in wait over the ground at dawn.

Leaning against the big black car in the small and quiet street was a hundred times better than wasting his time with an associate or subordinate unable to understand a simple command. At least Michael Dähler had been an excellent asset as strategy advisor and tomorrow's meeting was going to be a tough one with several associates furious for the loss of 4.8 billion and many more in contracts in the former Soviet Union. The news about Guntram had reached them—bloody gossiping women and stupid von Kleist—and they wanted to trade him for a better relation with Repin, and 'come to me crying when the Russian takes all their money and kills their children. They never learn; the Duke is right. The only way to control Repin is to have something he really cares about. I will not let that monster have my little brother again. God gave me a chance to redeem myself and I will not waste it. I hope the Duke gives me soon the order to terminate that woman.'

"Hi, Goran! I didn't expect you to see here!" the voice of Guntram interrupted his musings. The Serb was surprised that the boy was smiling at him with true happiness shining in his eyes. 'When was the last time someone was happy to see me? Only when Pavel was here.'

"Hello Guntram, I see you're much better than when you came here." He said as he carefully evaluated the boy standing in front of him. How was he able to approach him without being noticed? The month in the castle has been certainly good for him as Guntram's ashy complexion had been replaced by a rosier one and his eyes were not showing a deep terror and mistrust to everyone coming next to him. 'Antonov did a good job with him.'

"I feel much better, Goran. I can't run a triathlon, but the new medications are much better for me. I was in the movies twice already and in restaurants."

"Yes, I've heard about your escapade with Antonov to the Burger King."

"I had a salad and no fries," Guntram defended himself. "Besides, Friederich scolded me already."

"I'm driving you home today. Antonov had to leave the country for a few weeks. I need him in Central Asia. You will get another bodyguard from tomorrow onwards," Goran said while he got into his car, followed by Guntram. He started the engine and casually asked; "how's everything between you and the Duke?"

"Fine. I keep myself quiet and scarce and there are no problems between us."

"He told me he was satisfied with your behaviour."

"I do my best to avoid clashing with him, but sometimes I would like to break something in his head," Guntram said and heard the Serb chuckle.

"Get in line, boy. There are many in front of you. Does he treat you well?"

"Yes, he's very polite to me. He treats me as a member of his family according to him but he's very stern. He checks that I do all my school assignments, work at the studio with Ostermann and study. He even inspects my drawings. What can he know about art? Does he count how many sheets I use or if I paint out of the square?"

"He knows much more than you think, Guntram. He never tells it, but he knows, believe me. Oblomov bet with him that he could not identify a painting from you when he had only seen that children's portrait or his wife's, and he got it right in less than five seconds."

"He's very intelligent and well educated. His conversation when he has guests is impressive. How many languages does he speak?"

"Five or six. Let me see, German, English, French, Italian, Russian, some Mandarin and can swear in Serb. Good knowledge of Latin too, but that's Friederich's doing."

"When did he learn all that? At night he's only reading his papers and documents."

"Private teachers since infancy and a very stern father. He can't tolerate laziness. What he demands from the others, he demands to himself first."

"I believe you," Guntram sighed as he remembered how he had been questioned on London Georgian

Architecture two nights ago and the reprimand earned for ignoring the trade routes from India and the Antilles. “I passed a test a few days ago but he asked things that were not in the program. I got four books more to read and probably study before next Sunday. He should have been a School Principal, not banker.”

“Art and History together, the subjects he loves most. You're dead Guntram. He will bury you under his books or get you new ones.”

“I thought it was Economics or business.”

“That's working. It's a different story. The Duke appreciates you. You're not what he was expecting.”

“He's also not, well, he's not all the things they told me about him. What did he think about me if he didn't know me?”

“You were Repin's boyfriend. You should be a whimsical, good for nothing plaything,” the Serb shrugged and Guntram blushed from fury.

“Yeah, he already called me “expensive rent boy”, but he apologised later. I was never Constantin's toy! I don't want to be one. The only thing I want is to get away and live my life away from all of you. I never asked to come here, to destroy a man's marriage or become a hostage.”

“Don't be so upset. It's bad for you. I don't believe you were such things. He truly appreciates you and wants to protect you from Repin. Once the year is over, he will take you back and it will be the same as before or worse as his paranoia will be unleashed. The Duke “robbed” you once and knows that you're his weakest point.”

“I know but perhaps he forgets me,” Guntram said desperately. “I don't want to be put in a beautiful house with a guard or be his doll.”

“Don't count on it. Your only chance to leave Repin is to stay and become one of us. The Duke will back you up, but you have to be his friend too,” Goran said very softly and concentrated on the driving while Guntram thought on his words, his gaze lost in the countryside.

Guntram kept silent for the rest of the trip and when he got out of the car parked in the courtyard, a bodyguard rushed toward them. “One moment,” Goran said and took two large rectangular leather cases from the trunk. “Come Guntram, I have to leave this at the meeting room for tomorrow.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, you can look but you can't touch,” Goran cracked a smile. “Only the *Hochmeister* or the *Summus Marescalus*. I'll show you. They're impressive pieces. Follow me.”

Guntram trailed after Goran with big eyes as he passed the wings the boy normally was allowed to visit and directed himself to the south wing, where was the big ball room and another one always closed. He was surprised to see Friederich and many butlers and security personnel in the area when only the maids were dusting twice per week.

“Everything is ready, Mr. Pavicevic,” Friederich announced.

“Excellent, Mr. Elsässer. Thank you very much.”

“Should Guntram be...?”

“The Duke has allowed it. It's time Guntram understands what it means to be one of us,” Goran said and took the keys from Friederich's hands. “Follow me; you'll see the Hall of Knights. It shares its walls with the Chapel. This room is only opened for this meeting and can't be used for something that it's not related to the Order.”

“I see.”

Guntram was ushered into a large hall some twenty metres long and seven metres wide decorated with a marble floor, with portraits hanging from white Spartan walls and several long tables forming an U in front of an elevated platform with a old, solid wood table and ten chairs, one bigger than the others and only a painted crucifix on that wall.

“The largest chair belongs to the Griffin, the Duke and the one at his right to the *Magnus Commendator* and the one in the left to the *Summus Marescalus* and seven councillors more, three from the past *Hochmeister* and four new. They are the ones who make all recommendations. The Crucifix was made by Cimabue and it was a gift from the first consort to the founder Theodobald von Lintorff, I don't remember his name but he was responsible for most of the alliances forged at the XVII century. It's a treasure for us, made in 1260 as an early study for the one hanging in Santa Maria Maggiore. It's much smaller than the final version but I believe it shows the same devotion as that one,” Goran said to a shocked Guntram while he placed the two large cases. “On the tables sit the associates or members. We had to forgo of the word knight because there are not many noblemen left. I would say that sixty-five percent of them are bourgeoisie that jumped in after War World Two.”

He opened the boxes and presented two long swords laying on the interior velveted cases. One was

looking very old and the large handle formed a crucifix while the other had the handle like an inverted moon. Guntram swallowed hard as he recognised the weapons from the horror stories the Russians used to tell him.

"It's a two handed iron sword. Used by the Spanish Inquisition for beheading. Nowadays is a ceremonial sword and belongs to the Griffin. There's another original at the Royal Arms Museum in Madrid. Mine is a contemporary design based on the *Tizona*. I thought it was appropriate to keep the Spanish flare to all as we are a team. For practice we use normal foils, épées or sabres. These two are kept in the bank's vault and only come out for the general meeting," Goran explained to him, noticing how pale the boy was now.

"I've heard stories about this sword," Guntram said with a raspy voice as he could not remove his eyes from the Christ in the handle. "It's exactly as it was described."

"Russians have a vivid imagination and don't forget that Malchenko, Repin's cousin, is a member too. Perhaps he will be here tomorrow. Stay away from him. We tolerate his presence because he's a good liaison officer," Goran said very seriously and almost saluted the tall man standing at the room entrance.

"My Duke."

"Thank you for bringing it, Goran." Konrad said and caressed reverently the handle of his sword. "I don't think it will be necessary to put them on display. Keep them in the back room. Sometimes I think it's a crime to use them here. They deserve much better."

"It's what we have, my Griffin," Goran commented dejectedly. "Everything changes and not for good."

"Indeed. Hello, Guntram. You look pale. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes, Sire," the boy whispered still looking at the sword he had so many stories about. The blasted thing looked very well sharpened and heavy enough as to behead a person.

"Come with me, Guntram. I want to introduce you to the Fürst zu Löwenstein." Konrad broke the sword's spell, steering the boy out of the large room.

"Should I not change my clothes? I just came from the atelier," he asked, glad to be out of the suffocating room.

"It's all right. Nothing formal. It's an old friend of mine and adviser. My cousin Albert is with him too," Konrad said pulling his ward from the elbow and increasing his long strides toward the living room.

Two men were sitting in front of the fire. One tall man, around his mid forties, dark-haired with deep blue eyes, slightly round, with the aquiline nose of the Lintorff's was sitting next to a very old and frail looking, supporting in his cane man. The older man inspected Guntram from head to toes as he seemed to hesitate when Konrad advanced toward them.

"*Mein Fürst*, may I introduce Guntram de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen, Vicomte de Marignac to you?"

Guntram was surprised to hear Konrad using his full name and title. Normally he was introduced as "De Lisle" or "Guntram, my ward." He bowed his head toward the man and only whispered "*Mein Fürst*."

"My cousin, Albert von Lintorff. He oversees the Italian branch of our companies."

"How do you do, sir?" Guntram said and shook the offered hand.

"Come over here, child. Let me see you better." The old man ordered and Guntram obeyed. "It is a pity your poor health prevented us from meeting each other before. Sit down." He pointed to a chair next to him where he could observe the boy much better. Although the old man could feel the young man's nervousness, he was doing his best to keep his pose and you could certainly see that he was of noble birth.

"Thank you, *mein Fürst*."

"You don't look very much like your father; you must have taken your features from your mother or from the Guttenberg Sachsen. Pater Bruno has spoken to me about you and also my cousin Claire von Ribbentrop. She says that you work hard despite your heart condition."

"I do everything in my power to be useful."

"That is laudable, child. The month you have spent at our side has proved that you are worthy of being one of us."

"Guntram is an artist. He has no interest to participate in our activities, *mein Fürst*," Konrad said quickly.

"Indeed. He is very young, my friend."

"He is twenty-one years old. I was twenty-two when I was invested *Hochmeister*."

"And you nearly gave me my first syncope during your first year as Griffin. Your poor uncle Hermann never had so many emotions in his whole life. It was a financial roller coaster what we went through," the prince chuckled, visibly entertained at the memory.

"Thanks to your advice we have managed satisfactorily for the past twenty-four years."

"Do you give me your word to assure the succession then?" Löwenstein's blue eyes pierced Konrad's.

"In a year, if I'm pleased with the course of events. His role is of a personal nature, nothing else, no power granted to him," Konrad worded his answer carefully.

"In that case, although I am not entirely satisfied with your decision, I will not oppose you. This is too modern for my taste, but we have to adapt to the times if the outcome is good. In a year, if I am pleased with his performance, I will support his candidacy, but the succession line will not be further altered, is that clear Griffin?"

"Of course, it remains as it is unless we have a new development."

"Cousin, you have my vote too. He's from good breeding and his father was on our side." Albert von Lintorff dispassionately announced.

"Tell me young man, have you ever exhibited something?" the old man asked Guntram, still totally lost in the conversation obviously revolving around him.

"One exhibition in London, several months ago. Mr. Clive Robertson is my manager. I'm not sure if he has received some of my work in the past month."

"Have you resumed your studies?"

"Yes sir. I will take the tests in June."

"Very well, Ostermann tells me that you still need to gain more confidence in yourself, but you have some "sparks of talent" and work hard. I would like to see some samples of your work. Perhaps after dinner."

"It will be an honour to show it to you, Sire."

"Excellent, you may return to your duties, child," the prince dismissed Guntram. "Konrad, your Tutor's evaluation is also good and that carries a considerable weight in my eyes."

Guntram stood up and bowed his head to both visitors, after quickly checking with the Duke if he was allowed to leave the room. He was surprised to see a fleeting but warm smile hanging on his lips. He left the room, closing the door quietly.

"Cousin, he's not what I was expecting. He looks like a little, quiet mouse. Usually, you like flamboyant, bordering on scandalous."

"He's to be my personal companion, not my whore. Understand this Albert."

"I'm surprised, that's all Konrad. I was betting all my money in this Stefania, but it seems I'm wrong."

"Do you think I will mix our blood with the blood of a...?"

"Konrad, we all know about your dedication and of your personal sacrifices for the Order," Löwenstein stopped the probable fight between the cousins. "This is not what we all expected from you, although we know about your preferences since a long time."

"He's exactly what I like and I will choose an appropriate mother for my children. I can't marry a woman as I don't like or trust them at all: not to the point of sharing my life with one of them. He's intelligent, polite, descendant from an old line, generous to his brothers, respects the Church and honest. All good traits for a Consort. He gives me peace of mind."

"Without sex? We have to ask him how he does it. We absolutely need his recipe. I've noticed you're a bit more peaceful lately. Can we not sit him at the Board's meetings?" Albert chuckled while Löwenstein smiled wickedly.

"Do you understand Konrad that he is Repin's lover? The others will be furious with you if you announce that you want to keep him for yourself."

"He WAS Repin's lover. We all come with a past attached and in these days, only one experience at twenty-one is nothing. He tried to leave him the moment he found out about the wife. We still have time to think about returning him to Repin. Almost a year. I'm only asking your permission to consider him as a suitable Consort. It could not work at all."

"You have our permission "to court" him, cousin," Albert mocked Konrad. "Do you need a list of suitable presents, Romeo?"

"Albert, your famous lists will not work with this child," Löwenstein interfered wearing a tired smile. "He is truly his father's son. Remember that the man rejected Sybille von Lippe and her eight hundred million Marks, not once but twice. His family nearly disinherited him twice for this. I think he has his grandmother's soulful eyes. A very beautiful lady, breaking every heart back in the thirties. We were standing in line to get a smile from Sigrid Guttenberg Sachsen. Konrad, my boy, if you want to be successful you should better start to help in Pater Bruno's soup kitchen once per week." The prince laughed as the image of a very uptight Duke serving a homeless flashed through his mind.

"Maybe my cousin will finally learn to cook. If he wants to become a responsible man... cleaning is a lost art for him."

"Albert, let's do not dwell on your own housekeeping abilities," Konrad barked, losing his patience. "We have to prepare tomorrow's meeting."

"Still an old dry bone, Konrad. Poor boy, he will die of boredom next to you."

* * *

Guntram was still shocked after his meeting with the two men. What were those two exactly implying about him? To accept him in the Order? No, that it could not be because he was already a member, much to his dismay. No, "his role was more of a personal nature," whatever that might mean. 'I hate people talking at my back or deciding for me. I'm not an idiot!'

A soft knock on his door made him jump in his desk. "Come in!" he answered dryly still upset. "Ah, it's you Friederich. I'm sorry."

"Dinner is at 8:30 tonight. The prince has to leave early. His health is not in very good shape."

"He can still command a lot," Guntram mumbled making Friederich smile.

"The day he stops commanding, he will be resting in his vault. What did he tell you?"

"It was the most absurd talk I've ever had. He asked me about my studies, but he already knew everything beforehand, told me that I'm very young, that I'm worthy to be in the Order and that they would give their support to the Duke, then, I was sent away. Ah, I'm supposed to show him my work after dinner, but I don't know if he really meant it."

"Be sure that the Prince means every word he says. Prepare a small portfolio and I will leave it in the living room after dinner. Show them if he asks you again."

"Who's the Duke's Tutor?"

"That should be me, Guntram," Friederich answered smiling. "For over forty years. I look after him since he was four years old. Quite a strong-willed child."

"Thank you for speaking on my behalf. The prince said that your opinion carries a lot of weight in front of his eyes."

"You're a good and honest person Guntram. I have nothing against you. You had the misfortune of meeting the wrong persons and trusted them. Since you're under my care I've seen nothing that could displease me in your ways or temper. Perhaps you place too much trust in people, but I think this is because of your young age."

"Thank you, but I can't place the blame entirely on the others. I accepted their lies because I liked them."

"We all make mistakes but we have the power to rectify them, child. I hope you have learned your lesson."

"Were you his tutor?"

"Since I was twenty-two years old. The former Duke, Karl Heinz von Lintorff, personally chose me for the position. I came from the Jesuit Seminar and took over the younger brother. Konrad was a very intelligent child, but very shy and insecure. He was an excellent student, very inquisitive and sharp. At seven he could speak German, English and Russian fluently. Karl Heinz was very proud of his son, but he never pampered him and that was very important."

"You mentioned another brother. Where is he?"

"The eldest brother died in hunting accident when he was twelve. Karl Maria shot himself with his father's weapon. It was very hard for Konrad and the Duke. He adored his older brother and was silent for a full year. The Duchess divorced the Duke at the end of the year, but Konrad preferred to remain here with his father as his relationship with the former Duchess was never good."

"I had no idea that it was so bad for him."

"It was hard but he overcame it with the years. The Consort lost her title and she lives in Paris. Please Guntram, never mention her in front of him. He becomes absolutely enraged at her memory."

"But she was his mother! I would have killed to meet my own mother!"

"Your mother, not Marianne von Liechtenstein. She never liked Konrad as he overshadowed his brother since he was a small child. She rejected him since his birth and he was the saddest child I ever saw brilliant and doing whatever he could to be better for her. I did my best to support him and show him my care but a mother can't be replaced, Guntram. All this is in the past and should remain there."

“Why did you call her Consort?”

“That’s an honorary title for our Order. Our founder, Theodobald von Lintorff decided that a person, man or woman, would be named Consort; a companion to the *Hochmeister*. He or she would get the right to vote in the council and his opposition could nullify a decision made by the *Hochmeister*. The idea was that in case the heir to the Lintorff House would be a woman, her husband could represent her in the Council as women were not accepted. This is why the Consort has to be approved by the Council. The *Hochmeister*, should he take a male Consort, could have a wife too, but the Consort was always responsible for raising the next generation of Griffins. Sometimes a *Hochmeister* would take a male Consort, just because he considered that this man could be a good councillor or Tutor or because he needed one extra vote to support his rule. Having a male Consort also helped in the case of the *Hochmeister’s* premature death if his heir would be too young to rule. In that case, the Consort and the Council would have to make the decisions together.”

“I don’t understand, you were the Duke’s Tutor...”

“Yes, but I was never appointed by the Council or wanted to be. I was happy to serve in a less notorious way. Many of the older members still regard me as a member. I’m not from noble birth nor come from a line. I wanted to serve God in the Church, but the Lord had other ideas and my superiors sent me to Karl Heinz, the former Duke. My family had been serving the Order only for two generations. Karl Heinz understood my reasons. After he passed away, the new Duke asked me to stay as his estates manager and that’s already quite a headache. The Duke can also be very demanding and childish sometimes,” Friederich said, while Guntram pondered if he should ask if the man had been something more than a tutor. Was he not on a first name basis with the former Duke? Better not, it was none of his business and Konrad seemed to be very attached to his tutor.

“Ready your things Guntram, I’ll take care of them. It’s semi formal tonight,” Friederich finished.

“Why do you still look after Konrad?”

“Old habits die hard. I cleaned his nose countless times: once more will not kill me. Besides, that’s what his father would have wanted,” Friederich answered softly before closing the door.

Guntram sighed while he searched through his papers for something that could be worthy showing and wasn’t related to Chinese Greeting Cats. ‘That sounds like those two had something more than a professional relationship and Konrad knows and accepts it. Well, his greatest love was another man. I wonder what could have happened so they broke up. Konrad seems to be a pretty decent fellow. My first impression about him was very wrong.’

* * *

Guntram de Lisle’s Diary.
Good Friday, April 9th 2004

The Mass was in the morning at 10 o’clock sharp. No doubt they’re Germans. Already at 7 a.m. the house was a pandemonium, full with hired servants, more bodyguards than for an international Presidential Summit, a tense Goran checking everything, the famous sword nowhere to be seen, a very serious Konrad dressed in a mourning suit with his cousin, Albert von Lintorff sitting at his right during breakfast doing his best to cheer him up and I, feeling like a lone pea in a huge pot, unaware of where I should sit.

From nine onwards the house started to shrink. So many tycoons, members, together are too much for anyone. I escaped to the kitchen and Jean Jacques gave me a cookie—I didn’t ask for it!—and kicked me out. I had to return to the living room and in the corridor a man stopped me and I felt very nervous because he had a strong grip on my arm.

“So, are you de Lisle?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re going to get us all in a lot of troubles with that crazy Russian. Why don’t you disappear and make us all a favour?”

When I was going to tell the asshole that being here was not my idea, Konrad appeared out of the blue and barked: “Fortingeray, remove your hands from the boy!”

“Griffin, we should return him to Russia. Keeping him here is dangerous for us. If the Russians kill him, it’s their problem, not ours.”

“Fortingeray, your opinion is duly noticed, but rules are rules. He’s one of us and from a much older

line than yours. We will discuss all this at the meeting. Guntram, go with my cousin." I swear he fulminated the man with his look.

I looked for Albert von Lintorff and he was speaking with several men more and I remained in a corner.

"Guntram, sit with me, child," the prince zu Löwenstein asked me from the sofa he was sitting with another old man, in his 70's. "Come here, we don't bite any longer." he told me again and cracked a smile. "Rasim Mladic Pavicevic, this is Guntram de Lisle."

"How do you do?" I said thinking that perhaps this one was related to Goran.

"You look very much like your uncle Roger. Goran has spoken with me about you."

"I couldn't tell, sir. I never met my uncles or any other member of my family."

"Good for you. According to my nephew, you're nothing like them. He tells that you're like our Pavel; an artist too."

"Guntram paints well and has no interest in our projects, Mladic. He will remain as an outsider."

"In that case, I have no buts if this is what the Griffin wants. That Russian will get over it," the Serb replied and both men forgot I was there, like a good flower vase.

"Ferdinand von Kleist is still against us."

"He may dissent with us, Gustav, but he will not vote against us. We have already five of eleven votes."

"Six of eleven votes, Wallenberg will side with the Duke. He's not exactly thrilled but he supports his Griffin. With von Kleist is enough."

"Goran tells me you will sit with him in the Mass. That's a clear signal for the rest of the associates. It's simply stupid to place the blame of our confrontation with these people on you. The Russians want to come to our land since a long time and any excuse is good to attack us."

"Excuse me sir, but you're seriously mistaken," I said, and both looked at me like hungry wolves. Nothing that could be compared to Stephanov or his friends. "Mr. Repin had nothing to do with whatever might have happened with you. One of his underlings, Morozov attacked him and helped his wife to nearly kill me in an attempt to weaken him. They wanted to take over and used the Duke's wrath to their advantage. Mr. Repin never lied to the Duke on this. Constantin always spoke about him in a mixture of awe, fear and respect. He has no reasons to fight with him. He simply can't afford it. One slap from him and he lost half of his fortune."

"Could you be mistaken, child?"

"I don't know. It will not be the first time he lied to me," I admitted very slowly.

"Thank you for being so forthcoming with us, my child. It makes our decisions much easier."

"Which decisions?"

"About your future. The Griffin has granted you a place beside him, as a part of his family. You should be honoured."

"I have to return to Russia in one year," I said, becoming more and more agitated.

"Do you want to return?"

"Mr. Repin expects me to return," I replied.

"Do you want to go back?" Mladic asked me and I knew that he was a man you couldn't lie to.

"No, I wanted to leave Russia. There's nothing for me in St. Petersburg, but on the other hand, I don't want to cause more troubles between you and him and I will return as agreed. Repin will be furious if the Duke does not fulfil his part of the deal. I only hope that this year apart will make him rethink his affections toward me."

"You have no feelings for that man?"

"No, nothing at all but I can't have any negative feelings against him; he was always very kind to me and I would be ungrateful if I were to deny it."

"Guntram, Repin is our concern, not yours. You're just a young boy and an outsider. Go with my nephew and stay with him," Rasim Mladic ordered me.

Better obey and stay with Goran. At least he doesn't give me the creeps like all of them do!"

* * *

"So Rasim, what do you think?"

"Gustav, my friend, I'm not happy about this and I think it's a dangerous move from the Griffin, but I will not change my vote. The boy stays. Perhaps, he even makes me a favour too and allows me to finish that pending business with his wretched uncle."

"Nothing would please me more than to see you finally crushing that snake of Roger. He ruined my niece's life."

"This boy didn't have it easy either. He lost his father, his fortune, his health and his friends. His father saved us. The material he had hidden in Geneva could have destroyed all of us if it had befallen in the wrong hands. The minimum we can do is to honour the pact and protect his child."

"All right, but all this will be addressed in a closed doors meeting of the Council, nothing to discuss now."

"Of course. We will only report that he's to be readmitted to the Order. If Fortingeray tries to go against us..."

"He will find Goran truly willing to help him find his way once more," Mladic chuckled. "If this boy can get the snake out of its cave and tames the Duke, I will kiss him."

"The Griffin has already started to speak about children, with one of those modern methods, but he's considering to settle down and that would be very good for all of us. A year ago it was unthinkable that he would mention the subject."

* * *

During the service I had to sit—and be nice—next to Goran and a man called Michael Dähler, a big German with a contagious smile. Konrad was sitting in the front with the Fürst zu Löwenstein, Goran's uncle and several other very old dinosaurs. On the second line were Ferdinand von Kleist and several others. I tried to focus myself on the service, but many were looking at me with suspicion, hostility and scorn. Guess they all know my resume in advance. This Fortingeray man was very sure about who was my former boyfriend. I still don't understand why he was telling me to beat it. As if I would have a chance!

"Guntram this is Heindrik Holgersen Wallenberg. He will take Antonov's place for the time being." Goran announced me, showing me a Viking standing in front of me. How can you be so tall? What do they feed them there? Can you find a bed of your size? I could tell he wasn't happy with his new baby sitting job; we share the feeling (and misery).

We drove to Zurich, to a nice hotel, The Eden. I was supposed to have lunch with Elisabetha von Lintorff, Albert von Lintorff's mother and "the queen bee," according to Holgersen, "be quiet and let her do the talking." I had to carry once more my portfolio for her and one of her girlfriends, Marie Sophie Olszytn, "a very rich widow and art collector, also be nice, let her do the talking."

"Do I have a say in all this?"

"No, be quiet."

"Do you stay with me?"

"No way. I know it's Good Friday, but I prefer to penance differently."

The ladies were already waiting for me at the restaurant and I felt very sick to see so many people around. I had to take several deep breaths before entering, thanks to a strong push in the back from Heindrik and a "don't be a sissy!" whispered in my ear.

Albert's mother looked exactly like a queen, very elegant and aristocratic but not arrogant. I believe she was in her seventies but you couldn't give her more than sixty. She had dark hair, like her son and very blue eyes. The other was a replica but in blonde with brown eyes and wearing several thousand Euros worth in jewels, but very discreet all of them.

"Hello dear, I'm Elisabetha, Konrad's aunt and this is my very good friend Tita Olszytn. I understand that you're Konrad's ward." She said with a kind smile but with an x-ray eye.

"I'm pleased to meet you both."

"Sit down, dear; Ostermann has spoken about you a lot. He tells me I should take a look at your material before he charges me the full price." The other one told me laughing.

At first it was awkward for me but I relaxed as they both were very kind and not aggressive at all. After lunch we went to Elisabetha's suite and they looked at my drawings, asking me who was my manager.

"I believe that Mr. Robertson in London still has me among his clients."

"I'll tell my secretary to contact him. I'm interested in several of your things. Those birds are delicious," Elisabetha said.

"Take them if you like them. I'll see if I can get some silk paper to wrap them."

"You can't give them to me! Those are good enough as to sell!" She said shocked.

"I would be glad if you take them, please."

"Guntram, my dear," interfered Tita, "Ostermann already vouches for your work and that's already like an investment for us. You should keep your work or send it to your manager. He will know what to do."

"I'm not selling much at the moment."

"Ostermann told us that you had one exhibition in London some time ago and you sold everything. Angelika Volcker's son bought two of your pieces and he wants to have you at his gallery in Berlin," Tita told me shocked. Who's Volcker?

"I was not considering to make another one any time soon," I whispered, feeling very sick.

"Well you should, if you don't want Rudolf Ostermann stealing your things and making it by himself."

"I'm only painting a cat in the meantime. A Chinese cat," I said sourly.

"Yes, I know, I bought the "Cats at the Praxeum." Very funny. My daughter-in-law is in love of it and she took it for her flat in New York," Tita told me somewhat sounding shocked.

I was presented with a dilemma. A hideous thing like the Athenian-Chinese cats, a total waste of oils and canvas (but very good for venting all the frustration, resentment and murdering rage I was feeling against Ostermann for forcing me to paint the thing) was sold to a nice lady.

"Madam, Tita, please take those landscapes you liked so much. I esteem them much more than the cats. I still have nightmares about them."

"In that case, but they're incredibly funny."

"Elisabetta, I will be honoured if you accept those birds, they're from around here and you can appreciate them better than I."

Finally they took the drawings and it's a good thing because if it were my decision they'd be in the garbage.

I had tea with them and when I was wondering when I should disappear, because they were very happy chatting about many things and asking me about my studies and my work in the Antiques Shop, Heindrik Holgersen showed up and told me that we would drive home in two hours.

** * **

*Ferdinand von Kleist's Diary
April 9th 2004*

I want to kill Konrad. Nothing new. I want to kill Konrad, Goran, Michael the idiotic clown, Gustav zu Löwenstein, Alrik Wallenberg, Rasim Mladic Pavicevic, Albert von Lintorff, Jean Louis St. Pérault and myself.

Fortingeray, Hülsroj and Van Thimen are furious with us and with reason. Konrad not only opposed their more than logical reserves against this boy but he had to give them a slap in the face IN FRONT of the whole brotherhood.

Everything went fine; people accepted our losses after Repin's mess because we could counteract them with Gasrom and some other moves. The final number was not as brilliant as we wanted but you can't complain if you get a twenty-three percent return in one year. But there, he had to screw it up. Michael Dähler, our newly appointed secretary, spoke with his dodo voice: "As the last point in our agenda I would like to submit to the Council's voting the candidacy of Guntram Philippe Alphonse de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen, Vicomte de Marignac. His Highness the Prince Gustav zu Löwenstein and the Baron Albert von Lintorff support his plea."

It was a cold, no better freezing water bucket poured over my head. When had Konrad got their votes? I was speechless and I tried to keep a straight face.

"I oppose," Fortingeray said and several agreed with him. No more than fifteen, I guess.

"May I know your reasons?" Mladic Pavicevic croaked from his corner. The old man might be retired, but I wouldn't like to be alone with him in a room.

"Were the de Lisle not part of that traitorous uprising against our Hochmeister in 1989? Were they not banished from our Order?"

"Yes, the main line was erased from our records. Nevertheless, his father, Jérôme de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen was the one who put us in the track to find the real culprits. He offered his own life to atone for his sins against us in exchange for a full pardon for his son. I accepted it and took the child as my ward as it was informed to

this Honourable Council in 1990," Konrad said. "I understand Fortingeray that you were no part of this body at the time, so you have no recollection of this."

"Jerôme de Lisle hid the most sensitive documents that were in the hands of the traitors in Geneva. Had it not been for him, we would not be speaking today, gentlemen," Mladic supported Konrad.

"I support this young man, Fortingeray," Löwenstein added.

"We heard the rumour that this person is the lover of Constantin Repin. Do you want to let our greatest enemy's bed warmer in the midst of our entourage?" Hulsroj asked shocked.

"He was in a relationship with Constantin Ivanovich Repin, but he was not aware of the nature of his business or knew about the Order. He lived all his life away from us. This relationship is over since eight months ago and he does not wish to return to Russia," Konrad explained.

"I will not risk my assets because a nameless brat does not want to go back to his sugar daddy!" Fortingeray roared. "Your last fight with that Russian costed us more than four billion directly plus the loss of many of our contacts and business within the Russian Federation. I don't care if he does not want! Put him on the first plane back!"

"Are you giving me an order?" Konrad growled and we all felt our hearts stop.

"I'm only expressing my concern. He can't be one of us. What do we get out of all this? Nothing. Can he even pay the dowry? Does he have five million euros?"

When Konrad was going to open his mouth, Goran spoke for the first time in seven hours, "I'll cover those expenses, Fortingeray. The Summus Marescalus and the Hochmeister back him up. I have personally checked Guntram de Lisle and he has been always forthcoming to us. He has no links with the Russian Mafia. We are the ones who evaluate the military aspects of the game, not you and I resent your lack of trust to our abilities."

That was scarier than any tantrum Konrad could have thrown.

"My people answer for him," Mladic spoke.

"We are indebted to his father. He saved us because he believed in our ideals and shared his own line's fate. A true knight," the old Wallenberg finished. "I trust my brothers and my Griffin's judgement." I better keep my opinion to myself. Jerôme hated us and if he, and I have no doubts, put us in the track of the traitors it was because he had a hidden agenda we haven't discovered yet. I'm sure he wanted us to kill each other in a full scaled war.

Guntram got forty-eight votes in favour and twenty-three against. He's in, but he will not participate in our meetings nor hold any "executive position." That's what gives me the creeps. I checked our Code and the bloody Consort is not an "executive position," unless the Hochmeister grants him/her such prerogative. I have nothing against the boy; he's nice in fact. Quiet, polite and shy. Friederich likes him a lot and protects him too. Antonov told me that he lives in another galaxy and only cares about painting. He never mentions Repin or his past life. He studies hard and never tried to escape or contact him and he's sure the boy saw one of the Russian's hounds lurking around whenever he goes to that painting studio. Guntram simply ignored the man.

I'm concerned about Konrad. Does he want to repeat Roger's story? Does he want to take revenge on the boy? Guntram is nothing like Roger; he's a frightened kitten when the other was a panther—exactly what Konrad likes, hard, unforgiving and dangerous. Even that bitch he favours so much, Stefania di Barberini, is a bloody cobra. He likes to bed an opponent not a lover. According to him, "sex is like a good fight, the better the opponent, the better the outcome."

I'm bewildered.

Guntram can't play in bed per his doctor's orders and even if he were able to do a thing there, I bet he would be "a little lamb or a kitten," exactly as Konrad described. He's good looking, no doubt, but he's not the super adventure guy. One relationship in twenty-one years and with Repin! He was not even looking at other people. Oblomov told me that Repin had nearly to shake him so he would notice he was standing there. He was a virgin when he went to bed with the man!

I don't know what he's after this time. Konrad has already spoken with all the Council members about taking the boy as Consort and having his children by artificial insemination. I remember Jerôme told us that night something like "you need someone to gently counterbalance your domineering ways. Guntram has his mother's peaceful temper and a lot of patience. He's unable to hurt a fly." All true.

Could it be that Konrad finally got his middle age crisis? Could it be that he really wants "something fixed at home"? Guntram would certainly be easy to keep happy and obedient. One pat to the head and he does whatever you want. Repin's world truly broke him.

On Tuesday Konrad will hear me. I don't want that he abuses that poor lad.

Unable to sleep, Guntram tossed in bed. Sleep was elusive and the only way to achieve it was to read something. He took his robe and went to the library to look for a book as his school reading material was unappealing. He went the stairs down in darkness, glad that all the people had vanished at 11 p.m. and he could finally go to bed in peace. The library door was half open and he entered quiet as a mouse, going directly for the Art Section where was that book about Meissen Porcelain he had seen a few days ago. He opened the crystal door and removed it from the shelf.

"Should you not be in bed? It's 1 a.m., boy," Konrad's deep voice scared him. Guntram looked toward the desk but the man wasn't there. "On the couch, boy. Come over here. There's a draft where you're standing."

Guntram walked toward the big couch placed in front of the half extinguished fire, only some hot coals warming the nearby zone. He noticed that the Duke was still dressed from the morning and had a cognac glass in his hand and the bottle on the side table.

"I didn't mean to intrude Konrad. I just came for a book. I couldn't sleep," he quickly excused himself.

"What do you have there?" The man asked and pried the book from the boy's hand not waiting for an answer. "'Meissen and Diplomacy.'" Interesting subject. We got many presents thanks to this tradition. Our famous Golden Lion Service—kept under seven locks by Friederich—was part of Princess Maria Walescka's dowry in 1765 if I remember correctly. She was an illegitimate child from Augustus *den Starken*, one of many, but he was gracious enough as to pay for her dowry. Perhaps, Friederich will show it to you one day. He defends it with his life. It was never used or displayed," he spoke amiably. "Sit with me. I also can't sleep."

"You look very tired from the meetings."

"Do you know the German expression '*Hundemüde*;' 'dog tired'? I feel exactly like that."

"Must be hard to keep all those important people happy."

"That's a very diplomatic way to express it. Try 'to keep the sharks happy in their pond' and you will be closer to the truth." Konrad smiled tiredly, his eyes softening for the first time. "It's every year the same but with a different topic each time we meet. I hate this voting."

"Voting?"

"I'm elected as *Hochmeister* for a year only. I need more than 2/3 of the votes to keep my job. I only control thirty-four percent of the votes. I have to campaign hard to get the rest."

"Constantin told me that your position is inherited," Guntram asked perplexed.

"It's but only for the first year. If I prove to be an incompetent, the members can throw me out and the Council rules for a full year till they choose a successor and this one has only one year to prove that he's worthy of the title. My line came to power after 1878, when my cousin's Gertrud ancestor lost his position. He was acting as surrogate Griffin as my great grandfather was too young to take over because the previous Griffin, from Albert's line, had named him but died when he was ten years old. The surrogate Griffin only had daughters at the time and a woman was not allowed to be our leader. He tried to force the succession to one of his daughters and his son-in-law by trying to murder my great grandfather. The plot was discovered and he was deposed. His younger brother tried to recover the power but the Council decided to rule till my grandfather turned eighteen. Gertrud and Georg, her brother, are still sore about it. She's upset with me because I preferred Albert's son as my successor instead of her children. Ferdinand understands my decision and I think he's glad that Karl Otto will not get it. When I'm out, the power should return to the original line, the one who invested us."

"I didn't know it."

"It helps to keep the tensions down and reinforce my power during the year. We chose this day as it's the Death of our Lord and it could mean the end of a time for us. Don't look at me; complain to Theodobald von Lintorff for his poor choices." Konrad chuckled finding terribly amusing the shocked expression in Guntram's face.

"Every year? Would it not better to make it every four years, like most Presidents do?"

"I get a lifetime job which most Presidents don't, unless you're Fidel Castro," he chortled. "Perhaps I should give you a seat on the Council," he pondered half seriously.

"I would be fired in less than two minutes. I'm no part of their game. I have nothing that could be valuable to them."

"You have been readmitted as a member, Guntram, but you get no voting rights or executive positions for the moment. It's the best I can do for you. Maybe in the future, you will be more freely accepted."

"I thought I was a member! You told me this in St. Petersburg!"

"You were a member, but your line was expelled. With his actions your father won for you the right to be readmitted. Don't waste the many sacrifices he made for you, Guntram."

"I don't want to be a part of this!"

"You're my ward and a member now. You're virtually untouchable for Repin. Any of us has to shelter you in case of troubles and you have to do the same for your brothers. Betray us and the punishment will be exemplary. If you want to stay with us after one year, you can do it, and Repin has to accept it or fight with us as a whole."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I promised your father to look after you, and I don't want that you go back to him. As I told you, you remind me of someone I loved very much and I don't want to repeat the same mistakes with you. You blend perfectly with our lifestyle and beliefs and I dare say that you like it. I don't plan that you're part of our business and I don't think you could ever be one of us. You're an artist, an idealist and a selfless person. You can live by my side, giving me your companionship and friendship. That's all I ask from you. Finish your schooling, work hard to get a career and a name."

"Konrad, I don't know what to say..."

"Say nothing at all. Do you like to be here with me?"

"Yes, very much," Guntram blurted out and blushed under the man's piercing look.

"I see that you have made a huge progress since you're here. I'm proud of your achievements and I like to have you around, when you're not pouting or depressing up to the stones. Even if nobody believes it, I live in the deepest loneliness and I would like to have someone I could trust in, someone who will not use me or my power and someone generous, honest and kind hearted that would support me when everything is too much for me. I carry a heavy weight on my shoulders and it's suffocating for me."

"Yours is position I would have never taken," Guntram whispered.

"I know and I like you for that," Konrad pressed.

"Although I harshly judged you and you're not the person I thought you were, I don't think I can do what you want. We could never be friends because of our history and because I consider myself Constantin's friend. I don't love him any more but I will not betray him for you. You're his enemy."

"We are speaking of different things here. I'm not asking you to tell me about Repin's activities. I suffice myself to gather that intelligence. How can you betray a man that you don't love any more? Didn't you tell him?"

"Countless times, but he didn't listen to me. He said I was in shock and only willing to run to where I felt comfortable."

"Where is the betrayal then?"

"He's still in love with me and he has risked his position for me."

"Risked his position for you? How?"

"His marriage; his wife wants to get rid of him now. If she uses what you have given her and goes to the authorities, Constantin will go to jail and lose his children. He loves them very much. I've seen him with them and he's a very good and tender father."

"Guntram, we exchanged information. She came to me the same day you were nearly killed because she needed my protection to survive Repin's wrath. I wasn't aware of the facts or that she had laid a hand on one of us, but I didn't want to save her either. I imagine that her gamble was to kill you and escape while her accomplices attacked Repin. She thought that I was so furious with Repin because of Morozov's actions against me that I would protect her, but I didn't break the agreement I had with him."

"Constantin never wanted to go against you. He's afraid of you! Can you not understand it? This man wanted to cause a war between you and him!"

"That's what your death's was for. So they could place the blame on me because of my representative's death in Georgia. They tortured you so it would look like a punishment from us. It wasn't that she hated you so much that she needed to vent her rage. For some reason, it went wrong and she had to give me something in exchange for my help. What she offered me was interesting and as I didn't want to lose it, I offered her some information about his accounts in Luxembourg and his creative tax declarations."

"Constantin is an honourable man. He never went against you! There are so many stories about your brutality that no one would be as crazy as to clash with you!"

"People are more lunatic than you think Guntram and I have to prove them wrong. You're mistaken if you think this is not his fault. Morozov was under him and he should have controlled him better. No, he let this man advance against me to check if I could be defeated. He was testing my defences and paid a price for it. I don't take betrayal lightly."

"Massaiev told me that you're a bloodthirsty monster, that once you're unleashed nothing stops you. My whole family was murdered. Those people in Chechnya were murdered because of you. He says you have killed with your own hands."

"I only passed the information to the Russian Authorities. They decided to raid the village, a village harbouring terrorists and gangsters. As for your family, don't be unfair to me because you perfectly know that I was in a hospital because of a shooting organized by your own grandfather. Goran's father died saving my life. I'm merciless, that is true but I'm not bloodthirsty. I do what I have to do and use violence as the last resource, something that Repin can't say. My punishments are legendary because I want to set a good example so this is never repeated. It works most of the times and we are feared and respected."

"You beheaded three men; with your own hands. You have a sword," Guntram whispered.

"Who told you this? It's ridiculous!" Konrad protested, almost laughing.

"Did you?"

"Never! Do you think I carry an axe around, beheading enemies?" Konrad laughed. 'Down from five to three, the Russians are losing their respect for me. Time to show them something more.'

"Is it not true?"

"Sure it is. Did they also tell you that I nailed the heads on pikes and put them at the entrance? Very classical. Next time, I'll try impalement as I'm dealing with Russians," he chortled.

"No," Guntram whispered feeling very stupid for believing such a crazy story.

"Have they not told you about the time I hanged five men from their feet and let them there till they died? Took quite some time and finally the men gutted them alive to end the screaming."

"No."

"Russians must be losing their imagination. They used to tell better stories about me. Eating so much fast food can't be good for their brains," Konrad smirked. "Now, you won't be able to sleep at all," he laughed. "Let's go to bed, Guntram. Tomorrow we have to endure my cousin for the day. In the afternoon, his wife and children will arrive for the Easter Sunday Lunch with the employees from the bank."

"Excuse me for believing these slanders, Konrad," Guntram said very ashamed and offered his hand.

"It's all right. It's good to be feared when your opponent is a 6 feet long ugly black bear. I wouldn't like to be loved by one of them." He laughed as he quickly took the small hand between his two much larger hands. "Friends?"

"Friends."

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary Easter Sunday

I'm dead on my feet. The party started early in the morning with a Mass at 11—big surprise—lunch in the courtyard as it was sunny for 200 people (employees and their families about fifty children running around) and some noble members from the Lintorff family. I was hoping to escape during the Mass but Konrad caught me the minute I was scurrying myself toward the background and forced me to sit next to him, near Carolina von Lintorff, Albert's wife and a very kind and elegant Italian woman. Elisabetta smiled at me and patted me on the shoulder as she sat next to her son, doing his best to keep his two youngest children quiet; they're nine and eleven. Across the nave, I saw Ferdinand von Kleist and his wife, Gertrud and his three children, Karl Otto, Johannes and Marie Amélie a really good looking blonde girl. I'm not surprised that Albert's eldest son, Armin, follows her like a puppy. Goran was also there and he briefly smiled me from the distance. He was again with the funny German, Michael Dähler.

After the service the children started to run like crazy all over the garden as the people were looking for their assigned places at the tables. The young ones got a special area with people to look after them, toy's and brown rabbits. Strangely, Konrad was nice to the many who came to greet him. I saw him standing with Ferdinand and Albert, greeting most of the people after the Mass. I thought that it could be a good moment to escape but Goran caught me and started to speak about the weather and that he had seen some of my pieces in London at Robertson's before the exhibition ended two weeks ago.

"Are you able to chit chat? Goran, I'm shocked," Michael interrupted us, almost laughing.

"Are you able to be quiet?" He growled back but the other was not impressed at all.

"No, only Monika van der Leyden has the ability to shut me up. You lack her charm. Monika is that tall brunette standing over there, next to Cecilia Riganti. She's the Duke's secretary and our worst nightmare when we screw up something or don't clean the shoes before entering the bank." He explained to me, showing me a very aristocratic woman with a stare that could freeze the sun.

"She looks impressive," I mumbled.

"Hey, I saw her first. Besides, you're not her type. She likes them tall, intelligent, good looking, with a doctor's degree, rich and funny."

"Exactly like Albert von Lintorff, Guntram," Goran clarified for me.

"Drop dead!" Michael shouted at him.

"You have just described him. Monika would never waste her time with a man like you Michael. She's a woman of taste."

"I prefer you mute."

"I also."

"Goran, do you know when Alexei Antonov would be back?" I decided to switch the topic because the last part wasn't sounding like playing any longer.

"Holgersen has been nasty to you?"

"No, no. He's fine. A bit bossy but he's polite. I was only wondering about him."

"Holgersen will stay with you for a month and then, we will see. He's good, unless you prefer some of my own team's men. I thought you would prefer someone younger, more of your age."

"He's all right, Goran. I think I should go now."

"Why? You will sit at the Duke's table, next to Carolina von Lintorff and Armin, the Strolch," Michael told me. "It's a good place to be. I have to suffer Ferdinand and his uptight wife just to be near Monika."

"Ten to one she will mop the floor with you, my friend," Goran said very seriously.

"We'll see. Make it twenty to one if you're so sure."

"Done."

Lunch was very good and Jean Jacques is an incredible cook. He wasn't bragging about his titles and stars. I've never eaten so well since I'm here and I'm going to miss him a lot when I'm gone. Carolina didn't pay much attention to me as she was busy speaking with Konrad and the Head of Foreign Investments. Armin, on the other hand was a funny guy, expansive as his father but with the air of superiority of someone who knows that he has been born in the midst of real money.

"We are going to be room mates very soon," Armin told me during the second dish.

"Excuse me?"

"The Duke wants that I move with him from September onwards. I'll be going to the University of Zurich to study Economics and work at the bank. It's boot camp time for me. Too many parties for his taste and he wants 'to straighten me out.'"

"That sounds bad for you," I sympathized with him.

"How's for you? Is he too stern? When is curfew time?"

"It's not that bad. He always has people around for diner, well two or three times per week and I'm excused after eating. On normal days, we dine at eight and stay in the library till eleven, he working or reading and I painting or studying. You'll eat very well here. The cook is great."

"When do you go out?"

"I don't. I have a heart condition and the doctor forbade me to be under stress. I stay at home studying for my finals in June or go to a teacher's study to paint. I'm mostly busy with my drawings. I have to start to work again because my bank account is starving."

"You don't get an allowance?"

"No, why would I get one?" I was shocked. "I'm glad for his support and hospitality."

"Don't you go out? Discos, bars, cinemas? Do you know anyone?"

"Only CEO's or bodyguards. No one else. I help Pater Bruno on Saturdays. As I said, I can't run around much," I said, hoping that he would drop the subject as I didn't want to give him a long lecture about former jealous mobster lovers, German secret societies' knights, high finance and loans. Obviously, the guy knew nothing about me and that was fine for me.

"Well, time to shake this house a bit," Armin shrugged. Sure, when your "uncle" is fighting in the early morning with his sword, knives or hand style with the other boys. And they can hurt each other a lot. Nothing

comparable to what I've seen at Constantin's.

"The Duke dislikes any interruptions to his normal schedule, Armin."

"Lord, this sounds like a real punishment for me. Do you know that I will have to cope with Dr. Dähler too?"

"He's quite funny."

"Funny? He's a bloody Navy captain with an elephant's sense of humour. Everybody knows he has a short temper. He fired a whole traders team for not understanding his orders and my uncle supported his decision. He's the one who plans all the strategy. Not even Marie Amélie is worth of this. Does she come here much?"

"This is the first time I see her," I replied and he groaned. It seems that uncle Konrad is not the younger generation's favourite. Armin really looked gloomy.

After lunch, there was a sort of commotion as all the children ran in stampede back to the garden for the big Egg Hunt. I believe the flowers will have to be replaced on Monday. I saw many rabbits also running free, chased by children. I tried to stay in a corner watching everything as I knew no one and so much people were making me very nervous.

"There you are. I got you a customer." Konrad found me and I was surprised that he was holding a young girl, looking very sad in his arms. "Meet Gretel Morgenthau, she couldn't catch a rabbit and they're all already taken. Could you draw one for her?"

"Yes, of course," I said and he placed the blonde girl next to me. "I need some paper and pencils."

"Ask the entertainers. They're well provided and perhaps you get some more clients. She doesn't speak English. Good luck," he told me and vanished while I was holding the hand of a small five or six year old, hoping that I would get her a rabbit.

I sat at one of the tables and started to draw for her with pencils. She was very happy with what she was getting and I told her to colour it with the crayons. Two minutes later, when she was busy with her own paper, another boy came and asked for a lion, roaring so I would understand what he wanted to tell me in German. In a way, those children reminded me of the ones I was looking after in Buenos Aires. They could be wearing clothes worth several hundred Francs but they were reacting exactly as the ones from the slum. They all were looking in awe at the pencil and seriously colouring the sketch once they got it. One of the babysitters took pity on me and translated all what they wanted. I was so happy to be with them that for a moment I forgot where I was, enjoying their laughter. I just find adorable how seriously they take things when they have a task like colouring and how important is for them something so simple for us.

I think some of the grown ups also approached the table to check that we weren't planning a massive bombing or something like that. Quiet children are always suspicious.

"Konrad," I heard Gertrud's voice loud and clearly saying in English, "do you think it is a good idea to let this person near the children? After all, his reputation precedes him and extends from Russia."

The blood froze in my veins and a deafening silence—all conversations dead—numbed my ears. I started to stand up to leave the table when Konrad's hand on my shoulder forcibly sat me back in my place. I don't know when he had stood there. He barked something in German to Ferdinand and she turned red with fury. I gulped and looked around trying to understand the meaning of his words through the people's faces. I saw a look of pure hatred in Elisabetta's eyes directed at her niece, not at me.

"Gertrud, your reputation also precedes you but I trust my true friends good breeding to overlook it." Konrad translated for me and I wanted to die right there because the last I wanted was a fight because of me. I think Elisabetta realised my awkward moment because she said very clearly, "Guntram, my youngest granddaughter wants a "rondine" but I don't know the word in English."

"A nightingale," I whispered

"Yes, that's right. A nightingale and a duck for her friend, Claudia zu Löwenstein too. Small children are insatiable. I'm afraid they won't let you alone till tea time." Fortunately, all talks resumed and I saw Ferdinand taking his wife apart. I tried to distract myself with the drawings and true to her word, I couldn't leave the table till the children were called for their tea.

I hoped to escape this time, but Friederich caught me at the stairs. He's also a good hunter. "The Duke asks that you rejoin him in the living room. You're very pale, have some hot tea and stay by the fire," he told-ordered in his polite, but "move your ass" voice.

In the living room, Konrad was standing like a king in the corner near the fireplace, Michael, Goran, Ferdinand and two other men were with him. I warily approached them because I had a direct order.

"Guntram, this is Adolf zu Löwenstein, Head of Legal Affairs and eldest son of the Fürst and Mr. Joachim Cohen." He introduced me and I greeted both men. They continued to speak in German while I drank the cup of tea a butler had placed in my hands before I could say a thing. At some point, the man and Goran excused themselves and left our merry group. Armin is going to have a very hard time here.

"Guntram, I would like to excuse my wife for her outburst this afternoon. She never meant anything and she is very ashamed of her words," Ferdinand said to me and I gaped.

"Please, there's nothing to be excused. A lady is never mistaken," I answered.

"Thank you," he said, looking at me very surprised.

"My daughter told my wife she wants a frame for her duck. She has even named it Johannes," Adolf zu Löwenstein interfered.

"I'm glad it wasn't called Konrad," Lintorff laughed.

"No, but I think one of the eagles was," Albert decided to join the party and I had to bite my lips to suffocate the giggles. I have never heard any of the men, not even Ivan Ivanovich or Boris Malchenko make fun of Constantin or that he would take it so sporty because Konrad laughed at his cousin's joke.

"Did you catch the two rabbits that went inside the house?" Ferdinand asked.

"I'm afraid they're still looking for them. We have to get them soon. Tomorrow's lunch depends on it." Konrad said jovially. "Three years ago, one of these monsters gnawed the legs of a XVII century weapons cabinet. We could never find the culprit but we found its debris scattered all over the house for weeks," he explained to me.

"My cousin has a ghost rabbit haunting his house: it's white and black, long ears and there's a bounty for his head," Albert chortled.

"A substantial reward," Konrad added very seriously but I noticed a mischievous light dangling from his eyes. "One of the hardest and most cunning adversaries I've ever met." The absurd of the situation; he, the mighty Hochmeister versus a poor defenceless rabbit, lost the battle, made me laugh full heartedly. When my eyes met again his, they were looking at me very kindly.

Chapter 19

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
June 21st

I never thought I would be again in London but here I am. Lintorff literally kicked me onto a plane three days ago. The only good thing was that Alexei was waiting for me in the airport and I got rid of Heindrik Holgersen for a few days. We took a flight late Sunday 20th night and arrived to his house very late. I was very tired but Monday morning, very early I was at the entrance of my old university to take the tests, with Alexei at my side, looking totally bored. I passed "Methodologies"—very dull thing—and tomorrow I have a presentation for Architectural History plus the oral examination.

Lintorff really meant to make me resume my studies.

Alexei asked me if I wanted to go around the city or visit a Museum and I refused. It's too much for me. Konrad's house is less than three hundred metres from Constantin's and I never knew it! Fine example of the Georgian Architecture, decorated in the style up to the last detail and all pieces are originals. I've seen outside pictures of this house in several internal papers from the school and being inside could be considered as a privilege for any Art History scholar. The music room is one of my favourite.

Being here forces me to consider many things over. In a way everything reminds me to that day but I also remember the good days when I was going to school, working or painting. I saw my former classmates and they were glad to see me and I was also. We had coffee, without Alexei's interference, spoke a bit about what I've been doing, officially recovering from a car accident and a heart attack, how things are in Zurich, if I still paint, how fantastic was my exhibition and almost the whole school was visiting it—I could have died right there of shame—the upcoming exhibition in Tate's and I never realised that I had been speaking with them for over four hours! Alexei was very kind as not to complain at all for being parked in a nearby table.

It's not the city what drives me crazy. Not at all. I nearly collapsed when the car parked in Kensington, but this afternoon I could enjoy the place. It's Constantin's memory what freaks me out. I have to end all this. I will not return to Russia after this year. I'm not their slave to do always what they want. I'm not a monkey either! This life they lead is absolutely nuts!

* * *

June 22nd

This morning I passed my second test and I'm very relieved. Konrad just called me to congratulate me for the results... in his own particular way: "I admit that I'm pleased with your grades. I was expecting that you would pass your tests with no less than flying colours." Is that the German Swiss version of the hooray? Reminds me of Droopy. I really don't want to hear him when he's upset.

"Anyway, I was thinking to grant your wish of a brief face to face with Repin. If you're still interested, he will visit you on the 24th at five o'clock."

I could have died right there from shock. I didn't know what to answer. I wanted to see Constantin but I feared to what all will take me, of what he would tell me, of his reactions and of my own mixed feelings for him.

"Guntram, would you be so kind as to give me an answer? I don't have the whole afternoon for you." I heard his voice over the phone and I gulped.

"I would like to see him. Thank you."

"In the music room, with one of my men present."

"Alone, please. It's very private what I have to tell him."

"All right, but Antonov will remain in the next room. The meeting will be stopped if he deems necessary to do so. Is that clear, Guntram?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Do I have your word that you will refrain yourself from any kind of inappropriate contact with this man under my roof?"

What was he thinking? That I would swallow a full bottle of heart pills and jump on Constantin, fucking with him in front of all his goons? This man can be a real pig! "I will do nothing that could stain your house's good name." Victorian enough for your taste, Konrad? Jane Austen's girls had more fun than I!

"We have an understanding then. You will return to Zurich on the 26th. You should visit some exhibitions now that you're in the city. Antonov will accompany you. Good-bye." I swear he hung up on me.

I have to speak with Constantin. Delaying this moment will only hurt him more and could be dangerous for him. I'm sure Lintorff is after something more than collecting his money and I fear that Constantin could make a wrong move if he rushes to get money from his ventures. He has to understand that all is over. For his own safety. For his children's.

* * *

June 24th, 2004
London

"Can you please leave us alone, Alexei Gregorevich? I will be fine," Guntram asked while he struggled with the lump in his throat. The blond Russian looked at him very seriously, unhappy with the request.

"If you do something that could upset him, I'll kill you right here and fuck with the consequences," he barked in Russian to Repin.

"Aliosha," he used his diminutive as he had done it many times in the past, "he's my angel and I swear that I would do nothing that could hurt him. You are another matter," the man answered in Russian too.

"This is far from over. I'll enjoy your death," Alexei spoke and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"You look much better than before, my angel. You have colours in your face again," Constantin said, his eyes once more lost in the beauty of his lover. 'How much I missed him! I didn't remember he was so gorgeous.'

"Hello, my friend," Guntram said very timidly, without knowing what else to tell. "I passed the tests at the University. I've recovered some of the lost time and will try to present more in December," he quickly added, looking at a spot in the intricate parquet design.

Constantin didn't seem to hear him because he was engulfed in his contemplation of Guntram, a Guntram he had not seen in over a year, the healthy boy, with rosy cheeks and shining eyes he had left in London, in another house, one summer day before leaving for the States, before his wife decided to destroy his most beautiful artwork. "Can I give you a hug, my angel?" he asked softly, knowing that Antonov would jump on him if he dared to touch Guntram without his permission.

"Yes, of course," Guntram said smiling shyly and opened his arms. Constantin didn't wait for anything else and clutched his love strongly, almost crushing him against his chest till he felt Guntram's small hands pushing him away delicately and going one or two steps backwards to put some distance between them. "Should we sit, my friend?"

"Yes, of course. You should not tire yourself," Constantin answered automatically.

"My health is much better nowadays. I can't run, but I can walk much more than before and sleep much better," Guntram said as he sat in one corner of the sofa for three bodies and Constantin did the same.

"You indeed look much better. I'm very glad. Does Lintorff treat you well?"

"Yes, he does. He's kind although stern with me. He does not believe in "spoiling me" as he tells," Guntram told with a nervous chuckle. "He nearly forced me to study for the school, paint again and be with people around. I'm much better with that. I can go to places now, not as before, but it's much better. He told me to start to work again as "he has no money, time or patience for lazy boys." The doctors changed my medications and I feel better, but I will have to take them for the rest of my life."

"Will you start to work again?" Constantin asked not liking the idea a bit.

"Yes, sort of. I'm studying with a new teacher; Rudolf Ostermann. He's very harsh but good for me. He doesn't let me loaf or experiment. He destroys all what is bad and most of the time he knows what I should do. I could learn a lot with him. He wants to be my manager instead of Mr. Robertson, but I don't want to leave him."

"Rudolf Ostermann is one of the most famous curators in Europe. To get a review from him is almost impossible and he has no taken a student in twenty years!"

"He has me and many ladies at his studio. He leaves my work alone most of the time now and from what

I do, he suggests changes or fix things. We get along; sort of. If Konrad allowed this meeting, perhaps he will let me send you part of my work. I have something for your children, Constantin. I made it during my first month in Zurich.”

“The children miss you a lot. They're always asking about you, especially Vania.”

“I also miss them a lot.”

“Guntram, I miss you more and more with each passing day.”

“I was afraid of this, Constantin,” Guntram sighed and took a deep breath before continuing, hating himself for the pain he was certain he was going to cause to his long time friend. “You are the person who selflessly did and helped me more than any other, more than my own father. You showed me a world that I never thought could exist. I loved you with all my heart but it's over since that day. These three months allowed me to think about us in peace. You are not the person I fell in love with and I'm not that boy you loved. I'm changed and I can't deny the change any longer. I don't want to return to you and after the year is over, I will continue with my life. All I want to say is that you should not choose or plan your strategy thinking that I will be your lover again.”

“Guntram, you know I love you and things will be very different when you come home...”

“No, they won't. I'm certain of that. I need to leave all behind and start again. Away from all of you. I need my freedom to create, to live. You will put me in another golden cage, exactly as before. I didn't care before because I was blinded by my love for you, but I will not take it any more. I'm free here, free to make my own mistakes and to explore my own limits. I will find a way to survive on my own. I did it before.”

“Angel, you're very wrong if you think you can walk away from Lintorff. Freedom? Try to cross that door on your own and you'll see what he'll do to you!” Constantin started to raise his voice, making Guntram cower a little against the armrest. “I love you and you're mine. I will not let you go away like this!”

“Constantin, I want that we remain as friends. We can't be lovers any longer! Don't expect to recover what is broken!” Guntram said with a firm voice. “You were my first true love, but it was the love of a child. That child died in that hospital. I've realised that all this time, you have tried to get him back and forced me to be that person again, but I can't and I don't want. I'm different now; I know how cruel you all can be. I'm sick and bitter because of it. I'm tired all the time and I refuse to be your pet because that's what you want from me.”

“You're seriously mistaken if you think that I will allow this!” Constantin growled his eyes glowing in a feral way, as he took Guntram by his biceps, making him hiss in pain. “You will return with me in February!”

“I will only stay with Lintorff so he has no excuses to go against you! I'm not a piece of furniture you all can move at will!”

“I created you from nothing. You're mine!”

“I will not come back. Don't plan your strategy thinking that I will be back. Do what you have to do to secure your position and protect your children, Constantin. I will not betray your trust and do all what is in my hands to fulfil my part of the deal.”

“I will recover what is mine, Guntram. Whether you like it or not.”

“Good-bye, my friend.” Guntram stood and walked toward the door. “I will send you the book for your children,” he finished the talk by opening it.

“This is far from over, boy,” Constantin hissed when he passed by his side, but Guntram kept silent, doing his best to control the tears veiling his eyes.

He looked at the entrance hall just to see the butler running to open the door for Constantin and a deep sorrow engulfed him. Ratko was standing there looking at him with a frown. “Good riddance, boy. Best you could have done, but he's far from finished. Talk with Goran; he likes you like his brother. That man is a ferocious beast.”

“I'm no better than him. I broke his heart. He truly loved me.”

“Measure a man by the size of his enemies, my father once told me. You have earned my respect, boy. Break ups are never easy, but we all survive them.”

Alexei entered the room almost running and checked Guntram's pulse. “Shit! It's very fast. To bed with you!”

“I'm fine Alexei, but I've hurt the kindest man I ever knew! I've tried to tell it hundred times but he never listened to me and now he's in pain!” Guntram said, battling the best as he could to keep his sobs under control while the tears were freely flowing. “He was always wonderful to me but I can't be with him any more! Every time I see him, I remember it! I've should have been stronger and get over it, and did try in Russia, but only when I was here I could start to forget! I'm so selfish!”

Alexei and Ratko were speechless but for different reasons. The first didn't want to say a thing that could render his charge more nervous and couldn't say something good about Repin. Pouring all his hatred of the man was

useless and would only hurt the child more. 'Let him keep a good memory of the monster. He doesn't need to hit his head against the wall for being such an idiot to believe his lies.' Ratko, on the other hand, was still pondering if he had heard right: Repin... kind? The boy was crazier than anyone thought and he was sincere because he was now crying openly while Alexei did his best to calm him down. He hated nervous breakdowns. On the other hand, Repin had behaved very civilly when normally he would have stabbed, strangled, shot or drown the boy leaving him. That's why he had run from the control room the minute he had heard the boy sending him to hell. He had enough for one day. Time to return to the kitchen, call Goran and ask what he wanted to do with the security tapes.

"Alexei, take him to his room and call the doctor. Pavicevic will kill us if he has another heart attack," he growled while the Russian gently coaxed Guntram to climb up the stairs.

* * *

Both men had been watching the recording in the late afternoon. When it finished, Konrad closed his laptop with a dry thump. "Well Ferdinand, what do you think?"

"We might have a problem. He told Repin that he will not get back his main incentive to pay us back."

"Please Ferdinand, if Repin returns the money or not, it will have nothing to do with Guntram. He knows what I can do to collect my debts."

"Yes, but he has the perfect excuse to refuse to pay. We didn't return the boy."

"I will return the boy, Ferdinand. Repin can come here or send someone and, after we had verified that the transfer has reached us, the boy will be free to leave. If Guntram does not move, it's his problem, not mine."

"Do you think he's going to be so stupid? Then what? Do we give the boy ten Francs for the bus?"

"We'll find out next February. In a way I would love that he does not pay me so I can end this threat for once and all. Guntram has burned down all his ships now."

"And you love it. Now the boy has to do what you want if he wants to survive Repin's wrath after February. The minute that child—yes child, because his reaction to all this proves me that he's still a child—leaves your office, the whole Russian Mafia will jump after his throat to return him to Repin for a good price. Does he really believe that he can walk away?"

"All this proves that Guntram is a good person. His reaction is better than I expected. Can you imagine for a second what would have Roger done if he would have been in his place?"

"Perfectly well. He gets money from you, returns to Repin and makes him fight with you after he gets to be the administrator of his children's fortune. You kill Repin and he gets rid of the little slugs in less than a year."

"No, he would keep the slugs alive squeezing all the money he can from them."

"Don't forget the part when he comes back and sells you all what he has from the Russians," Ferdinand smirked.

"No, that's too straightforward for him. He makes an alliance with the third in power so he annihilates Repin's successor and Olga Fedorovna -let's don't forget she's still the wife and gets fifty percent of the legal money-and gets all for himself," Konrad snickered.

"Your plan has a hole my friend. Knowing Roger as we do know, he would have done exactly what Guntram has done so he can play the victim later, forcing Repin to eliminate the wife by himself, if he ever wanted to have his angel back," Ferdinand laughed.

"You're absolutely right, Ferdinand. You see? Guntram looks so much like him that I'm starting to forget what a snake Roger is."

"A black mamba, my friend. But Guntram is nothing like him. Hear me well Konrad. This boy is not guilty of what his uncle did to you. Don't play with him. He's in mortal danger now."

"I know, he has proven to me that he's loyal and honest. Some degree of brains and strategic planning ahead would be also desirable, but we can't have everything," Konrad sighed. "He will be a good companion for me."

"Just be careful. He's a decent kid; don't hurt him."

"I'll be as gentle as I can. If not, Friederich will kill me. He has already adopted him as his own. Remind me to tell Antonov that he should keep his paws off the boy. He's mine only," Konrad finished the talk.

'Poor boy! From a jealous maniac possessive Russian psycho to a jealous possessive German control freak! And don't forget the deranged Serb who thinks that he's his little brother. Protons and electrons, it's like Oblomov said,' Ferdinand thought, but decided to keep it to himself.

"Ferdinand, the third week in July is free?"

“Ask Monika, I'm not your secretary!”

“If you are not nagging me about something, then it's free. I'll take a few days off and go to San Capistrano. I'll fly to Sylt in August. Nice is too sunny and hot for my taste.”

“If you can take Michael with you, then I will have the perfect month,” Ferdinand said with a grin.

“Didn't I tell you? Michael will go with you to China. Cheer up, Ferdinand, it's only two weeks with him. Perhaps you can start to appreciate each other.”

* * *

The tall blond Russian couldn't yet decide if he should be furious with the Duke or not. First, the man had ruined all progresses the youth had done in less than twenty minutes. Guntram had flown to London in business class, sporty enduring the crowded VIP's lounge in the airport, taken all his tests with excellent grades, spoken with his former classmates and considered seriously to visit Tate's on his own. Small feats that two months ago were unthinkable.

Nevertheless, the Duke decided to “reward” the boy with an interview with the greatest monster he had ever met, pushing him to his limits. 'Lintorff is responsible that Guntram is a mess now. If he falls sick, it's his fucking fault.'

Alexei didn't know what else to do to get Guntram out of the dark silence he had fallen into after crying almost the whole night after his break up with Repin. 'I simply don't understand him. He does not love him, but still likes him to the point of feeling bad because he 'broke his heart'. As if that wolf could have a heart!' Guntram was again refusing to eat, mute and depressed, only obeying orders because if it were left to him, he wouldn't move a single finger by himself.

He was so sick the morning after the fight that the doctor recommended to postpone the flight for two days. When Alexei finally parked in front of the castle, he felt ten years older and wanted to strangle his employer. Friederich had been shocked the moment he had seen the pale shadow standing miserably in the foyer; nothing comparable to the vibrant child he had seen good-bye just a week ago. The old man sent Guntram immediately to bed and stayed with him till he fell asleep.

Much to Alexei's satisfaction, Friederich had rebuked the Duke for his “incredible lack of vision, if we are to believe that you were acting in good faith.” He forbade him also to enter in the boy's room: “don't come to me now and tell that you regret your actions. Your duty was to protect him and the first thing you do is forcing him to face this monster! Did you even considered his health? No, you probably were looking for a way to weaken your enemy!”

Friederich soft voice could be heard through the thick walls when needed.

The Duke had tried to defend his position but the old man, Tutor, simply had ordered him to be quiet and reflect upon his actions “against a poor soul who never lifted a finger against you! You're a wolf circling the lambs and this is where I draw the line, boy! Guntram is the only person totally innocent in this game you've devised! Stay away from him!”

“Are you done, Elsässer? I'm taking him on July 12th to San Capistrano. The fresh air will do him good,” Konrad finished the discussion.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary.

July 1st

I'm feeling much better since the fever is gone. After I returned from London, I caught the flu in the middle of the summer. One morning, I woke up running a very high fever and had to remain in bed for five days per the doctor's orders. I was terribly tired and sad that I was partly glad to be put out of hassle.

I was very surprised yesterday morning when I found Konrad sitting on the couch in front of my bed. “How are you feeling?” he greeted me and I replied that I was much better than before.

“I'm glad. The flu can be very treacherous.” He checked my temperature by placing his hand on my forehead. “You're still warm. You were really sick last night. Wagemann considered seriously to take you to the hospital, but in the last minute, you reacted to the medications,” he told me affably.

“I don't remember it.”

"With 39° C, you should not remember much. You gave us quite a fright, Guntram."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. I was thinking to fly for a few days to Rome, to San Capistrano for holidays and take you with me. You would like the property. It's in the Lazio and harbours most of our Renaissance collection. You will love it."

I smiled at him tiredly and he sat on the bed, next to me. "It's very quiet, sunny and you could draw there in peace." He told me in a gentle voice. "You're also very stressed and a change of air might do you well."

"I broke up with Constantin," I confessed. "I was very nasty to him."

"Tell me one thing," he told me very seriously and I looked at him expectantly. "Did your talk take place in the music room?" I nodded. "All right. There's a set of porcelain figures over the mantelpiece. They're from Fulda; a gift from the Bishop to our family, well to a Guttenberg Sachsen married to a Griffin. Did they survive?"

"Of course! I didn't throw anything!" I shouted, shocked.

"Then you were not nasty to him. To make Repin understand something, you have to hit him very hard. I know it by experience," he said very kindly while he took my hand and lightly squeezed it.

"He still loves me and I kicked him out. He did everything he could for me and I repaid him with treason. I'm a very bad person."

"There's nothing like a protocol for breaking up, Guntram. One part always turns out grieved and the worst you can say is "let's be friends" because the relationship never truly ends and that person thinks they might have a chance. A clear break is the best you can do. After all, no one dies on the eve, as the Spanish say. And let's do not lie to each other, sex and friendship don't mix well together."

"But I don't want be the cause of further problems for Constantin!"

"This is very different from being friends. You don't want to feel responsible for his actions and why should you be? Do you really think he will calculate his next moves against me based on you? You're just an excuse to attack me. How we further continue our war is our sole concern."

"I'm afraid he takes unnecessary risks on my behalf."

"Repin is a worthy adversary Guntram. Concern yourself that he does something rushed to get you back against your wishes. Wouldn't be the first time he takes a lover against his will. Massaiev takes care of the selection process," he sighed, still holding my hand. "I can only offer you my protection, Guntram, but you will have to remain with me."

"I will return to Argentina after this year is finished," I said clearly and withdrew my hand from his. Did he look upset for a second?

"You can't. The minute you step a foot outside this house or away from my protection, Repin will kidnap you and do whatever he wants with you, exactly as before, when you were living in London. If you're nice to him, you will get a golden cage and perhaps some freedom but if you refuse him, he will make your life or other people you care about lives miserable."

"When I tried to kill myself he said he was going to kill father Patricio in return if I ever tried it again and I didn't want to risk to know if it was true," I told him.

"Guntram, he's a mobster, a criminal with no qualms when it comes to his own needs and desires. By definition, he disregards all rules. I was sincere when I offered you my protection and affection and I trust that you will return those feelings to me," Konrad said and I was speechless. He certainly knows how to make things clear.

"Konrad, I think we could be friends at some point. You're a good person and have helped me out of kindness, but, as you said, some things don't mix together well," I said very slowly, choosing the words with infinite care.

He laughed at my face. "Guntram, the fever was really affecting you!" he chuckled. "Some "things"—as you call them and I believe you're referring to sex—can't be rushed or forced. I'm not planning to exchange security for sex with you. I can obtain "that thing" at a much cheaper price and with more seasoned lovers, without jumping into a young man's bed. I only want your companionship and nothing else. The rest might come later or not."

"Why are you interested in me? I'm practically a dork."

He chuckled once more, louder. "Your propaganda ministry needs some restructuring, Guntram. Maybe I like you because you're "a dork". You're intelligent but very naïve, honest, polite, generous and for some unknown reason, you don't grate my nerves like ninety-five percent of the people I know do. I haven't shared my life with anyone for the past fifteen years because all the lovers I had, were thinking more of themselves than of me. How can you share something with someone if they're already naming the price? They all want something from me, but you

don't."

"I would also want something from you; protection from Constantin," I clarified, not liking a bit his reasoning.

"I know and I don't mind providing it. Your character is naturally selfless, peaceful and kind. The person who came here in February is not the boy who stands now in front of me."

"I'm very grateful to you, Konrad. You have been almost like a father to me." A big cold water bucket should do.

"Perhaps I'm practising with you," he giggled, unaffected by what it's supposed to be the greatest turn-off phrase in mankind's history. "I'm considering very seriously in having children in the near future. I'm forty-six and soon people will tell that I'm an old spinster. You can stay single till you're forty, then people start to suspect."

What? Not even two minutes ago he insinuated that we should have sex, well not really, come to think. He says he can get better elsewhere, thank you very much! I'm not such a dry old bone to the cast away! One look from me and Constantin was set in flames and now he wants to marry? Poor woman and children!

"Are you going to get married?" I asked, still shocked at his audacity. Shameless prick!

"No, I couldn't stand a wife. I don't like women outside the bedroom. I said I want children and nowadays is possible to have them without the inconvenience of a wife. Before too, but you had to spend the rest of your life explaining your reasons and you had to adopt your own son so he could inherit you."

"Konrad, I'm afraid you are not making any sense."

"I need a gentle person at my side to counterbalance my domineering ways, as someone told me once. Alone, I would be too much for any child. They need stability and love in their lives and they don't care if the love comes from someone not blood related to them. Look at Friederich and me. He's like a father to me and has coped with me for the past forty-two years. He will die in this house and I suspect that I will mourn him more than my own father. Friederich has always been there for me, without asking anything for himself. He wasn't very funny when it came to study or discipline, in fact, he was very stern, but he protected and loved me like no one else had done it before. I want that my children have the opportunity to share their lives with a generous person like I had. Their lives will not be easy, exactly as mine was and they will need someone who's there to show them the right way. My father's best present was to bring Friederich from Salzburg. I've seen you with the children on Easter Sunday and they like you and want to be with you. You could take care of my children and help me in their education."

When he finished his explanation I was in shock, convinced that the fever had returned. "Are you offering me a nanny position for some non-existent babies?"

He was silent for a long minute and then he just said: "Essentially, yes I am."

I just gaped like an idiot for a longer minute. "I know nothing about children," I stuttered.

"Most people have no idea and have them, but you will get qualified help from a nurse for their menial tasks."

"I know nothing about educating someone!"

"Don't you want to have children?"

"Yes, but my own ones; the normal way. Getting a nice woman to look after!"

"Life never turns out how we plan it, Guntram. Evaluate your real chances to get children on your own after one year. Let's assume that for some miracle you manage to avoid our Russian friends and escape to an X country. You would need to start all over again, without money, friends or any kind of support. Get a new name, fake papers, and a low pay job as you have no special education of any kind. You would have to move every six months to escape the hounds after you. Perhaps Repin would grow tired in a year or two. Perhaps not, because for him this is a very cheap entertainment. How long would you last with your heart condition? A year? Two years? What would you do? Paint portraits in the streets? That's the first place where Repin's people would look. What about medical care? You need it constantly and an insurance company to survive. The stress would kill you in less than a year. You've heard Dr. van Horn."

"You said you would help me to get away from Constantin."

"I said I would help you as long as you were a member and turning your back to us, by refusing to cooperate with your Hochmeister, is a serious crime bordering on treason. Of course, I would not punish you as I truly appreciate you and don't think that you could be a threat to us, but we would withdraw all our support. You will be on your own, Guntram."

I felt like dying. Do what he wanted or take my chances with Constantin and I knew he wouldn't let me go. It was his way or the grave.

"You could be happy taking care of the children. Once they go to school, you could pursue your artistic career. I have nothing against it and I believe that you show great promise. You can paint here all what you want as long as the children are taken care of and happy. I'm sure the minute you see the babies, you will love them as if they were your own. We could reach an understanding between us and be happy together as friends or companions." He bent his body over me and his right hand stroke my cheek in a tender gesture. I was frozen and slightly trembling under his caresses. His eyes took a warmer light and he smiled genuinely at me.

"You have some time to think about it. I would protect and cherish you as you deserve. You don't know how rare and precious you are for me. These past two months at your side made me realise that you're an excellent companion for me. For the first time in years, I long to come home every night, have dinner with you, speak with you or just have you around me while I work. I told you once that you reminded me very much to the man I loved, but it's not the case any more. Physically you two look the same, but you're very different to him and I prefer you a thousand times over him."

I was mute and could only gape at him while he gently stroked my face and hair. I wanted to close my eyes to enjoy the feeling because he had been the first person that I had allowed to show me such tenderness. He bent over me and kissed me tenderly on my forehead, letting his lips linger over it longer than necessary. I held my breath and he smiled again at me in a very kind way, erasing my shock at the crude way he had declared to me. No, this can't be a love declaration, but it's certainly not what your future employer tells you in a job interview. Imagine, I was making a job interview on Easter Sunday and no one told me! At that point I was a mess and I returned his smile. His own smile broadened and he touched playfully the tip of my nose (that's certainly not sexy!) He rose from my bed and left the room.

I don't know what to think about. I'm as clueless as you can be. He's certain that I couldn't live on my own for too long. This bloody myocardial hypertrophy ruined my life more than Olga Fedorovna. Constantin was determined to get me back no matter the costs. I don't want to think what could have happened to me if our meeting would have taken place in another place that wasn't Konrad's house. It would be a madman's run against Constantin's men. I would be dead in less than four months.

I don't want to die. I want to live and paint. I want to have a life once more. I want to be able to look for a job, have a house of my own and raise a family. What all men want.

Konrad is offering me to be a part of a family, not my own of course, but a family nevertheless, continuing with my career and life.

If I'm alive again is because of him. He took me away from Constantin, even if he had his own selfish reasons, protected me, forced me to overcome my fears, and gave me a reason to live again.

He was always kind to me for whatever reason he might have.

He was responsible for my family's death.

Why did my father choose him as my tutor? I know this is true as I saw the documents he signed for Konrad so he could adopt me. In the letter he left for me he only wrote that he had cancer in a terminal phase and the illness forced him to make that decision; that everything had been a move against Konrad to get rid of him and that he was a good Hochmeister; worthy of his position.

I don't know what to do.

* * *

"What on Earth were you doing with the boy for so long? Friederich nearly shouted with the Duke when he left Guntram's bedroom. "He's sick! Leave him alone, Konrad!"

"I just explained to him what was expected from him. Didn't you want me to be honest with the lad? Well, I was. He knows where he's standing and didn't refuse to contribute to the cause."

"What did you tell him?" Friederich couldn't believe his former pupil's audacity and shamelessness.

"The same I told you. I want him as a companion and perhaps lover and that he takes care of my children exactly as you did with me. He could be a good friend."

"Do you have any kind of feelings, Konrad?"

"Of course I do! But I'm not full of sentimentalism. In a way, he's perfect for me, has accepted our rules and soon will let go his grievances against me for that matter with his relatives. After all, he never met them and they never cared about him. Jérôme was very clever to keep him away from those rats."

"I don't believe you."

“Well, I had to clearly explain the consequences of leaving this house, as it was his original intention. He knows that without me, there's no possible life for him.”

“What if he rejects you? Will you be so heartless as to throw him to the hyenas?”

“It will not be necessary. He will love me. I'm certain of that. Like all orphans, his greatest desire is to have a family and I will provide one for him. Be glad Friederich, I'm settling down finally. You like him too.”

“My opinion about him has nothing to do with your behaviour, Konrad! Do you love him or is he one of your playthings?”

“I don't know, but I'm certain that I would like to spend the rest of my life in his company. He will be an excellent tutor for my children. So please, do not interfere and let me work my way with him. What do you prefer? He, happy and in love with me, looking after my children or depressed, terrified and counting the days till February 2005?”

“He does not deserve to be treated like one of your pawns.”

“I swear that I will always treat him with my highest consideration. He's going to be my Consort.”

The old man only huffed his impatience and turned around, leaving Konrad alone.

* * *

July 12th 2004 Rome
San Capistrano

The Duke had preferred to leave a brooding Friederich at home even if he was planning to stay in Rome for a whole week. His former tutor's behaviour was grating to his nerves. Guntram didn't need to have a dragon at his side! Konrad was sick of the old man finding excuses to keep the boy away from him, interrupting them every ten minutes if they were alone. 'Friederich should be glad, I'm being perfectly honourable with the boy, offering the chance to form a family, cleaning my own closet and settling down, exactly what he has nagged me to do for the past seven years. Could he be jealous of Guntram? No, it's not that, he looks after him much more than me. Why can't he believe that I want to have the child? He's everything I wanted and, in a way, perfect for me. We complement each other. Does he really believe that I want to take revenge on a sick creature? That's beneath me! Guntram will be good for my children, but that's not his main concern! Bloody Roger, still making my life miserable after fifteen years! The minute I find him I'll take my time to kill him.'

“Is it big?” Guntram dared to repeat his question, while sitting in the private jet. He had been almost bouncing with excitement, happy to leave Zürich for something that wasn't related to school. Nothing wrong could happen in Rome. Constantin had no interests in the city and the time he had been there, he had loved the museums and St. Peter's.

“Pardon me?”

“The castle where we're staying: San Capistrano.”

“Yes, I suppose so. It's a family residence. One of the oldest we have. It was built around the XIII century and was used as fortress, monastery and from the XVII century onwards, as private residence for the Molinari family and ours. We inherited it, so to speak around 1675, I don't remember exactly, as donation from the first Griffin's consort to our founder's heir. Theodobald von Lintorff and Francesco Molinari are buried there, in the chapel.”

“How so?”

“When my family left Mecklemburg after the Thirty Years War, they went to Rome to ask for the Pope's protection. They were one of the last resisting against the protestant heresy, but we lost. We were clever enough as to keep our gold safe in Venice and Rome and the Pope granted his protection to us because of our services during the Teutonic Order times. Theodobald moved to Venice and he started to rebuild our Order along with many more exiled noblemen, changing our strategy. We will never support again an earthly government as they can only betray us, only our mother the Church. Of course, the pope sent a young and clever bishop to oversee what the Lintorff were doing because all this trade and banking, most appropriate for Jewish than for true Christians, couldn't be too good. Francesco Molinari was one of his illegitimate children and I think he was a very clever man, immediately realising how fast the world was changing. While Theodobald was a ferocious warrior, he was a clever businessman and thought that we could obtain much more if we were supporting our own people and the newly born industry. We lent money to private people for much less than what the Fuggers or others were asking to Nation States. The money went

into overseas trade, transforming manufactures and science. Francesco devised the idea that we all should form a society to protect our interests from Protestants and Muslims at this time. Later we realised that the Protestants were not so bad and good for the business and we accepted to do business with them. Our main problem was those Masons trying to destroy everything we believed in.”

“Theodobald and Francesco got along and he was named consort in 1656. They lived together for more than twenty-six years and Theodobald asked to be buried next to him after his early death, at forty-two years old.”

“That means he was a diplomat at seventeen?” Guntram asked very shocked.

“You were made general with fifteen if you were of noble birth, Guntram. Girls were married from thirteen years onwards,” Konrad chuckled softly. “Anyway, I believe that controlling a German nobleman in disgrace -forced to work like a commoner- was not exactly a very sought after job. Being Ambassador to the Dux was a good position. Funny how history turns out, a second rate job, designed to keep a bastard busy and away from Rome, where he could have started to conspire against his father, was crucial to create a driving force in Modern Society. This young Italian established most of the rules we operate under and convinced my ancestor to start a new era. No one but us, remembers him, but I would dare say that we are who we are thanks to him. Industry was the future as we learned in the battlefield. We have to thank for that lesson to King Gustav Adolphus.”

“He and the Polish who threw out a Governor of the window, igniting the conflict,” Guntram said softly.

“They’re more famous than poor Francesco,” Konrad smiled. “Good managers are never famous, but they’re more important than good warriors, Guntram. You should never underestimate the power of the second line. A consort is an advisor, much more than momentary sexual adventure. He can yield a lot of power if the Griffin allows it. Some of them were very powerful, others preferred to step aside. Some of them were women and even participated in the meetings, some were lovers, others just advisers. My grandfather’s consort was British and he convinced many of his fellow citizens to join us. Nothing between them, ever. I met him once when I was twelve years old and he was very old, living in England. According to my father, extremely clever man. His grandchild, Stephen Saint Claude is my CEO in London.”

“Konrad, I still don’t understand why you need me.”

“Sometimes you don’t need to understand things, just act upon them, Guntram.”

“I have no education; I’m not intelligent enough and have no money that could support you.”

“I don’t need such things; I need others that you can provide. I need a personal companion, a Griffin’s consort, but not an adviser for the Order. You will never be a part of our meetings or decisions, Guntram. Learn that from now onwards. Many years ago I swore to never let my personal life interfere with my duties as *Hochmeister*. It was a very hard lesson for me and I will not forget it. You can look after my children, teach them to be good and honourable persons, but you will never decide upon our policies.”

“I never wanted to be an advisor to anyone. I can’t even advise myself! I haven’t accepted your offer so far. Frankly, I don’t believe that you could need me and I think that you’re after something more. Life taught me that so much sugar is bitter in the end.”

“I’m not a sweet man and my offer is honest. You fulfil the requirements well.”

“Are you aware that I will not be able to “support you in the bedroom”? That even your doctor forbade me to have sex?” Guntram said very cynically, irked at his speaker’s coldness in the subject.

“I only ask you that you respect, obey and are honest to me. Nothing else. The rest might come or not. It’s immaterial at this point,” Konrad answered very stiffly and then the idea came to his mind. “As I said, I can get “bedroom support” anywhere else. I travel a lot, Guntram,” he said carefully, gauging the boy’s reaction. Guntram’s involuntary suffocated gasp, along with his pupil’s contraction confirmed what he suspected. The boy was already considering his offer and was hurt by his sentence.

“Of course, my Duke, but wouldn’t you prefer to have something better at home? Something that could accommodate you?” Guntram retorted with a tense voice, unable to control his anger.

“No, a third person would be bad for the children. Our relationship must be sound in every aspect and fighting over some petty jealousies can’t be good. If I ever share my bed with someone it would be for keeps. There are very nice hotels for the other matters. Mixing things is never good.”

“Does he live in this century? Taking your affairs to hotels? Lord, how old fashioned can he be?” “Most people nowadays have relationships and do it at home. Some of the parents were allowing his children to bring their girlfriends home for the night,” Guntram chortled in disbelief.

“Yes, girlfriends, not fiancées. There’s a difference.”

“No one does things like that any longer.”

"How long do today's couples last? Half of the marriages dissolve after two years. This is because people don't consider things in advance."

"And going to a hotel is better? How so?"

"The one you're with understands immediately that you're not seriously taking her or him. If they want something more, they refuse to come with you."

"No one thinks on those lines, Konrad. You want to do it and you... just do it!"

"Really? Let me ask you a personal question. Where was your first time with Repin? Because he was your first one, right?"

It was Guntram's turn to blush deeply. "I don't see how this can be related to the subject," he answered nervously.

"Answer the question and allow me to further elaborate."

"Almost first time in my 19th birthday, in his flat in Buenos Aires and the real one in London, at Ilchester Place. I even saw you that day."

"Were you ever in a hotel with him?"

"Yes, once for holidays in Montecarlo. Two nights," Guntram laughed dryly.

"But you were an established couple?"

"We had been together for six months or so."

"Then, I'm perfectly right in my assumptions. He considered it as a serious game and kept you in the upfront for his men. If you would have been just an adventure, he would have put you in a nice flat in London or taken you to a hotel in Buenos Aires, just to try the merchandise," Konrad said with a broad smile. "How is it that you saw me in London? I don't remember seeing you."

Guntram was glad to change the subject and answered quickly. "I was going out with Massaiev and you were arriving to a meeting because of Argentina's default. You were coming out of your car and I stood in the garden as I didn't want you to see me."

"Why so?"

"You destroyed a full country just to make some money. You smuggled money out of it."

"This is what he told you? Incredible."

"Didn't you?"

"No, I lost money like many of us. We are recovering it with the many investments done in the midst of the crisis, but my main interest in the region is Brazil. We provided some solutions for the local oligarchies but nothing else. As usual, Repin was covering my name with mud."

"Do you know that the soup kitchen where I used to work got no money from the state for five months? We used to feed two hundred fifty children per day. How do you feel about it?"

"Don't blame me for your own government's lack of efficiency. You elected them, not I. Does this happen in our side?"

"You can't compare Europe with Latin America!"

"Yes, your elites are corrupt to an incredible point, ours are better controlled."

"We are poor! We don't have any kind of industry! You Europeans kept our people like that!"

"First, you're European and descend from a long line of rulers. Second, don't give me the usual romantic story of 'we are poor people, sitting on top of one of the richest natural resources country in the world, exploited by you, mean Europeans.' You all started by selling raw materials in the XIX century. What did you do with the profits? Industrial development? Infrastructure? Schools? Nothing. The Swedish also started by selling wood and timber in the XIX century but they reinvested their profits and now are a powerful industrial country. Norway's case is very similar. Japan was a Feudal country till the XIX century. Even Russia and China; both paid a horrible price to become what they're now. Where were the Latin American elites? In Paris."

Guntram was silent, his brain searching for arguments to refute the banker, but none came. "Still, it doesn't give you the right to go against people who never attacked you."

"Guntram, if they had a fraction of my power, be sure that they would be against me. I keep a defensive strategy but if I see an opportunity, I seize it. Repin was very glad to be invited to the party and I guess he wants to establish some operative bases in Argentina."

"You might be right, he was very good friends with Federico's mother, a Senator. I saw many well known people in his house," Guntram admitted slowly. "They all wanted money from him."

"That's the usual story for us. No one likes us for ourselves but for our check books, but that's a lesson I

refuse to accept or believe in.”

“Pater Bruno or Pater Patricio in Argentina gave everything they had for unknown people. I met many others like them. You should be more out, Konrad; most people are not like you say. They have nothing compared to you, but give their work, time or money freely and gladly. It's not the amount what matters, but how you do it.”

“Maybe that's a lesson I'm interested to learn,” Konrad said in a soft voice, gauging carefully the boy's reaction. A nervous smile played in the youth's lips and he blushed, returning all his attention to a “The Economist” issue over the mahogany table. 'He does not oppose my advances. I have chances to get him in my bed too.'

Chapter 20

St. Petersburg
July 15th 2004

It had taken almost a month for Constantin to recover his calm nature. He had spent the time visiting several of his most troublesome business associates and the trail of bodies was becoming too large to be ignored by the Russian Authorities. Oblomov's concern increased with each passing day as, even if a firm hand was good for the business, too much attention from the press was very counterproductive. The photo of an exploded car on every newspapers' front page was too much for the populace. After all, the man had been just a second line Morozov's figurehead, a well known and respected lawyer and even had a foundation for missing children!

It was time to speak with his friend.

'Perhaps giving Guntram to Lintorff was not such a good idea.'

The black Mercedes stopped in front of Constantin's mansion and the chauffeur opened the door for him, but Oblomov remained for a long time inside the car, still thinking on what he would tell to Constantin. By sheer luck he had stopped his friend from killing Olga. 'We still need the bitch and getting rid of her now, is too much! We'll get the police knocking on our door!' He had to send her to a house in Romania because Constantin was more than ready to do it with his own hands the minute he came back from London. He had nearly shot Massaiev for bringing a Macedonian boy—or was he from Albania?—with similar features to Guntram's, but not his quality, and “Do you think I can settle for less now?” Constantin roared after stabbing the boy without giving him a chance to show his skills. That had been a truly long night for everyone.

'It was a very bad idea to let the boy go. Even with a depression, he was keeping the boss happy. We have to find a way to recover him after the year is over, and I don't care if I have to drag him by the ear all the way from Switzerland. Why did he have to fight with Constantin? He was happily living in bliss before. Fucking woman!'

The butler led him to the library where his friend had been locked the whole morning, skipping lunch and working like a madman. The servant knocked the door fearfully, but there was no answer.

“Go away, Gregory Antonovich. I'll speak with Constantin Ivanovich,” Oblomov said and opened the door, entering in the room alone.

“It's all Lintorff's fault. He planned all this,” Constantin growled without raising his eyes from the papers.

“It's Olga and Morozov's fault, Constantin. Lintorff saw the opportunity to get his loan secured, that's all. He will give Guntram back after one year. In February. I'm confident we will have enough money to pay him.”

“It was a set up and I fell like a damn fool! Why was he giving me the opportunity to see my angel? Because he wanted to provoke me!”

“I don't deny he can be a real bastard, but Guntram was unhappy here since London. He told you several times he wanted to come back to Argentina. He cut his wrists open last December.”

“He was getting better! No, Lintorff stole him for himself!”

“Lintorff has no interest in the boy,” Ivan huffed.

“Yes, he has! More than you think!”

“That thing finished in 1989, he can't be still furious about that!”

“I spoke with Nicholas Lefèbre and he has an interesting story to tell.”

“Where? He's Malchenko's lawyer.”

“Don't play the idiot with me, Ivan Ivanovich. This man is our main intelligence source within the Order, better than Boris. Did you never wonder why?”

“He must know someone and forcing him to tell could ruin all. He's on our side.”

“I got a letter from one of his associates. He wanted to meet me in Brussels. I went there.”

“Why were you wasting your time?”

“Because the letter was signed by Jérôme de Lisle, Ivan.”

* * *

Brugges
July 9th, 2004

"Mr. Repin? My name is Michel Lacroix. I believe you received my letter."

"I was expecting someone else, Mr. Lacroix."

"I'm afraid Mr. de Lisle passed away in tragic circumstances in 1989, but I can speak on his behalf."

Constantin took a good look at the man standing in front of him in that small café in Brugges. He was over his sixties and had an unmistakable air of superiority, a good but conservative dark blue suit and his moves were elegant and controlled. "Sit down, please," he invited the stranger noticing that his features were exactly like Guntram's although his eyes were green and his hair grey, perhaps black when he had been young.

"Thank you. I apologise for the detour you had to take to meet me. One can never be sure when the Order is around."

"You seem to be in perfect health conditions, Mr. Lacroix."

"I feel much better than in the past, thank you."

"How can I be sure that you certainly know Jérôme de Lisle?"

"Perhaps I could satisfy your curiosity."

"Indeed. When was the last time Guntram saw his father? What was he doing?"

"Ten days before his death and the child was drawing, sitting on the floor. He never realised his father was going away. He didn't have the courage to tell him good-bye."

"Yes, that's right Mr. Lacroix," Constantin accepted the answer. "Is it safe to speak here?"

"If you like, we can walk to the park."

* * *

After walking for more than ten minutes, Lacroix stopped by a channel, laying his arms on the bridge parapet, letting the sound of the running water to muffle their conversation.

"I admit that you're the last person I ever expected to meet," Constantin said. "The resemblance is remarkable. Jérôme can be proud."

"I saw him in Paris, January 2003. He has certainly grown up."

"I always wondered why your friend took that decision."

"The child was the only thing that mattered to him, nothing else. Jérôme would have killed for him. When you're in troubles with your *Hochmeister*, death is the only solution to get him off your back, Mr. Repin."

"So you're the one who provides information to us?"

"Among others. I've been taking care of your taxes since 1995. You're a generous employer, thank you."

"My pleasure, but I will have to investigate more my employees in the future."

"We are not here to speak about working conditions, sir," the man suddenly changed into another person, a dangerous one, as Constantin had learned to identify over the years. "Why is Guntram living with Lintorff?"

"It wasn't my choice, sir. I'm in a very frail position in the moment and needed cash. Lintorff offered his support and after we had reached an agreement, he backed off and demanded to have the boy as collateral. He said something like the boy belonged to him as his father had given him as payment for his debts. Guntram went to him by his own will as Lintorff threatened to kill my children and expose me. He will return him in February, after I pay him back the money and I'm confident that I can do it."

"Lintorff will never give you Guntram back, Mr. Repin. He's more deranged than I thought."

"Why is that Mr. Lacroix? He knows better than killing him. He wouldn't dare to cross me because he's aware how important Guntram is to me," Constantin said, his fury starting to boil.

"Let me tell you an old story and perhaps you will understand the Griffin better. It starts slightly before Guntram was born, in 1982. It's not a very well known story, only a few were part of it and most witnesses are dead. When the Griffin succeeded the previous one, suddenly departed due to a heart attack, he was only twenty-two years old, very intelligent and showed great promise but he would have needed another ten years before his father could have named him *Hochmeister*. Everyone expected that he would be one year in power and out with the Lintorffs as Hermann von Lintorff was too old and sick to rule and Georg von Lintorff had not enough support or money. The Order was not as powerful as it's now, but it was large enough. To most associates' surprise, the boy did well during his first year and the profits were huge, unheard of, winning him support from the youngest members and many

Komturen, those are the local leaders of the chapters and deal with the less honourable people, and Lintorff got another term. Before him, being a banker was a secure and boring job. With Konrad von Lintorff everything was turned upside down from morning to evening,” Lacroix smirked at the memory.

“Lintorff is excellent in his job. He has also advised me many times.”

“You couldn't find someone better for this business. We believe that around November 1981, Lintorff started a clandestine love affair with one of his traders in Paris. How they met, we don't know, but it was discovered in June 1982.”

“Lintorff is promiscuous, we all know that.”

“I'm afraid that in this case, the relationship was very stable. Rocky, yes. Fighting like crazy, also true.”

“You seem to know the lady.”

“His name was Roger de Lisle, third son of the Vicomte de Marignac, Head of the Order in France.”

“It can't be! He's more into women than boys!”

“For seven years, Mr. Repin. Roger was five years older than him and quite a ladies man. How they got together is a mystery, but Lintorff was absolutely obsessed with him. Roger was a normal man, married with one small baby girl and only willing to make a good living. When he married with Maria Augusta zu Löwenstein, he stopped visiting clubs and discos and stayed at home. It was quite a change in him. Lintorff was obsessed with Roger, writing to him almost daily, surveillance on him and his family, offering money to support his father's own bank and companies. He was like a stalker. I believe Roger agreed just to ease the tension or perhaps he was curious or even liked Lintorff. He was a very good looking man, funny, whimsical, selfish, but with a very weak character. He could throw things and make a tantrum if he was upset, but it was never more than that. The youngest is always the most spoiled child.”

“When the Vicomte found out what his youngest son was up to, he was furious with him for dragging the family to a scandal or ruining his marriage, well above the family's expectations. Roger tried to break up with Lintorff, but it was useless as that man spoke with the Vicomte and offered him a seat in the new council. Roger was sent back to Lintorff's bed and he got several concessions, like becoming Division Head in the bank, but nothing else because Roger was not clever enough as to become more. He always needed someone to tell him what to do. A “magnificent animal,” according to Lintorff himself.”

“What would have been nothing more than whoring your son became much more as the Vicomte and his eldest son realised that they could use Roger to lead Lintorff while they and other associates stirred the waters. Roger learned his part well and kept Lintorff busy while many were sabotaging his projects in 1986, 1987 and 1988. That year, Lintorff was a walking corpse as he had no support from anyone but the Old Guard, Löwenstein, Wallenberg and his uncle Hermann von Lintorff. The *Summus Marescalus* at that time, Mladic Pavicevic, was on his side along with many of the *Komturen*, as he was dealing with their business very efficiently because the conspirators had no access to them.”

“In the past months, I heard the strange rumour than Guntram's father was the one who exposed the traitors in 1989, Mr Lacroix.”

“Mid of 1988 and he only put von Kleist on the right track to find out the culprits. Nothing else.”

“Why?”

“He had a different agenda than the conspirators'. He would have preferred that the whole Order would have fallen along with Lintorff. It's a corrupt and rotten organization.”

“Mr. Lacroix, the minute two men join forces, corruption starts,” Repin laughed.

“You're right, Mr. Repin, but coming back to our story. Lintorff exploded.”

“I can imagine.”

“NO, you don't. First, he wanted just to expel the traitors, but there were some leaks about the Order and the associates' heads started to roll. Some associates, all businessmen believed that a simple band of mercenaries could terminate Lintorff, but they were very wrong. He survived the attack on his estate at Günstrow, but many of his bodyguards died. He finished with his own hands the prisoners. I think that the legend of him gutting people alive comes from that night. He went directly for the Vicomte's head, killing him and his eldest son's family. He gave the orders, but you know that part.” The man told the story without moving a single inch from his face.

“Roger took his wife and daughter and escaped to South Africa. The remaining brother was a fugitive from the French Justice and the Order. Jérôme had been expecting this outcome for a long time, as he had realised that Lintorff had the upper hand. A few uptight businessmen were no match for the criminals who respected him as their leader. Small winnings for a year? That was nothing compared with all the clever ways he had devised for reinvesting

their dirty money. It was nothing at all! Lintorff offered them protection and provided expertise. He always controlled the military aspects of the Order and those are more important than anything. No matter how much the associates would have cried in the Council, he was there to stay. Hanging a banker from a bridge is easier than most people believe.”

“Don’t tell it to me,” Repin smirked.

“Jerôme had a child, Guntram, who was seven years old and always living abroad. He had been presented to the Order and became a member, but his father decided to keep him away from Europe in case they would fail. He hid the boy in Argentina, where you met him, and kept him with the minimal survival skills. Too much money could have spoiled his character or attracted unwanted attention toward his persona. Risking his own life, Jerôme offered his life and his boy’s to Lintorff in exchange for Roger’s full pardon.”

“Why would Lintorff want a seven year old? He dislikes children.”

“Because Guntram is the living image of Roger. Lintorff loved that man to the point of lunacy. His rejection and acts against him, killed him and turned him into the hatred consumed man he’s now. Unforgiving, ruthless, cold and totally lonesome. Jerôme had the only thing that Lintorff ever wanted and he used it to save his brother and child’s lives. Lintorff would have torn his son into pieces without a second thought, exactly as he had done with his cousins! Jerôme had to convince him that he should protect the child in order to get a reward in the future. Guntram was a very sweet boy, unable to hurt a fly or even throw a tantrum. He was always glad for every smile you would dedicate him. It took Lintorff less than a minute to accept the offer. Jerôme fulfilled his part, but kept the boy hidden, just in case Lintorff would have done something against him. They searched for him in Europe for many years, but they lost interest at some point.”

“And focused on Roger. There’s a bounty for his head. Do you know where is he?”

“No, but he has learned to hide over the years.”

“Guntram broke up with me,” Constantin said, lightening a cigarette. He needed one desperately, his mind in turmoil as he understood Guntram’s abnormal behaviour. His angel would have never broken up with him! Lintorff had been messing around with his head!

“Lintorff is already working on him. He must have convinced the boy that he was better. Why is Guntram so sick now?”

“He had an undetected heart condition. It worsened during an attack my wife planned on him. He was stabbed several times and suffered a heart attack in the operation table. We thought he was going to die.” Constantin said, deciding to be straightforward with his angel’s father-uncle. “I punished the culprits, but he will suffer the consequences all his life,” he finished, seeing how the man looked devastated and in pain. ‘The father, not the uncle’.

“Exactly as his mother. He inherited more than her sweet and loving temper. He’s an artist like her,” Lacroix mumbled, lost for a minute in his thoughts.

“A very good one,” Constantin added softly. “I love him and I swear to look after him.”

“Lintorff waited all these years to get his lover back. Do you think he will return Guntram to you?” Lacroix leaned on the bridge’s parapet, his gaze lost in the running water.

“Why did his father give up his own child? Couldn’t he run away like the other brother?”

“Roger’s daughter changed schools fourteen times, she never finished it. She’s a waitress in Recife, Brazil while her mother, once a promising medical doctor, sells clothes and cleans houses. They barely make a life. Roger had to leave them in order to save their lives. Jerôme never wanted that for his son. He preferred to leave him behind and give him the opportunity to become someone. I saw his exhibition in London and it was well received. He might have a future.”

“He’s very talented. His father’s sacrifice was worth it. How can I get him back?”

“There’s nothing you can do at the moment, Mr. Repin. The security around him is very tight and I fear the men have orders to kill him before allowing you to take him. My sources tell me that Pavicevic himself paid his dowry to the Order. You will only have one chance to get him out and it must be by his own will.”

“Mr. Lacroix, he broke up with me two weeks ago. He does not want to return to me; he’s still terrified because of his ordeal. I have done my best to create a safe environment for him, but he’s too shocked to listen to me. He was living with my children till Lintorff took him away.”

“In Paris he said that he loved you and was happy with you. Lintorff will not stop till he has him completely at his mercy. Guntram is everything he ever wanted to find in Roger, but without any of his character’s faults. I’m sure of it. He’s a deranged man. He swore to take the child as his Consort if he proved to be worth of the title and I’m sure he is. The only reason why Roger was never named Consort was that his family had a strong

influence over him and Lintorff didn't want to share his rule. I can help you to get Guntram back.”

* * *

“Can this be true?” a very shocked Oblomov asked when his friend finished his tale. The bottle on his side of the desk was almost empty and he was certain that Tatiana would never believe that he was drinking with Constantin.

“Every word. I even saw photos of Lintorff with the uncle and his letters. That explains his abnormal behaviour when he was here,” Constantin lighted a cigarette inside his house for the first time in his life. Oblomov poured himself another glass.

“He jumped on Guntram, that's for sure. Shit! Our dirty laundry is nothing compared with Lintorff's!”

“Exactly. I want my angel back. I swear I will gut Lintorff alive if he pollutes him with his filthy hands.” Constantin crushed the cigarette against the ashtray and lighted another one, his gaze lost in his children's portrait hanging on the opposite wall. It was Guntram's last piece and it was his best so far.

“Lintorff will not back off, I'm sure. He took a great risk to steal the boy from you. First, I thought he was being paranoid about his money, then that he wanted to punish you and finally wanted to gather some intelligence on you, but never this. That explains why he said that Guntram belonged to him!” Oblomov mumbled taking the boy's picture in a silver frame from the desk.

“According to the Order's rules, the boy is his since 1989 and he should treat him with courtesy. He's a hostage, exactly like when they were trading kings' children in the Middle Ages. The moment his father signed the documents—yes, they even have the forms for such trades, Ivan Ivanovich—provided the information about the traitors, admitted his crimes toward the organization and offered his life, the boy became Lintorff's responsibility and he could do whatever he wanted with him.” Constantin explained while removed the frame from Oblomov's hands.

“Fucking amazing.” Oblomov drank his sixth glass of bourbon since Constantin had started to speak. “The German is crazier than we ever thought.”

“He's not crazy. He knows exactly what he wants and will do whatever it takes to get it,” Constantin mumbled, his fury partly dissolved after the long talk. “He will not relinquish Guntram no matter if we pay or not. According to this Lacroix, he thinks that my angel is his property now. He was nearly driving his uncle mad to get him in bed and once he was in, he didn't let him out till the last day. And now he wants to make sausages out of him!”

“If I would have been burned like he was, the last person I would touch is Guntram! Is Lacroix the boy's father?”

“He didn't say it, but I'd bet my savings box that he is. Clever man. Faked his own death to escape the Order and crossed to our side and we never knew it! Boris tells me that this Lefèvre's buffet is excellent.”

“You need good logistics to do something like that, in front of the whole Order! This man has my respect boss!” Ivan chuckled, “but my mother-in-law will be a kindergarten teacher compared to him!”

“That's my aunt Ivan Ivanovich,” Constantin rebuked his friend with an acid tone. “De Lisle, Lacroix or the Easter Bunny, hid Guntram in plain sight, his money and continued to work for us. In Europe, no less! I'm impressed.”

“But he was sick! We read the autopsy reports!”

“And had four or five grams alcohol in his blood before he jumped. There was no way he could have walked toward the window! The police turned a blind eye. I always thought that the Serbs had made it look like a suicide. Lefèvre identified the body. With his salary in the bank and profits, he must have had hidden somewhere more than twenty million dollars at that time. More than enough as to buy a body and keep his child according to his status till he could return for him.”

“Let's be glad that Edmond Dantès is not against us, boss,” Oblomov shuddered, wondering how he was going to fix the mess they were in. 'Now Constantin had every reason in the world to fight to have his boy back and Lintorff had every reason to keep him. There's no way to stop war now, it's personal now. Shit! One good deed in my whole life and now we all are going to die.'

“But, is he on our side?” Constantin pondered, switching his computer on to resume his work. Lacroix was right, he should stay low and pay Lintorff back so he would ease his defences down. It was all a matter of planning and patience. He was a very patient man and now he had an incentive for Guntram to return to his side; the father he had always longed for.

Chapter 21

San Capistrano
July 13th

In the evening, Konrad was pleased with his day so far. He and Guntram had spent the morning and afternoon in Rome, visiting the Villa Giulia and the Etruscan Museum, having lunch there. As the mercury was not too high, they remained in the restaurant's terrace; he, reading some documents sent in the morning by his secretary and the boy, drawing the gardens or the villa in a small pad he had in his pocket, without interfering with his work.

Konrad decided to walk along the river before asking his bodyguard to wait for him with the car at the Castel Sant'Angelo. He enjoyed the boy's silent and amiable companionship, his acute questions and that he was really listening to his answers. They visited the fortress and at 8 o'clock both were back in San Capistrano, sitting in the grand living room, waiting for dinner.

Guntram was very tired, but glad to have been out for a full day and Lintorff could be funny when he was not stressed or playing the big bad banker with his associates. His sense of humour was very dark, but it suited him and he could take a joke on him much better than any other man he had known. Yesterday, when they had arrived with the limo from the airport and he was a bit sore after their talk in the plane—'admit it Guntram, he's a bone to big for you'—Konrad had murmured the minute he had seen the twenty something employees standing in line to receive him; "just a second Guntram, I have to make the Duke's parade. The serfs need to see their master" and he had giggled at his royal and serious tone.

"Be careful, your Grace when you throw the bone. If you get one in the eye, you will have to pay for it."

"I know. Bismark was a dangerous revolutionary with all those social laws," had been his answer, in his best "business meetings" voice, but a mischievous glint in his eyes. "The secret lies in throwing only one bone with all of the meat attached."

Guntram had had a very hard time trying to control his laughter in front of the Italian—"inheritance from my father"—butler. He had fallen in love with the incredible Art collection in the house and with two real Bronzino drawings in one of the corridors. He was not surprised that his bedroom was near the Duke's private stances and had a view over the countryside, in the middle of the Lazio area.

Konrad had promised him to take him to St. Peter's to see the Treasury and later the Trajan Market or the Capitol Hill where you could enjoy a breathtaking view of the city. To his surprise, Konrad could speak Italian very well and had been very kind to a young child, no more than five or six, who had asked him if he was a giant. "No, unfortunately not. Giants are five centimetres larger than I," he had told the boy mimicking his seriousness and the small one had been very happy with the answer.

'He's not the man I thought, really not. Those eyes of his are really something. He looks like a million dollars, but he takes it naturally. I could speak for hours with him and he doesn't make me feel as if he's cross examining me like Constantin used to do some times. Good, he doesn't like art so much.'

"Madame Barberini is here to visit his Grace," the butler announced with a mortified face, already fearing the more than probable outburst from his master. The Duke had behaved so well since he had arrived with his ward, not complaining at all over small things, or inspecting the house from roof to the cellar, or changing his mind every two minutes about something. He had preferred to stay in the living room, reading peacefully with the boy sitting next to him, not upset that his dinner was delayed till nine. 'Mr. Elsässer has a hard work'.

"I don't receive people tonight, Mario."

"The lady insists, Sire."

"Take her to the library," Konrad said with a face that forebode nothing good for his security staff, the butler and the woman.

"Immediately, Sire," the butler answered, turning to leave the room and nearly bumped into Stefania, dressed with a blue short cocktail dress.

"It's incredible Konrad, sitting in your living room in a wonderful evening. Hello, dear," she said, going over the butler, now fearing for his thirty-six years old job, two years before retirement.

"It's all right, Mario," Konrad dismissed him while Guntram stood from the comfortable sofa he was sharing with him, leaving his sketch pad aside. He couldn't help to smooth his shirt's wrinkles, like a child, when he

felt Stefania's x-ray eyes on him. He kept his eyes down, while Konrad took his time to stand up.

"Stefania, this is my ward, Guntram de Lisle. He's staying with me for the holidays," he said, his eyes fulminating her, but she didn't pay attention to him and offered her hand to the boy, seemingly frightened of her. He kissed it and bowed his head, but said nothing, too disturbed at her interruption and bewildered because of the palpable aura of fury emanating from Konrad.

"How do you, Mr. de Lisle? Are you French? I was under the impression that you were Russian," she said haughtily and Guntram blanched.

"My parents were French. I lived all my life in Argentina," he mumbled nervously, looking to Konrad for help or permission to escape.

"Guntram is the son of one of my best lawyers. He's studying Arts in Zürich."

"Really? People told me you were coming from St. Petersburg."

"I lived there for six months and in London too, Madam."

"Stefania, sit down. This is starting to look like a police interview, darling," Konrad said very dryly, not waiting for her to sit down to sit. "Something to drink?"

"No, I was hoping you would accompany me to "Sotto Voce". It's a new lounge bar and it's the best place in the city. You can't miss it if you're here, even if you keep closed your house in Villa Borghese and hide here."

"I'm in holidays, Stefania: looking for peace. Besides Guntram has a heart condition and needs to rest after spending the whole day in Rome." Konrad decided to cut off the upcoming argument as fast as he could.

"Please, don't worry about me Konrad. I don't do well in such places," Guntram cut his escape route earnestly.

"Guntram, there's no reason to go out. Mrs. Barberini can have dinner with us if she wants," he said after briefly considering that throwing her out, 'as the vixen certainly deserved for breaking into his house and spoiling his evening', was bad for his public image. He could feel the boy was already softening to him, immediately blushing every time he was fixing his eyes on him.

"Konrad, dear, you're still not fifty! Come on, we can have dinner downtown. They have a Spanish chef who worked under Adrià."

'Excellent, just excellent. *Chateaubriand* mousse and broccoli ice cream for dinner! We have *canetons* with that raisins sauce here!' Konrad opened his mouth to defend his dinner, but Guntram once again commented, "Sounds very nice. Is he not the one who was named Chef of the Year?"

"Exactly, that one," Stefania said with a triumphant smile.

"Do you want to come with us?" Konrad grunted.

"No, I can't eat it. The doctor forbid me to do it," Guntram said with an earnest smile at Konrad, melting his fury at the youth for being so stupid as to take that woman's side. 'Doesn't he realise that she's competition of the worst kind?'

"In that case, we could stay here," Konrad said quickly and Stefania made her best impersonation of big puppy eyes at Guntram.

"It would be a pity to waste a dress like the one Miss Barberini is wearing, Konrad. You should take her out."

'Is this boy an idiot? His uncle was a hundred times better for bending me to his will!' Konrad thought and he caught Guntram smiling at her encouragingly, in an attempt to ease her faked pained face. 'A kind hearted idiot. Well, someone has to pay for women like Stefania. I'll get her out before she does something to him. She obviously wants trouble.' "I have to change myself, Stefania."

"Do it, dear," she said while Konrad stormed out of the room.

The Duke saw Mario standing at the end of the corridor. "Do something! Get the boy out and don't leave him with the witch alone. You should know better which people are allowed to enter this house! This is a family residence!" he said with a low voice. "Elsässer will explain you your new duties."

"Yes, your Grace," the man answered very sheepishly.

In his bedroom, Konrad jerked the drawers open to vent his fury before he would do or say something he might regret later in front of Guntram. 'How can he be so dumb? Doesn't he realise that woman wants to have sex with me to get him out? That's it! He doesn't want anything with me and kicks me to her bed! Once more, they're toying with me! Exactly as Roger, with his doll face and lies! Fuck with the tie. I'll change the shirt and she should be glad!'

Still cursing softly in German, he laced the shoes and put on a Patek Philippe, and heard a soft knock on the door. He went like a thunderbolt to open it, finding Guntram at his doorstep, clutching a big sketchpad.

"Hello. Excuse me Konrad, but the butler told me you wanted me to show my drawings to Miss Stefania and I wondered if this would be acceptable."

"Yes, she won't understand it."

"Ah. You look great with a blue jacket," Guntram said distractedly. "I'll meet her downstairs. She's very beautiful. Do you think she would let me paint her?"

"She's a professional model."

"Yes, you're right. She must have hundreds of people wanting to do it. I should not bother her. I go now. I don't want to keep her waiting."

'No, not playing with me. Hopeless case of good will.' Konrad sighed. 'Did he say that I look great in blue?' Suddenly, his fury had disappeared.

* * *

"Go to bed early, Guntram. Don't stay up late drawing like you always do," Konrad barked the minute he entered the living room to fetch Stefania, ready for a forgettable night out. He nearly gasped when he saw Guntram sitting next to her, after showing her his drawings of some chickens he had seen in the farm near the castle, smiling softly at him, beautiful and unaware of the geyser he was sitting on. 'Like a child without malice. I will have to protect him from people like her.'

"Yes, Konrad. Good night, Madam," the boy replied, slightly bowing his head to Stefania, looking at him with clear scorn in her eyes. That little mouse couldn't compete with her. She had been so foolish to be concerned about a "young, very handsome and kind boy" living with Lintorff, as one of her special friends, a banker from Milan, had described him at her request.

"Perhaps we will see each other sometime," she said, extending her hand.

'Not if I have something to say in the matter.' Konrad thought before taking Stefania by the waist and steering her out of the room with long strides. 'Bloody nuisance of a woman. All of them good for nothing.'

* * *

The faint echoes of disco music were still banging onto his brain when Konrad sat back in his limousine, with Stefania at his side, chatting with herself because he couldn't care less what she was prattling about.

'Lounge bar? It was a despicable joint for vulgar people. TV artists! They give a bad name to the real ones!' the Duke thought, doing a supreme effort to keep a straight face and his mouth shut before losing his temper, exactly as he had been forced to do for the whole night in front of forty total strangers, all famous, with invitation only, considering than pouring bottles of champagne on top of a half nude *starlette* was the top of refinement. The place had been crowded with "celebrities reporters" (tattle tale of the worst kind) and Stefania had been more than glad to be photographed several times. His bodyguards, Ricardo and Piero had spent the whole night keeping the paparazzi away from him; therefore he had to look for a table in a secluded corner bearing with Stefania's pouting and kissing good-bye his dinner.

The cognac was Hennessy when he had clearly asked for a Louis XIII, Rémy Martin... and a heretic had dared to put ice on it! His people knew he only drank that brand. How right was his father to tell him: "Choose one drink and stick to it. With any luck, the waiters will learn it." What kind of place was this that they didn't have the Rémy Martin XO?

'The incompetents forgot the funny umbrella,' was his unspoken remark and left the glass on the table, after one sip, refusing to drink it.

He had enough of all this.

Time to put an end. He had much better at home. Ten minutes talking with Guntram or watching him draw were more entertaining than two hours of idiotic prattle from a TV soap operas producer.

"Stefania, darling, allow me to drive you home," Konrad interrupted her vivid talk with another woman.

"We just arrived darling and ..."

"Please." One word sentences were his best.

She pouted again and made a little girl's face, something he hated, but one of his looks convinced her that Lintorff had enough for one night and she should better keep her low profile if she wanted to fix what had been broken that night in Zürich. After all, the "*stronzo*" had not called her at all. She was not going to throw ten years of

work to the trash, especially knowing how touchy Lintorff was.

"Of course, dear."

She was doing her best to distract him by telling him that funny story about the D&G fashion show in Milan, but he kept ignoring her, brooding and fuming as usual. 'This man is impossible!'

"Do you want to come in for a drink?" she suggested when the limo parked in front of her elegant apartment building.

'I want to go to bed, but perhaps some fun would be good to ease the tensions. If Guntram bites his lips once more or smiles at me, I'm going to jump on top of him in the middle of the living room! Those shy smiles of him are darn sexy! And his eyes are something incredible when he looks at you, caressingly and...'

"Konrad, do you want to come upstairs?" Stefania repeated the question, sounding irked and kicking him out of his limbo of barely contained lust for the boy. 'Roger was an ugly toad compared to this boy. Fuck being friends! I need him in my bed!'

"Do you have some red wine, Stefania?"

"Yes, of course," she answered taken aback by the strange question. "Your cousin Albert sent me four boxes from his vineyards."

'Bloody Albert! Again trying to get rid of his rubbish! I swear he does it on purpose!' He opened his door by himself and got out of the car while the chauffeur had been stoically standing for more than ten minutes at Stefania's side.

Once inside the elevator to her penthouse, she caressed his cheek and he smiled as it was mandatory to answer her advances in some way. She opened her door, realising that Konrad was in one of his "sombre nights", and decided to go for the wine and glasses, her stilettos resounding in the corridor. "Make yourself at home, dear."

'Home as go to bed or home as get the slippers and sit in the couch? Must be the second, she went for a bottle of that rats' poison.' Konrad walked with certainty to the modernly decorated living room, the one "with the pseudo Warhol portrait" as he used to call it. Some minutes later, she rejoined him with a bottle and two glasses. He took it and started to expertly removing the lid to the "*Principessa di Battistini- 1997- Mention Spéciale*" bottle. 'Aunt Elisabetta should kill Albert for using her name for this. It proves that he's her favourite child,' he thought before serving it without tasting it 'no need to, it's well known crap for the snobs.'

"Should we make a toast?" she asked seductively.

"To your beauty and talent, Stefania," he answered automatically, doing his best to drink it 'without making faces Konrad, it's unbecoming,' as Friederich used to tell him when there were Brussels sprouts on the menu, every fifteen days, like clockwork. He left his half emptied glass on top of the crystal table before grabbing Stefania again.

"You didn't finish your glass."

"It needs to breath some more," he mumbled as he kissed her shoulder carelessly tearing the spaghetti strap of her expensive designer's dress. 'With any luck, it will kill all your cockroaches'

His hand went for her back zipper and in less than a second he had it down, pulling from it to get rid of the dress.

"We are a naughty boy tonight, are we not?" she teased him partly pushing him away but he didn't move and inch or removed his hands from her. "You could wait till we reach the bedroom."

"Fine, go ahead."

'German noblemen are real pigs and this one is the greatest of them all!' she thought before going up the stairs with him in tandem. She had not even closed the door, when he jumped on her and finished to remove her dress, throwing it to the floor, almost stepping on a real Versace. Instead of admiring her La Perla lace underwear, he unhooked the hooks fast and started to fondle with her breasts as all contribution to the romantic part, without removing his clothes. She jerked his tailored jacket so he would understand—as if that were possible—that he also had to make the supreme effort to disrobe himself, without help, if he wanted to get something from her.

'She's right, it's uncomfortable with shoes and clothes on,' he thought when he felt the strong pulls in his jacket. With quick and precise movements he removed the jacket, shirt, trousers and underwear before rejoining her on the bed, only wearing her thong and silk stockings. He placed his body on top of hers and kissed her on her neck before starting to suck one of her breasts.

Stefania couldn't help to think 'what a waste, such body for such a boring man! That's all he can make, three minutes sucking, then he penetrates you, another five minutes and it's over. He snores or leaves. Better I start to moan so he finishes sooner.'

"Turn around, Stefania," Konrad asked her. 'If she starts to moan so soon, it means that she wants something big from me. She should earn it.'

"Konrad, baby, you know I don't like it. It's painful," she half pleaded.

"Steffi, you know I like it a lot when you do it. You're incredible."

"But, this is not romantic."

"Please, darling. You would make me very happy," he pleaded in a mocking way, determined to leave if she wasn't complying with his request.

She sighed and he took it as her acceptance, turning her around, almost hitting her head against the headboard in his haste to place her on her fours, just to remember he had forgotten to put a condom on. 'The last I need is a bastard from her or catching a STD,' and he went to get one of his own stash because he would have never taken one from hers: 'oldest trick in whores' history; get pregnant from the rich man.'

Only with a brief preparation, Konrad sodomized her without giving her time to get used to him. He mounted her at a fast pace, grabbing one of her breasts to stabilize her under his thrusts. When he reached his climax, he emptied within her with a groan in her ears, releasing his hold over her and lying spent by her side.

* * *

One hour later, after slumbering holding her body—for appearances sake as he needed a second or even a third round to be completely relaxed when he returned home—Konrad decided that it was time to resume his activities with Stefania. The only good thing about her was that she was always willing to do what he wanted, although later the tab would become bigger.

Once more, her faked moans convinced him that either she wanted something big or she was truly trying to make up from the latest date. 'Always take care of your customers, used to say my father.'

Round number three was in the shower as it was already late and he wanted to be home before 3 a.m. as he planned to take Guntram to visit St. Peter's treasury museum. He climaxed again thinking that 'this should be sufficient till we reach Zurich. There I could visit Henriette or ask Charles for a drink. He's always willing to have some fun.' He showered and kissed her with a "you're truly amazing, Stefania."

He redressed himself quickly while she combed her dark raven hair. 'Time to clear the agenda, she's too dangerous to have around Guntram, What if she makes him nervous? He had already the jealous wife experience to have now the scorned mistress one.'

"Stefania, dear, I've been thinking hard in what I should give you for your birthday."

"It's not due till December, darling," she laughed

"It's an important number. You don't turn forty every year," he said jovially, expecting her more than probably explosion.

"It's thirty-six, darling," she corrected him acidly

"Yes, I'm sorry. How dumb of me! Anyway, I was thinking to give you this flat for it. I would need some time to prepare the papers. Why don't you ask your landlord to contact my secretary, Monika and she will take care of all the details?"

"That's most wonderful of you!" she cried excitedly. "I don't know what to say!"

"You deserve it, Stefania. You have been a good friend for the past ten years. I want that you have some security in your life. This man was speaking about a new TV show for you, something much better than cable TV, something in the RAI, if I understood correctly."

"It's a fashion show on Saturdays at 2 p.m., but he needs more financing."

"How much?"

"I would say around €700,000 for two years. It's a lot of money and the network is not sure about it."

"I will pay them for you. National TV could be your big break."

"Konrad, this is too much. We don't know if we can pay you back, we still don't have enough sponsors."

"As a tribute to your talent. Monika will also take care of it."

She jumped to his neck and kissed him. 'Well, the first real kiss I get from her. Fair enough for a farewell.' When she was telling him how wonderful he was, he only said. "I'm afraid that we part ways tonight, Stefania. You have made me very happy."

"Why?" she shouted.

"I have decided to settle down with someone. To have children even. I think the fairest thing to do is to

let you go before I take more of your time,” he said very seriously.

“When?” she started to weep. “Who? I gave you the best years of my life! I loved you! And you leave me like this?”

‘You got a generous lay off, don’t complain woman.’ “Stefania, I’m almost forty-six years old. It’s time to settle down and be a responsible man. I have found someone who could provide love and stability to my life. I wish you all the best and should you ever need something, call Monika. There is no reason for us to stop being friends.”

“*Stronzo! Sciagurato! Figlio di puttana!* You’re fucking with that little Russian slut! Pervert!”

“Not really.”

Her howl put him on guard and he was able to dodge the porcelain box hurled in his direction with incredibly good aim. The box crashed against the wall and Konrad knew that it was the time to leave the woman shouting atrocities at him. ‘Good Lord, what manners! I doubt Guntram could be able of such a display even if he were furious with me.’

Konrad left the building to find his long-time bodyguard, Ricardo, leaning against the black car, smoking a cigarette. The man jumped to attention the minute he saw his boss leaving the building as he were chased by the devil (‘or a cunning witch’) and opened the door for him.

“And people wonder why I never married before,” Konrad snorted, before entering inside the car. “Tell Monika to call her manager and arrange the details. She’s too upset to remember it.”

Ricardo closed the door with great satisfaction. Miss Barberini was officially out after lasting ten years, four months and three days. A world record.

Perhaps the rumours about that young French becoming the Duke’s new lover were true. It wouldn’t be the first time his employer had fun with a man. ‘Hope this time it lasts, seems to be a good boy, nothing like the vipers he beds. Ratko says he’s nice.’ Ricardo thought as he sat in the passenger’s side indicating with his head that they should drive back home.

* * *

Still upset for getting a powder box flung at his head and accused of being a pervert—why could no one believe that his love for Guntram was pure and selfless?—Konrad needed to calm down or someone would suffer his bad temper. Watching the boy sleep had always that strange therapeutic effect on him. He entered in his room on tiptoes, noticing that the window was open and his pencils were scattered over the cover. ‘One of these days, he’s going to stab himself with one of those things.’ Konrad moved his head disapprovingly while he removed the items and left them over the bedside table.

‘He’s so beautiful that I can’t take away my eyes from him. When did I fall in love? Was it when he smiled at me for the first time? No. When he let me touch his face and looked at me with his big eyes? Not that time. I was already mad about him. The times we were speaking together or walking in the forest? When he looked at everything in awe and showed me beauty even in a dirty pond? No, I loved him since the moment he sat next to Goran in the car, looking terrified but doing his best to conceal his fear and face me.’

Konrad crossed the room as silently as he could, closing the open window. ‘It’s cold for him. A draft could be dangerous.’ He approached the bed and covered Guntram better, taking a good look at him, soundly asleep. ‘Roger told me that his father used to call him his “little prince” and how right he was!’

‘No, I can’t be friends with Guntram. He has to be my consort.’

* * *

The glaring sun woke Konrad up. Cursing at the late hour, he sat on his bed and rang for that incompetent of a butler. ‘I clearly told him at eight and it’s 11:54! Idiot!’

The butler knocked at the door very timidly, knowing beforehand that his employer was very upset. His short temper was legendary and yesterday he had broken up with the model he favoured so much. The heads would start to roll in any minute. He had kept his temper in check since he had arrived with the young French and behaved well toward his staff.

“I said at eight, Mario!” Konrad started his scold but a soft knocking stopped it. “Come in!”

“Good morning, Konrad,” Guntram greeted him, carrying a dish covered with a napkin in his right hand. “Your bodyguard told me you returned very late and I asked Mario to let you sleep. There’s no need to go today to the

Vatican. We can do it some other day,” he said simply.

“In that case...” Konrad answered, settling for throwing a dirty glance at his butler, who ran away in haste to bring a cup of coffee for his master.

“Come Guntram, sit with me. I apologise for the inconvenience,” he said, moving to one side of the bed to leave some free room, but the boy sat in the couch at his right side. ‘Not what I was expecting. For once, he’s in my room, he’s dressed and sitting on a darned couch.’

“Were you out?” Konrad asked, noticing that the boy was wearing simple beige trousers and a striped shirt with normal shoes.

“Yes, since 7 a.m. In the farm. My models from yesterday are today’s lunch.” he replied, smiling while the butler placed a small silver tray with a cup of black coffee on top of Konrad’s bedside table. “It will be pretty soon. Maria Domenica promised to bake a chicken pie for me.”

“Did she really say “chicken pie”?” Konrad asked incredulous.

“*Pasticcino di pollo*. Is it chicken pie, right?”

“Yes, it is but she doesn’t cook since 1995! My house keeper is retired!” Konrad was irked to say the minimum. The woman knew he loved it since he was a child, but since her retirement, she refused to cook for him, only taking care of the house management.

“She told me yesterday night she was going to make one for me. And she has given me this too. It’s like small apple cakes. They’re really good and thought that I could save one for you.” Guntram answered removing the napkin to show two perfectly golden small apple pastries, covered with honey.

“I’m asking her to bake them since 1994. I adored them when I was a child, but she retired and stopped making them. She keeps the recipe under seven locks!” Konrad said with a mixture of resentment, jealousy and admiration. “Since when do you know Maria?”

“From yesterday night. I didn’t want to eat alone and had dinner with your butler and her, in the kitchen. He’s also a very kind man. She has relatives in Argentina and we were speaking long about it.”

“And you got the cakes...”

“Plus the recipe. She says that Jean Jacques should bake them for me. Do you want to try it?” Guntram came closer to the bed offering the dish to Konrad.

“Exactly as I remember them,” he said after the first bite. “How did you manage it? She refuses to do it for me!”

“Did you try with “please”?”

‘Coming to think no, but it’s her job,’ Konrad thought, but said nothing, too busy finishing the pastry.

“You can have the other too, Konrad. Perhaps I could convince her to make more,” Guntram chortled very amused.

“Do it and I’ll name you my heir,” Konrad said seriously and Guntram laughed, shaking his head negatively. “Come, sit here. I’m always trespassing in your bedroom.” Konrad tried for a second time and the boy sat on the other side of his bed.

“How was your evening?” he asked casually.

‘He’s jealous!’ Konrad realised joyfully but his happiness was a short lived one: “Is it as luxurious as *Oggi* says? Were there celebrities? Jennifer Anniston was coming to the opening this week!” when the youth asked him at full speed.

“Who?” Konrad grunted, crossed that Guntram was more interested in the place than what he had been doing.

“You can not know her. The girl from “Friends”! Rachel!” Guntram snorted.

“Does she work in a bank?”

“No! She’s an actress. Very famous!”

“If she was there, I missed her. I was with Stefania.” Konrad put some emphasis on the last word of the sentence.

“Yes, I know. She’s a very beautiful woman. I remember her now. Was she not the one from this cosmetics campaign; the one with the Greek goddess or was it Helena of Troy?”

“Helena,” Konrad grunted, displeased at the turn the conversation was taking.

“Very beautiful indeed,” Guntram said lost in his thoughts. “If I were you, I would be very happy that a woman like her calls at my door,” he finished, his gaze fixed in a brocade’s detail.

Konrad couldn’t help it. He had enough. He bent his body over the unsuspecting boy and firmly gripped

his chin and kissed him full on the lips, capturing his soft lips to devour them, enjoying the gasp and surprise from Guntram.

Guntram was petrified when he felt the man kissing him with so much ardour, like Constantin had never done before. It was like being kissed by a volcano and without realising it he put his arms around the powerful neck and shoulders offering himself to Konrad, letting him taste him fully.

Konrad immediately put his arms around the boy's waist pulling him with a light jerk on top of his body, revelling on how the boy kissed him back without restraints or calculations, naturally responding to his caresses, surrendering every wall to him and letting him take all what he wanted. His hands roamed through his back, briefly resting on his bottom and the need to feel Guntram under him was overpowering. With infinite care he turned so the child would be under him, without interrupting his kisses, savouring the mixture of tenderness, youthful eagerness and surrender he was receiving.

Guntram slightly spread his legs to let the man positioning himself better, feeling an unknown electricity running through his spine. "God, he's a hundred times better than Constantin," his mind acknowledged and the consequent "WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?" came as a natural result with lightening speed.

He pushed away the surprised man on top of him. Konrad grunted in disbelief that what was one of the best kisses he had enjoyed in years had been cut off so abruptly. He saw Guntram jumping out of the bed, standing by the door looking at him with horror, shock and embarrassment. The boy opened the door and ran away to his private living room and to corridor.

"Damn! I almost had him!" Konrad cursed.

'Time to get dressed and catch my frightened kitten. This jump cannot be good for him. There's no way that I will let him escape now.'

* * *

'I'm a mess. What the hell was I thinking? Clearly I was not thinking! All this is the result of not having sex for a year! I was kissing that man! He killed my family! I have to get laid by someone and soon!'

'Sure, brother. With the seventy year old Austrian butler, the Russian bodyguard with a nice guy for a boyfriend, the very well married maids, or the seventy-five year old Art teacher with more thorns than a hedgehog? So, the winner is... the German! Who, by the way, kisses like hell! Imagine what he can do with the rest!'

'Shut up! I'm not going to fuck him! Even if he were the last man in Earth! Besides the doctor forbid it.'

'Your doctor has patients like the Löwenstein Dinosaur! Can you imagine one of them in bed with the German? That man really knows how to kiss! Unlike Constantin! A full ride must be incredible and you like him since you saw him in London!'

'Never! I just thought he was handsome, with classical features!'

'Nothing like a handsome guy to get it good, brother!'

'He's a murderer!'

'Won't be your first! Let me remind you... Constantin?'

'I left him!'

'You left him because you had enough of him! Fool him but don't fool yourself! You were only putting a nice face when you were in bed with him. You liked that he was drooling over you... Like a pro, Guntram.'

'Shut up!'

'No, I'm your conscience and I do love my job! Think over it brother; the German is good looking and some real good sex will be good for you!'

'Shut up!'

A soft knock on his door cut abruptly his internal monologue and he feared that it was HIM. He was petrified, still dazed for the kiss he had received, 'and returned, brother, quite hotly', sitting in his bed. A second knock forced his good breeding to take over his frayed nerves and he stood up to answer it.

"The Duke would like to know if you're having lunch with him or not, sir," Mario, the butler asked very politely.

'Of course I don't want to but do I have an option? He will charge in after lunch!' "Please tell his Grace that I'll rejoin him in five minutes. I still have to take my pills."

"Certainly, sir. You don't look well. Should I ask a tea for you?"

"No, no, it's all right. It's just a headache."

"Very well, sir." The man left the room and Guntram felt once more lost in the room. He went to his bathroom to take his pills and wash his face with cold water. He took a tie from his closet and a jacket too with the secret hope that those symbols would establish that he was not in the mood to play with Konrad. 'He's clever, he should understand the hint.'

* * *

They had lunch in complete silence although Konrad tried to initiate a conversation on art but Guntram barely answered with some barely articulated monosyllables, bordering on grunts. 'Is he not hot? Friederich told me he hates ties; only wears when he has no other option. The first thing he does in the morning is to get rid of it the minute I'm out. We're in the middle of the summer! The last thing I need is to run to the E.R. because he had a collapse. He's already looking very flushed.'

"Guntram, do you feel all right?"

"Yes, Sire. Thank you."

'That's it! Sire and tie. Back to square one. I'll speak with him before he hides under his bed and not in mine where he should be. Roger was driving me mad with his demands and evasive, but his mood swings are more impressive. Half an hour ago he was kissing me, and really enjoying it and now, he looks like a frightened mouse again.'

"Would you like to go this afternoon to the Vatican? The treasury is open till late."

"Please accept my excuses, but I have a headache. Some other time, perhaps."

'Please accept my excuses? No, this will not work with me, young rascal.' "It must be the heat in this house, Guntram. Too much excitement for you in the morning and noon," Konrad said and noticed how the boy blushed at his words. "The best would be to remain in a quiet and safe place for you, like St. Peter's. I'll take you for a ride." He enjoyed the last words as the boy gulped at the double meaning phrase.

Guntram could only nod his acceptance.

* * *

Konrad sat on the pew a few metres away from where Guntram was standing, first looking enraptured to Michelangelo's Pietà and now sketching it at an incredible speed. 'No wonder Friederich complains that he hides papers and pencils in his pockets. He had the full set! With sharpener included! Wait till he sees the pencil shavings you carry in your pocket! If this helps him to calm down and be more reasonable, then I will tell him to let the boy alone. Since we arrived at 2:00 he has only spoken three words to me.'

He noticed a priest well over his seventies, not tall, approaching Guntram and standing next to him as he inspected the way the boy was working. 'Jesuit and cardinal. Well, time to go back to your duties, your Eminence,' Konrad decided to clean the area. 'Repin had a hard life indeed. Guntram does nothing and they all come running to him, like flies to the sugar.'

The priest was lively talking with Guntram when the Duke stood next to Guntram -smiling shyly (and adorably) and showing him sketch pad-. "Yes, good indeed. Could be much better if you work harder. Do you have a teacher? I can recommend you one very good in Rome," the man was saying.

"I'm living for the moment in Zurich. I study there with Rudolf Ostermann," Guntram said very proud of his teacher.

"With Rudolf? Are you not by any chance the boy with the unusual name?"

"My name is Guntram de Lisle, sir."

"I'm Enrico d'Annunzio. I work at the treasury. What a coincidence to find you here! Rudolf sent me some examples of your work for an opinion. You have to work more, but could achieve a lot if you would let yourself go; you seemed to be very constrained in your painting."

Konrad blanched at hearing the man's name. Not that Italian pest asking for a loan of his collection for the past five years! With Ostermann's support. Time to recover his kitten and disappear before he would be forced to have tea with the man and give his Cimabue for the masses entertainment. "Guntram, it's getting late. If you would excuse us, your Eminence."

"Hello, my son," D'Annunzio greeted Konrad, extending his hand so he could kiss the ring and the Duke made reluctantly a genuflection and kissed the golden seal. "Enrico, Cardinal d'Annunzio. Your grace?" he said while

Guntram repeated the gesture, very impressed that he was standing in front of a cardinal and wondering why Konrad didn't look impressed at all.

"Konrad von Lintorff," he introduced himself very briefly, aware that he was doomed.

"An expression never better used, my son," the man chuckled. "I see that you're in holidays. Are you staying in San Capistrano?"

"Yes, I am."

"Wonderful! Then, tomorrow I can visit you and see this young man's work. Should we say at five?"

"I would be honoured to receive his Eminence," Konrad resigned to his fate. Probably the man's expert eye had recognised in Guntram's sketches part of his collection.

"Your Eminence should not bother to travel. I could come here, Sire," Guntram interfered and Konrad wanted to kiss him, but the following answer was not what he was expecting at all.

"Guntram, I want to look at your work and the Duke's collection too. He's a very busy man and whenever you have the chance to catch him, you should take your opportunity. Many of the artworks there were last time photographed in the thirties when they were moved to Switzerland because of the upcoming war. As a historian, I have to see them." He explained very gently to the boy who nodded in agreement.

"I read your book. The one about pigments used in the Umbria region. It was a very detailed study."

"It took me almost ten years of my life to write it. We'll see each other tomorrow at five. Good day, Duke." The Cardinal smiled kindly to the youth; a sharp contrast to the man almost boiling with fury.

'No doubt, the Vatican still has the best intelligence service in the world. The Mossad boys are amateurs compared to them!' "Come, Guntram, we drive home now," he growled to the astonished boy, wondering what had set Lintorff on fire. The Cardinal had been very nice. It should be what had happened in the morning. After all, the man had kissed him and he had jumped on top of him. Perhaps he had misunderstood everything. He only wanted a nanny, not a lover and coming to think, who in his right mind would like to have something with him when you could bed a woman like Stefania? She was like Angelina Jolie! Absolutely gorgeous woman!

Guntram believed that it was time to put an end and save himself another mess like the one with Constantin. 'You and rich powerful mobsters? Bad idea Guntram.' He got in the car without saying a word.

* * *

Dinner had also been as silent as lunch, Konrad musing and mechanically eating, had closed himself to the world as it was his practice when he had troubles. Guntram had tried to excuse himself, but the Duke had only growled, "Come with me to the terrace".

The view of the countryside from the battlements was breathtaking and Guntram fell in love with the barely lighted fields, looking at them in rapture, leaning on the parapet.

'He's truly beautiful, but I have to let him come to me again. If I rush it, he might flee again,' Konrad thought and left his glass on the stone wall.

"Is it not too hot for cognac?"

"Please, don't tell me you're going to put ice in it!"

"Ice? Never. I thought it was more for winter."

"A weather less warm would help, but it's all right if you only have one glass. Do you want to try? It's a Rémy Martin."

"No, thank you. Alcohol and I don't mix together well," Guntram said, remembering his first time with Constantin. 'Part of the fun was the champagne, brother.'

"Yes, that's the first thing doctors take away," Konrad commented with sympathy. "Sometimes, I believe that my own father had his second and final stroke because the doctors forbid him to drink. The poor man was desperate in the end for a good Armagnac. He would die if he sees me drinking this," Konrad chortled, glad that Guntram had smiled finally.

"I'm not so classical. My father was more into apple cakes and cinnamon. I also. His cologne also smelled like apples, now that I remember. Very similar to yours. What's an Armagnac?"

'Exactly as Roger, must be in the family,' he also remembered but decided to answer the question. "It's a kind of brandy, from Gascony, distilled once while cognac is distilled twice. Far more rare than cognac and the flavour is more delicate. I prefer something stronger, but if you want we can get you an apple cake."

"No, it's all right," Guntram chuckled. 'Now or never, he's in a good mood.' "About this morning, I

wanted to apologise for ...”

“Was I so bad?”

“I beg you pardon?”

“If you start to apologise it means it was a really lousy kiss and now you're going to tell me that we can be best friends,” Konrad smirked and Guntram gaped like an idiot.

“No, it's not that! It's the other! The opposite!”

“Do you want to repeat it?”

“Yes! I mean, no! Not at all!”

“But you said yes. Did you like it or not?”

“Very much, but that's not the point here!” Guntram confessed without a second thought and blushed the second the words were out of his mouth.

“How so?”

“We should not do it again! Forget we did it!”

“I also liked it very much, Guntram,” Konrad said softly. “Would love to repeat it.”

“We won't! It's very wrong!”

“You are single at the moment and I am also. We have established we both liked it. How can it be wrong?”

“Because of who you are!” Guntram shouted in pain and turned his back to Konrad.

The man sighed and advanced till he put his hands on the youth's waist half expecting a blow from him but nothing happened, encouraging him to continue with his strategy. “Guntram, don't let something that happened almost fifteen years ago rule your whole life. You're perfectly aware that your father was very sick when he took that decision. It was in his autopsy report. The cancer would have killed him in a few months.”

“I know, but I only wanted my papa. Nothing else,” Guntram whispered, leaning his head against the man's shoulder.

“Let me give you a new family; one that you can take care of. Let me love you as you deserve,” Konrad murmured, tightening his embrace. “I wasn't responsible for your father's death! He saved my ruling and gave you to me! He trusted me as to look after his only son! Why can't you trust me too? Didn't I protect you the minute I found you?”

“You were very kind to me. You saved my life.”

“Then, give me a chance to win your love. It's all I ask from you.”

Guntram tried to think the best course of action but he couldn't get his mind away from the memory of that morning's kiss, so he took the next logical step. He jumped to Konrad's lips and kissed him with all the accumulated desire for three months.

His initial surprise at his kitten's reaction let Konrad unarmed for an instant but his desire to taste once again those lips, driving him mad since the first minute he had seen the boy, clutching onto his enemy's arm, kicked him into reaction.

Both men kissed each other madly while Konrad swiftly lifted Guntram in his arms, too lost in the kisses, and leaned him against the wall, almost crushing him with his weight in his eagerness what was being offered to him with so much freedom and joy; without restraints or calculations. Something really pure and innocent. He could feel the boy returning his kisses with more fire than before and his ragged breathing and his heart pounding against his chest.

“Guntram, stop! I don't want to fuck you against a wall!” Konrad protested, letting the boy go. “You don't even have permission from a doctor!”

“But I do want it! More than ever before!” Guntram pleaded like he had never done before.

“I don't want to risk you for ten minutes fun! Stop right now! Our first time shouldn't be like this! Not against a wall! What you are going to give me it's very precious. Should not be wasted here.”

“In case you didn't notice, Konrad, I'm well worn out. Since I was nineteen,” Guntram huffed

“I didn't mean your virginity. It's your heart that I want. Forever. Till death do us part. I want you to be my Consort, not my friend. Would you take me?”

“Yes,” Guntram answered in a blink, his eyes lost in Konrad's.

* * *

“Why do I have the impression that we are forgetting something?” Konrad pondered in the terrace

overlooking Piazza Nabona, where they had stopped for lunch after walking during the whole morning.

“I don't know. Do you have your agenda with you?”

“Right,” Konrad remembered his blackberry, hidden in his pocket and got it out, reading intently and fighting with the temptation to open his e-mails. “I forgot him! The cardinal. Finish your tea and we have to come back.”

“Why are you so upset that he visits you? He seems to be a cultivated man.”

“Because he wants to take my paintings away. For an exhibition at the Vatican.”

“You have fantastic pieces. Some of them are in history books! Why don't you let people to see them?”

“Because once they're ruined, there's nothing to be done! They don't belong to me, they belong to the family!”

“People behave in Museums!”

“I don't want my name made public. I hate publicity or the press.”

“You can always write “private collection”.”

“No, and that's final, Guntram.”

“It's a real pity. They're unique and inspiring.” He sighed dejectedly, but didn't press the issue any more.

* * *

Cardinal d'Annunzio couldn't believe his fortune. First, the boy's paintings were much better than you could see on a photo and had a classical style. The studies he was making for a portrait of an Argentinean priest and his pupils were exactly what he was looking for Cardinal Righi Molinari.

Lintorff had finally agreed to lend the two remaining panels of St. Catherine's Altarpiece from Bernardo Daddi and a work done by an Umbrian follower of Giotto di Bondone. The “Crucifixion” by Francesco Giotto, acquired in 2000 for half a million pounds was out of the question. 'Perhaps in a few years. One step at a time.'

* * *

“It was very generous of you to give him the paintings,” Guntram rearranged his head in Konrad's lap, as the man was mind absently caressing his light brown bangs while he read his e-mails on his blackberry.

“Does it make you happy?”

“Very much. They're wonderful and it's a shame that they're hidden here,” Guntram said softly.

“Not hidden. Protected. You never know what could happen. We have many enemies, kitten,” Konrad sighed.

“Constantin would cut himself an arm before doing something against them. Art is his true love in this world.” Guntram looked at Konrad in the eyes and the man bent his head to softly peck his lips.

“Repin is not my only enemy. He's just a nuisance for me. This is a very big game, kitten. Stay out of it. There's nothing for you here.”

Chapter 22

For the first time in years, the cup of coffee didn't ease his nervousness. Friederich could feel that there was something amiss since Konrad had returned from his holidays in Rome. First, the concept of holidays was something totally amiss in his vocabulary. He never stopped working. Only once in 1996 and it was because he suffered a serious pneumonia, but he had managed to run everything from his sickbed. Out of the blue, he had decided to take Guntram for a week to Rome with the excuse that the boy needed some sun after being so sick in early July.

Second, Konrad had returned in an excellent mood, looking ten years younger and had behaved like a teenager during lunch, taunting Ferdinand von Kleist over the hard time the man had had in China, after two weeks at Michael Dähler's mercy. Guntram was only smiling in a silly way and quiet as usual. He had brought along two sketch pads full of drawings, so he had been working diligently.

Third the boy didn't complain or pout when he was informed that tomorrow he had a date with his doctor. In fact, he had been glad.

Fourth, Monika van der Leyden had phoned him two days ago to joyfully inform him that "finally the Duke saw reason and dismissed that vulgar woman. I was never so happy in my life to call a real estate agent to take care of the papers for her flat in Via Condotti, where else?" The rest of the compensation fee was too generous, considering she had been getting several presents over the years and a €10,000 monthly allowance. No, Konrad had done something bad and wanted to shut her up or he had found something much better.

Fifth, Ostermann had told him to arrange with the insurance company the lending of three pieces to the Vatican when Konrad had refused to do it for a long time.

Sixth, he had taken the rest of the day free when normally he was running to his office the minute he was setting a foot in Zurich. No, after lunch he had sent Ferdinand back and decided to go for a walk in the forest, taking Guntram with him.

Seventh, Guntram was in an excellent mood, almost shinning, nothing like the terrified, sick boy that he had received in February.

'I can still put two and two together, Konrad. You are after the child. Over my dead body, boy.'

He took out his mobile phone of his pocket and quickly dialled from memory. "Good afternoon, Mr. Pavicevic. It's Friederich. (...) I wondered if she was ready. The Duke has returned with Guntram. (...) He's very fine. Tomorrow I'll take him to the doctor, just for a check, but he seems to be in good health. He was working a lot in Rome. (...) Could you bring her today in the evening? That would perfect. He will be very happy. Thank you."

'From the age of nine to thirteen, Konrad tried every night to smuggle a Rottweiler in his bed and never succeeded. Now, at forty-six he tries to smuggle himself in a young man's bed. Forget it boy, I won't let you have your fun with that child. He deserves much better than becoming your whore. He's nothing like his uncle!'

* * *

Walking with Konrad was a source of happiness for Guntram. The tall trees and the peace, only broken by some singing birds or the sound of the wind through the leaves, relaxed his nerves and he let Konrad hold his hand as they were walking.

Since they had spoken that night, they had been together practically the whole time, speaking, reading and kissing each other when there was no one around. Konrad was coming to his bed twice only to hold Guntram and sleep, disappearing very early in the morning.

Konrad halted his walk and embraced his kitten to kiss him as he has been dying to do since breakfast in Rome. He was so happy to have his kisses returned with a matching passion.

"Let's do something, please," Guntram whispered in his ear.

"No, kitten. Tomorrow after we have spoken with your doctor. I don't want to risk you. Once he gives you clearance, you will move to my rooms and stay there."

"Are you really sure?"

"Why not? I'm old enough as to know what I want and you make me very happy; like no one else before."

"I don't think this is a good idea. If you come to my room, no one will notice and we can also be happy

like that.”

“I will not have a clandestine relationship with you Guntram. Period. Don't you love me enough that you need to hide yourself from the others?”

“No! I do love you! I would do anything for you, but think about your position! What if Constantin finds it out? What if he hurts you?”

“He will not hurt me or you. I will protect you with my life, but hear me well, my love, I will not hide my feelings for you. You're my chosen companion, my lifemate, my beloved. I have already announced my decision to the Council and most of them agreed to it.”

“When? Who? Why did you do it?” Guntram blurted, unable to believe that his sex life was discussed at a table, even before he knew he was going to love Konrad.

“Because I wanted to leave everything clear for the others. Goran, Michael, Gustav Löwnestein, Mladic, Albert and Wallenberg support you. In fact, the Swedish likes you more since you were under his grandchild care, Heindrik Holgersen. He also likes you and says that you're “not troublesome”. Ferdinand is reluctant, but abides with my decision.”

“When did you do it?” Guntram asked in shock. His whole private life was being discussed as if it were a business deal!

“Last Easter, when they all came. I'm very sure of my feelings for you, Guntram and I hope likewise from you.”

“Konrad, this is going to be the greatest mess of our lives,” Guntram sighed, but kissed his lover tenderly.

“Let's go home, my love.” Konrad said when he finally broke the kiss. “I'm hungry and perhaps Jean Jacques understood your handwriting.”

“Don't worry, he made me read it to him,” Guntram chuckled. ‘He's like a big child who needs to be hugged and loved unconditionally. He's adorable.’

* * *

The black sleek Mercedes at the entrance rose all Konrad's internal alarms. ‘Why is Goran here if we had agreed to meet tomorrow?’ The Duke quickened his pace to enter cross the empty courtyard and the main entrance with one of the butlers already opening it. He could hear Guntram walking behind him. Friederich was waiting for him in the foyer and only said. “Mr. Pavicevic is in the living room with the bitch.”

“I told Monika to get rid of her! This is impossible!” he barked in German while Guntram was looking with big eyes at the stiff butler pronouncing “that word”.

“It is a present for Guntram, your Excellency and she will be very good to him,” Friederich replied in German too.

“And?”

“Mr. Pavicevic himself chose her. She's a very polite companion, Sire,” Friederich sauntered in the way Konrad hated so much, exactly as he was doing when he was ten years old.

‘I'll kill Goran for this!’ Konrad thought and went in a straight line to the living room to get rid of the floozy the Serb had dared to bring to his home.

‘Exactly as I thought, well boy, you have serious competition now.’ Friederich smirked and caught Guntram before the lad could escape to his room. “You can go in, Guntram. It's something for you. It's very cute. You two will like each other,” he said with a real kind smile, unlike the sneer he had shown his former pupil.

* * *

The well known silhouette of a pug, sitting on top of his Belgian carpet was a great shock for Konrad.

“The red ribbon was not my idea. The trainers put it,” Goran growled from his sofa, rising the moment his Duke entered the room. “She does not give it up. I think she likes it.”

“What is this animal doing here?”

“You asked for it, my Duke. In March, so here it is. Friederich told me to bring it today.”

“Make a sausage out of it!” Konrad started to tell, but the cry of happiness he heard from Guntram at seeing the dog, made him stop and change his mind when the boy dashed to the animal and knelt next to her. “Do you

like it?" he grunted as the animal crouched in the way all of them do before jumping for playing.

"It's a very nice dog. Is it a female?" Guntram said grabbing her by her jaws like all dogs love.

"Yes, it's a she and eight months old. She's fully trained to be inside a house. It's a *Mops*," Goran said softly. "His Excellency ordered a dog for you in March, but she had to be trained before giving it to you. Mr. Elsässer has already a bed for her."

"Are you really giving it to me, Konrad?" Guntram asked very happy, while he was scratching the animal's belly, also happy to be with the boy.

"If you like it..." Konrad said, irked with the look of triumph dangling from Friederich's eyes.

"Like her? I simply love it! Thank you so much," Guntram said, picking up the dog.

"Ah, ah. Don't pick her up, Guntram. She's heavy for you. Almost six kilos. Remember what your doctor said," Goran interfered.

"Thank you very much, Goran for bringing her." The boy immediately returned the dog to the floor, jumping like a ball around him. "Can I take her out now?"

"Yes, go with Alexei. He should be somewhere," Goran said.

"Return in thirty minutes for tea." Konrad barked, upset at the set up his Tutor and *Summus Marescalus* had prepared for him, not liking a bit their new way of cooperating with each other. True, he had given the order, but he had not repeated it and Friederich hated dogs inside the house and here was this one, sleeping on top of his carpet!

"What is her name?" Guntram asked.

"I should look in her papers," Goran replied.

"How did you call her, in German?"

"It's a *Mops*, I don't know the word in English."

"Can you call a dog Mopsi?"

"If she comes, when you call her, I guess so," Konrad said miserably as obviously the dog was here to stay. "Take her outside. I have to speak with Goran and Friederich."

Konrad waited for the pug and kitten to be gone before he would start to shout with his people. "I never imagined you were in the dog training business, Goran."

"She was trained in Bern. Her parents won several prizes. It's a fine exemplar and Guntram likes her very much," the Serb said, impassable as always.

"I don't remember when I asked for it."

"In March you said the doctor had recommended that Guntram should find a way to release the stress as it was very harmful for his health. I spoke about dogs and you answered me "would be good one as pet. A small one, but not in a flea size." It looks like a clear order to me. I chose a *Mops* and female as they don't mark the territory so much as men... I mean, males, my Duke."

"The dog can sleep in Guntram's bedroom. I have purchased a bed for the animal," Friederich announced. "It will be good for him to have something to look after and play with."

"He's almost twenty-two years old, not ten!"

"Animals have incredible therapeutic uses. Doesn't his Excellency want the best for Guntram? He needs to relax more," Friederich charged.

"Indeed, Guntram looks much better after that week in Rome," Goran supported the butler.

Konrad hated the idea that both men were in tandem. 'Learn to lose, Konrad. That's the most important lesson. You can win another day,' his father used to tell him. 'Yes, I can win much more with the dog here than if I throw it out. I can see if he's able to look after the dog before I give him the children.'

"Do you want to stay for tea, Goran?"

"It will be my pleasure, Sire. We should discuss the matter in Hungary. We have the location."

"After dinner, when Guntram is in bed. He told me what happened that night in London and I intend to match every second of what he suffered."

"It will be my pleasure, my Griffin. Antonov wants to join us."

"Let him come with you. He has his own interests there. Tell Holgersen to look after Guntram during the last week of July. I'm taking him with me to Sylt in August and then I will travel to New York for two weeks to arrange the other matter. I'm confident to have it solved by May."

* * *

Guntram de Lisle Diary.
July 21st

I'm so happy with Konrad. He's very tender to me and drives me mad with his kisses. Once he lets you know him, he's very funny, intelligent and wonderful. Have I said that he's a hell of a kisser? Incredible. If he continues like this I will be the one pushing him over the desk and jumping on him!

Today he gave me a dog, Mopsi, to keep me company. She's a pug in beige colour with dark ears. Goran was very nice to bring her in and Friederich allowed her to sleep in a basket in my room so she doesn't feel bad. She snores and it's very funny!

Finding the dog in my room wasn't funny for Konrad. He was truly cross when Mopsi barked like crazy when he passed to kiss me good night. "The minute the doctor allows it, you come to my bed and this animal goes to the kitchen or to a guest room if you want!" he threatened her and I laughed that he was jealous of a poor dog.

He tells me we are going for ten days to Sylt. It's an island in the north of Germany.

* * *

July 22nd

As promised, Konrad accompanied me to the doctor. Not in the morning when they made all the tests, but in the afternoon when I had the consultation. Van Horn says that I'm much better and will reduce my pills to three, but I have to be careful. I feel much better so I asked the big question.

"Do you think I'm able to do that?"

"Do exactly what?" Bloody German precision! THAT!

"That thing." Can you believe that he looked at me perplexed? He's not that old not to ignore what is that! Fortunately, Konrad said something very fast (and amused) in German.

"Ah, that thing called sex, young man. Well, if you're interested, it means that you're definitively on the road of recovery. Yes, twice per week, only once per night and you should leave three days between to rest and recover. A climax increases the heart activity very much and is a considerable stress for your heart. Try it if you want, but you should stop the minute you feel bad."

Thank you so much! Twice per week? Three days for resting? I'm not a bloody monk! I was furious with the bastard when I left his office.

Konrad was barely containing his fun. "If looks could kill, Guntram. Poor man! He only wants the best for you!"

"Did you hear him? Twice per week. It's more wicked that saying nothing at all. It's like showing candies and placing them on the highest shelf!"

"I should organise my agenda to travel during those three days you're "resting", kitten. Tomorrow you move to my room."

The funny thing is that he was informing Friederich with a very serious voice that he's supposed tomorrow to move all my clothes to his bedroom and leave my drawing utensils in the small bedroom that's next to his private studio. He should also think about changing it so I can use it as a studio. The poor man was looking at Konrad in shock and I thought he would have a heart attack right there.

"Is that understood, Friederich? Guntram is my chosen Consort."

* * *

July 24th

Yesterday was one of the happiest days in my life. In the morning of the 23rd Friederich and Dieter, moved all my clothes and papers to Konrad's rooms. I think I never blushed so much in my whole life as first Dieter, then Annette and finally Katherine helped him to sort the things out under Friederich watchful eye, looking partially pissed off or surprised. The servants said nothing to me, but I caught them, gaping at me several times. Alexei only winked barely controlling his laughter. I had lunch with him and Friederich, looking more sombre than in the morning. I swear I never wanted troubles with him! It was not my idea to do it so openly!

I escaped with Mopsi and Alexei for a walk in the forest. He was almost giggling at my face!

"Come on, Guntram, don't look at me so upset! I'm very glad the Duke starts something with you. Jean Jacques thinks you're perfect for each other... and I should say that the boy who went to Rome is not the one I got back." He sneered at me. "Already being naughty?"

"No! I mean, it's none of your business!" Do Russians always check and discuss what their bosses do in bed? Or is it something from his KGB times? He smiled knowingly.

Konrad returned from work at seven and we stayed in the library, sitting together, but closer than normal. At eight, a very serious Friederich announced dinner as you would tell someone is dead.

"Today was black truffle soup on the menu," Konrad growled the minute Friederich poured the soup on his dish.

"The chef changed his mind in the afternoon, Sire. Also, the main dish and dessert are changed. Artists are very temperamental."

The second was also very good... and I got red meat and it's not Sunday! The dessert was baffling because it was an apple ice cream with a lot of cinnamon and candied walnuts with chocolate and strawberries, but it was great.

"What is this?" Konrad grunted once more. He had been so charming during dinner and he changed in less than a second when he saw it! He hates that someone changes the slightest thing around him. "This is the first time Jean Jacques prepares this!"

"Perhaps we didn't need this at home before," Friederich said and disappeared from the room, while Konrad mumbled something in German and ate the ice cream.

I was truly nervous when Konrad casually told me that it was time to go to bed. Heck! I was terrified to behave like an idiot there or do something he wouldn't like or not being good enough for him! I was on the brink of the next heart attack. I only gulped at his words. Way to go Guntram!

When we passed by the stairs by my old room, he kissed me holding me for some minutes.

"Are you sure Guntram? From tonight onwards you stop being a child and become a young man. You will acquire all my enemies and they will do anything to undermine my love for you, therefore there can be no mistakes or lies between us," Konrad told me very seriously. "Are you sure that you want to spend the rest of your life with me? Once we do it, there will be no turning back for any of us, my love."

"Yes, I love you."

He took me by the hand and we climbed the stairs in silence because my heart was hammering. We entered in his private living room and it was eerie to be there. I mean, I was here not a few hours ago, but now the place seemed to be impressive and solemn. He told me to change into my pyjamas because he had to look for something in his studio. I did it in the bathroom, becoming more and more nervous. I think I was more jittery than my first time with Constantin. I must have poured half of the toothpaste tube when I squeezed it!

When I finally took the courage to go out (yes, I'm a real chicken!), Konrad was already in his bedroom, dressed in his pyjamas, standing next to the desk in front of the bed. There was a tray with one glass and a bottle of red wine and I thought 'this is not the moment to follow the doctor's advises! I need a drink! Urgently!' but said nothing so nervous I was. He came to me and put his arms around my waist, kissing me on the forehead, reverently, like a brother; not like a lover.

"Guntram, know that my love for you is true and I will respect and honour you every day of my life. I cannot marry you in the way I would like, but I want to give you this ring as a symbol of my fidelity for you. It's the original seal of my family and has been with us for centuries. Always the Griffin's consort carries it," he told me and showed me a very old looking ring.

"It's a Sassanian cameo carved in a cornelian stone, but the design is Sumerian. It represents a griffin with a tree of life at its side. It was a present from Pope Innocence IV to our family for their contribution to the Teutonic Order in the XIII century. That order financed most of what we know as the Vatican today. You should always wear it as a symbol of your status and my love for you. You have to give it to the eldest son when he marries because he will be the next Griffin." Konrad took my right hand and kissed it before he placed the heavy thing in my finger. I was speechless.

He served the wine in the glass and I was surprised because he always tastes it before anything. It's automatic in him.

"This vintage is from before the War. It's a 1938 Château Mouton Rothschild. My father bought these bottles when I was a child for my marriage and for my children's births. I drank the first bottle when I was appointed

Hochmeister and I had given up hope that I would taste the others till I met you.” He took the glass and presented it to me and I took it, still speechless.

“I swear to love, protect and cherish you till my last breath, Guntram.”

“I swear to love, respect and support you till my last day, Konrad,” I said out of the blue, but knowing that it was the right thing to do and that I meant each one of the words. He took again the glass from my hands and put it to my lips and I drank from it just a little and repeated the same for him, almost lost in his eyes while he finished the glass. The sound of the glass against the wooden table was very strong with my eagerness for what was about to come.

Konrad kissed me once more but this time with unbounded passion. I had to cling to his neck to avoid falling. Perhaps, it was the wine, perhaps the company, but this kiss was the best ever. His arms grabbed me by my waist and we continued to kiss, tasting each other. His hands caressed my back and I felt my robe fall into the floor. Somehow I found myself sitting on the border of his bed, looking hungrily at him while he got rid of his own robe. He also put out the pyjama tops and I swear this man puts the Michelangelo's David to shame. I was like a rabbit in front of the wolf while he sat next to me and resumed his earlier kissing more feverish than before.

I felt him on top of me and I loved the feeling of his body heat over mine. It was simply maddening for me. I closed my eyes in bliss as he was unbuttoning my own clothes.

“Please, turn off the light.” I pleaded with him.

“Why? You're so beautiful. I do want to look at you.”

“I have the scars from that. I don't want that you see them.” I confessed. “It's not pretty.”

He removed his body from mine and smiled with infinite sadness. “I also have scars from fighting. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You're beautiful to me just as you are; with everything. We love each other.”

“I've been with no one since that day and I don't know how I am going to react.”

“If you want to stop just tell me and we will stop. I want to make love with you, not just have sex. I want what we are going to do tonight to mean something for you and I.”

I let him undress me, and he continued to kiss me as lovely as before, placing his kisses on every one of the scars, making me shudder with pleasure every time he did. He bit me lightly several times but I didn't care because it felt great.

“Don't stall, Konrad. Please. I need to feel you inside me,” I croaked and he nodded

After using the lube just briefly, he penetrated me with infinite care, taking his time to let me get used to his size. Each one of his pushes transported to heaven and I was dizzy with pleasure. I remember that I put my tights over his hips when I felt he was completely inside me enjoying the rocking of his pelvis moving me—and almost lifting me from the mattress—slowly to pick up speed as he felt that I was responding to his caresses. I was moved that during all the time he was kissing me and checking that I would be fine. We climaxed together and for the first time I didn't want to run to the shower, but feel him inside me for as long as I could.

“I wish you would have been my first,” I whispered, totally spent but happy like a child.

“I want to be your last, Guntram,” he panted, hugging me stronger.

“How could I get another after this?” And it's true. He did very little gymnastics or tried strange positions and it was the best I ever had. I can't want another after him! I understand now why they call it “la petite mort.”

“Guntram, I'm almost forty-six, with you at my side I don't know if I'll turn sixty,” he chuckled. “It was incredible, my love,” he said, kissing my temple several times and caressing my hair. I guess I moaned because he laughed and said: “just like a happy kitten,” obviously proud of himself. “Those nuts were not so useless, after all. The chef gets a raise in the morning.”

“I don't understand.”

“I was afraid he would have sprinkled Viagra in my food! Didn't you realise what was in the menu? Red meat, strawberries, walnuts, passion fruit in the salad and a long etc.”

“Oh no. Do you think they imagine what we were doing?”

“My staff has a very vivid imagination, kitten and if you're in my bed you're not here to play chess.” I looked at him baffled. “The best is if we play straight since the beginning. They have to respect you and hiding in the cellar for a romp is a bad idea. They will be shocked, or not, for a few days and by next week, they will forget all about us.”

“Friederich is unhappy with all this. I don't want to cause you troubles with him.”

“He's happy with you. He's unhappy with me. Pissed off. This morning he told me that if I hurt a single

hair from you or behave less than the perfect gentleman with you, he will make my existence miserable. That's a threat I take very seriously. You are my Consort now and my equal."

I didn't know what to tell

"Why do you think he let you have the dog in your room? To bite me if I dared to set a foot in there at night!" He laughed and I did the same. "Your Mopsi does not like me at all. Every time I come near you, she shows me her teeth."

"She's jealous," I chuckled, "but you're cuter and far more interesting in bed than her."

"She will not come here. It's the kitchen or another room. That's final Guntram."

"All right, poor Mopsi. What about when you're not here?"

"In the kitchen, Guntram. I don't share my bedroom or you."

We had a shower together and I definitively wanted more, but "I don't want troubles with your doctor," was his answer. I let him dry me with the big towel and I don't know why, I took his cologne from the marble sink and smelled. It was so similar to my father's.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, reminds me to my father's one," I answered and he froze.

"I'm not your father."

"I know! It's just the smell. Who makes it? It seems like there are apples in there."

"A perfumer in Milan," he answered and put some of it on my neck, deeply smelling it as he hugged me possessively. His member once again was active and against my bottom. I felt once more become jelly and placed my hands against the sink to support myself as he buried once more inside me.

I felt his hands taking me by my hips bones to prevent that his thrusts would hurt me against the sink, his head buried in my shoulder. It was a hard ride but I loved him more in his unbound passion than in his controlled and tender way from before. I nearly collapsed after this one but it was worth it.

He was very concerned and took me to bed, redressing me with the pyjama and putting me inside the bed, disregarding my protests that I was fine (not true)

"Should I call Antonov?"

"I'm not up for a threesome and he must be also eating apple ice cream with the chef," I joked.

"It's not funny! I can't lose you now!"

"I'm fine, Konrad. I need to catch my breath, that's all. Just hold me for a while," I panted, feeling better as my heart slowed down. He redressed and joined me in the bed circling me with his arms and kissing me several times, with real concern.

"I shouldn't have taken you twice."

"Tomorrow more."

"Not in your life time. Three days rest, kitten. I'll fly to Shanghai if I have to."

"Party pooper!" I scolded him falsely.

"I'm a banker, Guntram. It's in my job's description." I laughed, feeling much better and burying myself in his arms till I fell asleep.

** * **

As usual, Friederich knocked on Konrad's door at 6:00. 'You said nothing about loafing today, so out of the bed, boy,' but didn't enter the bedroom as the man was sleeping with Guntram. He set the breakfast table with his morning coffee and toasts.

"Holgersen is waiting for you Sire. Should I dismiss him?" Friederich said through the door.

"Come in," Konrad grunted.

Friederich stood frozen in the door frame when he saw his pupil lovingly arranging the covers around a soundly sleeping Guntram, already dressed for training. "Let him sleep all what he needs. I fear yesterday's activities were too much for him." The Duke told him haughtily and kissed the child in the forehead. He also noticed the empty bottle of wine on the desk and the single glass there. Guntram changed his position in the bed and he saw the well known ring with a red stone.

Konrad dragged him out of the room and closed the door. "Surprised Friederich? I told you he is the Griffin's Consort, not one of my whores. I am blessed with my choice as he is a gift from God."

"Konrad, I never had anything against Guntram. If he were someone else, I would hit you in the head for

not taking him. I only fear that he finds out about your past and suffers for it. His health is very frail!”

“He’s my gift from God and I will do all what’s within my power to keep him. I passed many of the trials He set for me and this is my reward. I will not let anything or anyone to come between us. Is that understood? He truly loves me for myself.”

“Konrad, he is very sick. Could you survive it if the worst happens? I worry for you also.”

“He’s getting better, the doctor said it.” Konrad said with a lump in his throat. “I’ll be very careful with him because I don’t want to lose him. These months with him have been truly blissful for me. If the Lord decides to take him from me, I will live the rest of my life remembering the time he has granted me with him. I’ve decided to take that risk. If I were to spend only a month with him, then my life would have not been a total waste.”

Chapter 23

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
August 12th, 2005
Sylt.

Konrad and I have been for almost two weeks in Sylt. Honestly, I've never heard about this place before but it used to be (and still is) the favourite holidays spot for the wealthy and noble Germans. It's an island, very quiet where we are, a turn of the century villa with eight bedrooms and a private beach. I love the place as it's lonesome but haunting at the same place. The large beach with the stormy sea. I've been sketching most of the time, well, when I was not with Konrad, or painting with watercolours in the veranda. The light and weather are very nice.

Friederich also came along and he took care to "keep things orderly". Translation; he oversees (really!) that Konrad keeps distance from me after one night of passion. How can he tell if I've done something? We are not noisy! Two days, minimum.

I'm so happy with Konrad! He makes me feel great like never before. It's not just his kisses or the way he looks at me (that certainly helps too) but how he's always aware of my needs and I'm just happy to make him smile or laugh. He's not a cold man, as he likes to pretend, he's generous and in need of being loved. Sometimes I believe that when he comes with his papers and sits next to me, just to read them and sighs dejectedly, he does it in order to get a kiss and a hug in my effort to comfort him. I'm more than aware that he can fight to get his way on his own, but he seems to love when he's hugged, petted and comforted like a child.

But he also behaves like a pig sometimes. A real pig.

Two days ago he wanted to attend the Polo Masters Series in Keitum, on the north part of the island. Elegant club, full with noble and rich people, all of them on first name basis. I'm glad to be called Guntram—never thought I would say that—because most of the men were called Walter, Karl, Heinrich or Wilhelm. Konrad introduced to many, most of them bankers or industrialists coming to him with a humble attitude. I kept myself quiet because being introduced as "my companion" to most people or "my consort" to some of them, who bowed their heads, was a bit shocking. Do they all have to look at my hand to check the griffin's seal? I mean, Constantin always introduced me by my name with a "fellow of my foundation" if he deemed necessary and everybody knew I was his boyfriend.

After lunch, buffet in a tent, I had enough and scurried myself toward the terraces for a bit of peace. Konrad was busy speaking in German with four men. I started to draw, enjoying the peace as most people were still eating.

Just like that I felt someone sitting next to me and peering over my shoulder to see what I was drawing. I hate onlookers! I have no problems with people coming and watching your things or when they ask you something, but this is very bothersome. Truly. I threw a dirty look at the offender, a guy in his mid-thirties, also "elegant sport" dressed (wonder if you could come here with a tracksuit) blond with blue eyes, nothing out of the ordinary. He said: "Entschuldigung..." and a long speech totally incomprehensible for me.

"I'm sorry, but I don't speak German."

"Oh, I just wanted to apologise if I disturbed you. I have an Art Gallery in Berlin. I was asking you if you do it professionally. Those sketches are very good."

"I used to but I'm not presenting anything at the moment." I said.

"Andreas Volcker, how do you do?" he said and extended his hand.

"Guntram de Lisle, pleased to meet you."

"It can't be! Are you really Guntram de Lisle? I saw your exhibition in London last summer! I bought two paintings, one charcoal with a worker's hands and an oil of three children in a slum. I've been trying to contact you since last October but Robertson told me you had a car accident and moved to Russia, not painting any longer. It's incredible that I find you here, in the middle of the champagne drinker's tribe!"

I laughed because the last sentence saved me from having a nervous breakdown at the mention of my past. "No, I'm not painting much at the moment."

"But your sketches are very good. I saw a few more things from you and they were much better than your exhibition, more mature and intense. Dark, but hypnotic. Nothing like before."

"It was a near death experience, Mr. Volcker," I whispered.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Are you not painting at all? Who's your manager now? Robertson plans to retire next December. He's eighty-three now and very tired of all."

"I'm studying with Rudolf Ostermann. He says he's my manager now and sold one or two paintings from me. I'm not sure because he never tells me a thing. One thing that was completely hideous was sold without my consent!"

"Sometimes you have to be hard with your artists!" He chuckled. "I will call him in September and ask if he wants to lend me some of your pieces for a collective exhibition I'm planning for December. All young but good artists. Here is my card." He told me and gave me the thing. I took and kept it in my sketch pad. "Do you want to have dinner with me?"

Before I could tell him no, Konrad appeared out of nowhere and politely shouted "We have plans for tonight, Mr..."

"Volcker, from Volcker Industries. Mr..."

"Lintorff." Wow, he's impressive with one word sentences and he was looking really pissed off that the man was speaking with me.

"As I was telling Guntram, I would like to have his work in an exhibition in Berlin, at Alexanderplatz."

"In that case you should contact Mr. de Lisle's manager, Rudolf Ostermann. He will decide if the place is appropriate for him." Konrad barked. OK, one, he does not like familiarity of any kind and two, it seems he decides for me. "Let's go, Guntram. It's too sunny for you."

Dilemma: Fight with your love in front of most of Germany's high society and keep your ground and independence or keep your mouth shut till you're home? Second option.

"Good-bye, Andreas."

"Good-bye, write to me and send me some photos of your work."

"All right, I will." That should give Konrad an idea of my views on the matter.

We went back to the car he was using. A monster Audi Q7. He was almost about to explode. Why? I did nothing wrong. He was driving and fuming at the same time. He's going to have a heart attack before I if he persists in his attitude.

"Konrad?"

"What?"

"Why are you so worked up? The man just offered me a job. At some point I should start to work again. I can't live all my life depending on you. He also bought two of my paintings at Robertson's. He says he wanted to contact me but I didn't know till today."

"I don't like adventurers near you! You should have not spoken with him!"

"What am I supposed to do if a man, in a good place, introduces himself as an Art dealer; I have his card here, and tells me that he knows me?"

"You were flirting with him! I saw him looking at you at lunch time!"

"Certainly, you don't need glasses! I didn't see him at all! I was doing my best not to fall asleep in front of the old dinosaur making a list of all his diseases and comparing medications with me!"

"That was the Baron!"

"Boring nevertheless!"

"All right, next time, you stay at home!"

"I'm sorry but I do not know knitting," I retorted sarcastically and really crossed with him.

"Then, paint!" He shouted at me. "You were flirting with that man like a slut! Dinner? Where, in a hotel?"

"You have a dirty mind indeed! You go on business dinners all the time and I say nothing! Heck, you disappear for weeks and I say nothing. Don't judge me by your own deeds!" I roared, "You love to use the word whore with me. If I'm one, why the hell did you give me your ring?"

He didn't answer me and focused on the driving. I was furious and panting from the shouting exercise. Only one man in my life before and I'm the whore from Babylon! It's really not my problem if both of them have some self confidences issues! When he parked in front of the villa, I bolted out of the car and went directly to sit in one of those chairs on the beach, to watch the sea and calm myself down.

An hour later, I saw Konrad coming and sitting next to me. "I'm sorry for my outburst, kitten. It was totally out of place. It's not your fault if there are so many pricks around."

"Konrad, I swear I did nothing to entice the man. He came out of nowhere," I sighed.

"Maus, I know it. You have no idea how beautiful you are. Men and women throw themselves at your feet and I went mad with jealousy. My former lover was almost as good looking as you are and was getting laid with every woman or man that was passing around, just to hurt me. I saw that person there and I lost my temper. Can you forgive me?"

"If it was so bad for you, why did you stay with him?"

"I don't know. I used to believe that I loved him but I see now that it wasn't real love, just infatuation and lust mixed together. He was like a drug I needed to possess. You're nothing like him. It's not the first time I see people drooling around you but you never notice them nor insinuate yourself. Nothing and I'm very grateful for it."

"Konrad, I love you despite all. In fact, the first time I saw you in London, I thought 'the devil is not bad looking at all'. You are quite hot yourself." My resentment melted at his explanation.

"Me, hot? People say that I'm an iceberg!" He chortled but wore a sad expression in his eyes.

"Yes, you're tall but not that much," I smiled and gave him a light kiss and he kissed me back like the volcano he is, leaving me breathless. "If you're an iceberg, I don't want to know what is hot for them!" I panted, trying to recover myself. He returned my smile, looking very proud and I laughed finding him once more terribly charming and sexy. We finished the conversation in the bedroom.

* * *

"Kitten," Konrad did his best to shake Guntram awake. "It's almost eight. You must have dinner and take your pills."

"Five minutes more," Guntram mumbled, hiding himself under the covers, spent after making love the whole afternoon.

"You said that an hour ago. Come, be nice and get out of the bed, please. I want to take you out. There's a concert and we could try the new restaurant you saw yesterday."

"Not tonight, I'm very tired after it," Guntram whined.

"Guntram, you can't spend your holidays in bed with me!" Konrad said falsely shocked.

"Why not? I have no objections. The sound of the sea, it's getting colder outside and here is warm..."

"Guntram! GET OUT!"

"All right, you miss it."

"Informal kitten, no need to wear a tie."

Still mumbling his discomfort for being thrown out of the bed and forced to dress again, this time in beige trousers, light blue shirt and a dark brown jersey, the young man did his best to put an amiable face the minute Konrad returned to the room. "Take a light jacket, it's windy."

When Konrad started the car, he jovially said; "we're having dinner with Albert and Armin, the *Strolch*—that's how we call him—; he'll move with us upon our return to Zurich. I had enough of his loafing and he should start to work immediately under Michael Dähler's direction."

Guntram suppressed a groan at the news that his probably romantic dinner had been turned into a family-business one. "Poor Armin, don't you let him enjoy his holidays? He was supposed to move in mid September!"

"I know, but it will be better if he starts to get used to our lifestyle and learns some manners from you."

"Konrad, with all due respect, I'm a lousy chaperone."

"You always know your place and he should learn it too."

"What am I going to tell him? He already thinks I'm a dork, always painting and staying at home! At least you could let him invite some young people, like Ferdinand's children!"

"Karl Otto is away in Harvard and Johannes is in the Max Planck Institute."

"The girl, what was her name? The tall blonde. Marie Christine!"

"It's Marie Amélie, Guntram and the answer is no."

* * *

Still confused, Guntram got out of the car while the valet parking took it away. In the bar, Albert and his son, Armin were already waiting for them. The man stood from his stool and gave Guntram a light embrace and patted his back, as if he were a young child. "Welcome to the family, I do hope you know where you've gotten yourself in," he chuckled and Konrad fulminated him with his eyes. "Save me the terror show, Konrad. You'll need all your strength

to deal with Armin.”

They sat and ordered dinner, letting the boys be together in the round table. In less than a minute the men lost interest in them and started to discuss their business in German.

“Konrad told me that you're moving to Zurich soon,” Guntram said to start the conversation.

“Yup, I'm a dead man walking. They changed the execution time just because of a small incident in Salou.”

“Where?”

“Spain. Some friends from the University and I were celebrating a bit and you know how things are. We met a few girls, also drunken as we -the place is incredible, one disco or a pub after the other and you can drink all what you want- and went to the beach as we had no money left for the hotel. I don't know why they make so much fuss about it. Everybody does it there. We were having a good time, all of us, all together and boom! The Spanish police came out of nowhere! We were detained for indecent exposure, alcohol consumption and two of the guys for minors' corruption. Who would have thought that those hot little things were only fourteen? Lord, those two knew much more than us!”

“How many of you were arrested?”

“In total? Let me see. About thirty people I would say. But there were no drugs involved.”

“That sounds like a Roman orgy to me. The Spanish must have been shocked.”

“Yeah, we were in the newspapers even. Only the initials, of course. The major expelled us from the city. Uncle Konrad exploded and here I am. Probably my father will abandon me here.”

Guntram was shocked, looking at him with big eyes. “Please, don't tell me you're a prude like my uncle. He was even shouting me for having oral sex in public. Where's the fun if you don't do it like that?”

“In the act by itself?” Guntram asked, still digesting the news. ‘I'm not surprised Konrad does not let Marie Amélie come to the house if we have a satyr around.’

“Tell me once thing, Guntram. How is it for you? Is he not too boring? I mean, you're the Consort now, therefore you have to attend all the meetings and protocol things.”

“I was invited to the dinners before. You'll get used after a week or two. It's not that bad.”

“Well, at least he disappears to the States when we return to Zurich for twenty days or more. That will be good,” Armin whispered.

“Look Konrad, those two are already conspiring against their elders,” Albert joked. “Seems they're going to be friends,” Both boys looked at each other with barely concealed contempt. “Perhaps, not. What do you think?”

“Your son should learn from Guntram the proper behaviour of a gentleman. He perfectly fulfils his duties as my Consort and has learned in less than half a year to be one of us.”

“The good breed finally shows, cousin. Guntram has my respect for all what he has overcome and for taming a lion. Armin, learn from him.”

“Thank you, Albert,” Guntram mumbled, hating to be the centre of attention.

“Thank you? No, my friend. You have to come to our next Board meeting when I'll present my bank's results. We are going to need a lion tamer,” he chortled. “Just kidding, cousin. Everything will shine that day.”

“When will Armin move with us?” Konrad decided to ignore the joke in order to keep the good ambiance over the table. “Do you want to return with us to Zurich? We leave in four days.”

“I would prefer to remain with my family, my Duke.”

“All right, I will be expecting you on August 15th in Zurich. Your school starts in September and it's time to prepare yourself for it. Dr. Dähler has informed me that he could use your services from August 16th. You start at eight in the morning. Being a relative of mine means nothing for me in the office. Therefore you will be treated like one of my employees. Is that clear, Armin?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Good. You drive in the morning to work or to the University. During school time, you're allowed to take two days off during the week to study in the afternoon, but the rest of the time, you work. On weekdays, dinner is at 8:30. If I have guests, you're excused from accompanying us. In a few months, I will reconsider my decision if you prove to be worthy of being with the adults.”

“My Duke, when will I study?”

“First rule, you don't speak unless you're spoken!” Konrad barked and Guntram flinched. ‘He was never that hard to me!’ “You can study on weekends and after dinner. Use wisely those two days off you have. You're not allowed to go out in the evenings till further notice.”

Armin was shocked but he hid his fury because he knew that shouting would only enrage his “uncle” much more. He threw a glance in Guntram's direction and saw that the other boy was also shocked and looking at him with sympathy. “Your behaviour as a Lintorff leaves very much to be desired,” Konrad continued, “I will not be as lenient as your father. Guntram can tell you that I don't allow playing or loafing in my house. Work and study and everything will be fine between us.”

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
August 17th

Yesterday Armin arrived with his things. I'm afraid that his idea of “shaking the house” should be postponed for some time. The poor guy got a “preventive scold” from Konrad at his studio and a long “Not to Do” list. In a way it's worst than boot camp. Konrad's idea of “fun” was to send him for a walk to the forest! I mean, I enjoy walking with him, but I'm not the normal kind of youth, besides I need to have some peace.

Armin is in the yellow room, on the other side of the castle. It's a nice place on the second floor with good light, furniture, private bathroom and a small desk. He can hang around with me. Poor guy! I was busy with my painting in the room Friederich sent me in the gallery on the third floor, the former nursery area, and didn't pay much attention to him. I spoke with Ostermann about this Volcker's offer of an exhibition and he said that he will speak with the guy. Also, he had spoken with Cardinal D'Annunzio and I'm supposed to try my luck with the portrait of Cardinal Righi Molinari for the Vatican. Both men liked my style and I'm supposed to do something similar. I will get paid €3,000. Yes, Ostermann takes half and the tax office thirty-six percent more of my share. He also checked all my material and said that I was improving “a little, don't get it to your head’.

So, it seems I have to work because my bank account is really thin. I don't want to use Constantin's money and what I received from the exhibition, I donated to father Patricio. I couldn't take that money, even if it was the work of two years. I'm not the man who made those paintings. I always did my best to avoid touching the money from the scholarship because I felt that I was already abusing him with all the things he was giving me, besides letting me live in his house and paying part of my school from his own money. I was living mostly from the leftovers Robertson was selling.

Last time I looked, it was in £3,476.

Anyway, Ostermann told me to start to paint two concepts I showed him and we will see what comes out. One of the ladies studying with him, Ms. Van Breda, liked several of my watercolours of the beach in Sylt and wanted to buy them. Ostermann jumped on her and charged her €1,500 for five pieces. Much less than the £600 Robertson was getting, but I said nothing. I got €480 cash from him. Not very useful because here they take Swiss Francs. Could use them to buy working materials.

* * *

August 19th

Konrad went to America but before he left, he shouted at me like never before. I honestly didn't know I was not supposed to do it!

“How dare you to take money from the Church! It's an insult to me and to your duties as my Consort!” He roared, entering in my studio and hitting the door. I rose from my chair where I was painting with my heart rate at top speed. Fortunately, Friederich came in almost immediately.

“My Duke, you should let Guntram explain himself before you pass your judgement.”

“What do you have to say in your defence?” He asked me in a voice that terrified me. I just froze and looked at him, breathing raggedly.

“My Duke, for the last time, shouting at the young man will not solve the problem and will only be detrimental for him!” Friederich shouted at him.

“He's a shameless whore! He takes money from everyone! Worthy of being Repin's slut!” He shouted back to Friederich. His words hurt me so much, much more than any punch from Massaiev or threat Constantin could have done.

"Don't you dare to speak in that tone to me, boy!" Friederich growled, without raising his voice. "Remember who I am!"

"I remember very well who I am and he has disgraced our family! Like the cheap whore he is! I should have seen it! Exactly as the other!"

They continue to shout at each other in German while I had to sit in the chair, dizzy and lost. I felt some pain in my chest and swallowed a pill. Friederich saw it and immediately rushed to me. "Guntram, are you feeling all right? You're pale and ashen."

"I'm fine. I just don't understand what is all this about," I almost cried.

"The Duke says that you accepted money for a Cardinal's portrait. He was just informed of your commission by your teacher."

"Yes, I have to paint a portrait but I haven't received a cent so far. It's after I deliver it. Meister Ostermann managed the sale and set the price. He only told me to start to work with the photos I got and perhaps I will have to fly to Rome to sketch Cardinal Righi Molinari," I said dumbfounded.

"Guntram, you're not supposed to take money from our Mother, the Church," Friederich explained to me softly.

"I didn't know it! It's true! I'm almost broke and accepted the commission because it's a great opportunity to me!"

"If you need money, just ask for it. You should be used to it by now!" Konrad said with contempt and I nearly broke into tears because I had never felt so dirty in my whole life.

"I'm poor, not a beggar! But you're so heartless that you don't know the difference!" I shouted Konrad. "I need to work to have something of my own!"

"Why don't you have money? I understood that your last exhibition had great success," Friederich asked me after giving Konrad a disapproving glance.

"I didn't keep the money I made, or the other I got in the past year. I've sold nothing since I came here and I never took a cent more than necessary from Constantin!"

"What did you do with it?"

"I gave it to father Patricio in Buenos Aires. He needed it more than I. The government suppressed most of the help for the soup kitchen. Pater Bruno knows about it because they write with each other."

"How much was it?" Friederich asked me.

"I don't know exactly. Some £26,000 and later over £4,000 for some paintings I made in St. Petersburg, but I'm not sure. Constantin sent the pieces to London and I didn't care at all. I got \$2,000 more for two drawings from one of his lieutenants' mistress."

"In total almost €45,000, child," Friederich concluded. "In comparison, that's much more than what you give Konrad from your own profits. It's only a matter of scales. I don't remember you giving a hundred percent of your income. Get out of this room and return when you're ready to offer your excuses to Guntram. Your behaviour is unforgivable."

Konrad looked truly sorry and I couldn't let him go like that. I know I'm an idiot but what can I say? He looked certainly contrite. "Please, don't go Konrad. I didn't know I shouldn't take money from the Church. I never meant to insult you or your family. I'll refuse the commission tomorrow morning if that fixes the problem."

"No, Guntram! It's an incredible opportunity for you and it shows how really good you're!" Konrad said. "Paint the portrait. I'll tell D'Annunzio that it will be a present from our family to the Vatican. I should have spoken longer with Ostermann, but I let my temper overtake my reason. My behaviour can't be excused. I said terrible things to you."

"It's all right, don't worry."

"No, it's not all right. I insulted and hurt you when I swore to protect you. Could you forgive me?"

"Yes, of course," I said and he came to me, knelt to my side and embraced me, almost crushing my ribs with his arms. Friederich huffed and went away, closing the door quietly. Konrad started to kiss my face and I only wanted that they would erase the pain his words had caused me.

Some time later, he let go of me and rose from his crouched position. "Why didn't you tell me you needed money?"

"You already have done so much for me that I couldn't ask for more. I only need to work and get money again. I'm feeling much better and I will look for a position or something. You have already paid for the school fees, the medical fees—which must be astronomical—the food I eat and even the paper I use for painting!"

"Guntram, that is nothing for me!"

"But it's a lot for me! You saved my life!"

"You also. My life was dark and horrible before you came here," Konrad confessed, "and I nearly ruined everything because of my own stupidity!"

"Konrad, next time ask and then shout," I said and smiled at him.

"You're too good for me."

"I'm glad to be appreciated but I think you're also great for me. I love you even if you're grumpy and stern."

"I love you even if you're on another planet all the time and want to hide from the world," He kissed me with a lot of passion and I was more than ready to go horizontal on the floor or the table, but he had other ideas. "Guntram, you just had to take one of your pills because of my yelling. You obviously are not up to this. Besides, I need to speak with you." He disentangled from my arms and it was a real disappointment! He sat on the couch by the window and made a gesture so I could sit on his lap (honestly, a lousy consolation prize considering what I was after) I sat and laid my head against his chest and he petted my hair, looking at me lovingly. Although he had just given me a fright, I melted and sighed contented.

"Maus, I need to stay in New York for three weeks and I can't take you with me. First, I thought to send you to Argentina with Antonov so you could visit your friends there, but the doctor told me that it's a very long journey and he discourages it. I was now thinking in sending you somewhere in Europe for a week or two, but if you have to work, I don't know what to do with you."

"Konrad, I promise to leave the Meissen set alone," I joked.

"You would never get to it. Friederich custodies it with his life, but this is not my point. I worry that you might be bored here. The Strolch, Armin, will be in the bank and running under Michael's boot. He's not going to be the nicest person when he comes home, if you understand me and I want to keep my stocks' values high with you."

"You make the rubbish and run away!" I laughed.

"Like most people," he laughed in a charming way and I kissed him. "Perhaps you would like to go to San Capistrano and make the sketches of the Cardinal there. D'Annunzio would be more than delighted to get another chance to invade my house again. I can invite them. Maria Domenica loves you and she will feed you well."

"That would be very nice!"

"All right, then you go next week to Rome with Antonov. Take all what you need for working."

Just like that I was sent to Italy, once more with a Russian as chaperone. Fortunately, Alexei is a very nice person. I'm not so sure if Jean Jacques is going to be happy about it.

** * **

August 30th Rome

I'm dead on my feet. I worked like crazy today with the Cardinal. As Konrad predicted, D'Annunzio dragged the poor Righi Molinari who hates the idea of having a portrait of himself. He was working in El Salvador and Nicaragua and speaks perfect Spanish. We got along as our views are very similar and I made the sketches as he was telling me about his past. He even showed me the photos of his time there and I took several ideas from there.

Maria Domenica behaves like a grandmother to me and she certainly feeds me... and I haven't heard Alexei complaining about his share!

Although I feel a little homesick (is that the word?) because Konrad is not here, I enjoy the city very much.

I think I saw Stefania in a restaurant Alexei took me once so I would see Rome at night. I told him that she was there and wanted to say hello, but he dragged me out of the place! I'm not jealous of her or do something to importunate her! She was just a good friend as Konrad told me.

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Rome, September 3rd, 2005

The meeting with D'Annunzio and Molinari Righi had been a success as both men had approved the

portrait's concept art and the first had been very impressed with Guntram's work.

"You might get a permanent position here, young man. Continue to work hard. I'll inform his Grace how pleased we are with your development."

"I'm honoured to be given this opportunity, your Eminence. It's every artist's dream."

"Ostermann showed me the pictures of a Madonna you plan to send for an exhibition in Berlin. She has indigenous traits and is dressed like a peasant with the Jesus child in her arms, surrounded by dense foliage. I wondered if..."

Guntram paled at hearing the words, 'I'm dead, I pissed off the priest, theologically speaking.' "I can explain it and it's not finished yet," he said in a hurry, interrupting the old man but freezing under his stare. "All right, I don't know why I did it. It just felt right to paint her this way." His voice sounded very sheepish while he slouched in his chair. "If you think, it's inappropriate, I will put it away immediately, your Eminence."

"Why would you do it?" Molinari asked. "I also saw the photos and I believe it's a painting full of Grace."

"But she's not canon, I mean, I didn't want to be disrespectful or anything, but she's not usual."

"I was thinking to ask if you could reserve the picture. One of our patrons has offered to buy and donate it for the Modern Art collections. We have paintings from all over the world and we would be very honoured to have it. I understand the Duke's Foundation is one of our main benefactors but we can't let him buy this paint too and give it to us. We would be abusing his generosity."

"Ah. I should ask Dr. Ostermann, he's my manager and teacher. I'm not sure if the quality meets your standards."

"It does. Do we have your agreement?"

"I can give it to you and send something else. Nothing is decided yet. I only need four or five pieces."

"No, that paint should be exhibited. It's too good to be hidden in a vault. We were four of us looking at it at the Treasury and we couldn't agree on the feelings it evoked in us. One of my secretaries told me it arose in him the same emotion he had when he saw Fra Angelico's frescoes in San Marco."

"This too much, your Eminence," Guntram murmured embarrassed at the praise.

"All right, my son. Go in peace now." D'Annunzio said, smiling to soften his words and rising to offer his hand to be kissed. Guntram jumped to his feet and knelt to kiss the ring and repeated the action in front of Righi Molinari.

"Please, take this Rosary with you. His Holiness has blessed himself."

"I'm most grateful your Eminence." Guntram said and left the room. When the aide closed the door behind him, he felt his knees turn into jelly and his head spin around. He let a long sigh out and had to grab a chair to recover himself something.

"You look as if they had pulled out a tooth from you," Alexei joked, rising from the chair where he had sat to wait for his charge.

"They liked the portrait and want one of my paintings for the collections here. I was compared with Fran Angelico and got a Rosary from the Pope himself," He blurted at full speed.

"You forgot to mention the part when you have a heart attack. Please, don't do it on my shift, Guntram, Pretty please? The Duke will kill me if I don't return you in one piece to Zurich."

"I need something strong to drink."

"All right, I'll buy you an orange juice outside."

Guntram laughed "Only that?"

"Remember the part of not dying on my shift?" Alexei chuckled. "Let's get out of here. I'm Orthodox and perhaps one of them wants to convert me. Come, if you were a good boy, I'll buy you dinner in a nice place just to celebrate."

* * *

"I can't believe you brought me to a normal place!" Guntram said merrily when he entered the restaurant with chequered tablecloths, some football stars photos as decorations and a wide array of wine bottles in one of the walls.

"You have been hanging around with Heindrik for a very long time. Well boy, it's pizza and a very good one according to Jean Jacques. He should know because he..."

"Won two Michelin Stars for the *Königshalle* and one more for *Au bec fin* in Paris," Guntram filled in the sentence, reciting what he had heard many times over the months, specially when the Chef was arguing with Friederich over something.

"Exactly! He has as many medals as I!"

"You forgot the Bocuse d'Or part."

"Doesn't count. He studied with the man. Perhaps it was arranged," Alexei said seriously.

They had an early dinner and Alexei agreed to let Guntram take half a glass of red wine. Suddenly, the Russian stopped his tale about how he had smuggled a bottle of vodka in an Afghan village and looked to the entrance door. The boy, still laughing at Alexei's inventiveness followed his eyes and the laugh died on his lips.

Standing in the door was Constantin Repin with six of his men. Mikhail Massaiev was among them and smirked at Alexei in a wolfish way.

Constantin walked toward their table and sat, when Alexei moved his hand to his jacket, he only raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to kill all the innocent families here, Aliosha? This is not Kabul. My men will shoot if you try anything and your two colleagues will die needlessly. I only want to have a word with my angel. In private."

"You're breaking the terms! You have no permission from the Duke to take him away!"

"I'm just borrowing him for a few hours," Constantin smirked. "When I'm finished, I will return him to San Capistrano myself. You can go and have a drink with my people. Some of them still remember you."

"The Duke will kill you for this and I will be very happy to be there when it happens," Alexei growled.

"Be more concerned to come home tonight before you plan to repeat the favour you did to poor Olga last July. I never imagined that you were so adept to Pavicevic's methods. Next time you kill someone, bury the trash please. The police have been giving me a very hard time with each piece of Olga they find. Do you keep them in a freezer and throw it every time you need to make my life miserable? The poor woman deserves some consideration. I'm sick of opening the vault to put the pieces in."

Guntram was horrified and on the brink of a collapse while he heard Constantin speaking with such coldness and scorn. His mind was telling him that his monster was dead and somehow Goran and Alexei had been involved, but he couldn't understand it really or wanted to accept it.

"But I'm not here to speak about the past, Aliosha. You had your revenge for what happened in '96 and Lintorff got rid of my wife. I always thought that she had something to do with the snitch we got over your uncle's smuggling weapons without sharing with me. Thank him in my name. Guntram, go inside the car with Mikhail Petrovich. Now!" Repin shouted as the boy was looking at him with true panic in his eyes. He didn't move a muscle at the command. "Don't make me take you there. Your men will not survive this night if you play difficult."

Guntram rose from his chair and without looking at Alexei, he went to the entrance, where Mikhail smiled encouragingly to him: "Did you bring a coat, child?" Unable to speak, the boy shook his head negatively. "Well, you should have. It's chilly out there. Relax, Guntram, nothing will happen to you. You're too valuable to hurt," Massaiev whispered and took him by the arm, forcing him to follow him to the black BMW parked at the front door. He opened the back door and gently pushed Guntram inside, taking the place next to him. Inside the car were the driver and another man.

"Don't worry, we go to the St. Regis. We were there, remember? It's just a talk with the boss and I will take you back to Lintorff. Did you take your night pills, child?"

Guntram again shook his head and took the box out of his jacket to show it. "Good boy, take them now." Massaiev ordered him and placed a bottle of water in his hand. The water's taste was strange and Guntram grimaced after gulping the two pills. "It's one of those flavoured fancy waters, child, nothing to be concerned," he lied, calculating that with that sip, the tranquillizer would relax the boy. "Drink some more," he pressed the bottle to Guntram's lips and he drank, afraid that his refusal could hurt Alexei and secretly desiring that what was inside would kill him. "That's enough, Guntram. You're a good boy. We all missed you a lot. Mr. Repin's children love the book you sent them. The smallest one, Vania, asks me when you're going to come home. He's very lonely since his mother passed away, Guntram," Massaiev sighed. "Here we are," he said when the car stopped at one of the hotel's side entrance. "I'll take you to the suite and you can wait for Mr. Repin there."

Massaiev had to steady Guntram in the private lift when he almost dozed standing. 'Half a bottle was too much. If he falls asleep, it would be better for him.' With some effort, he managed to take the youth to the bedroom because he was certain that he would fall to the floor if he left him in the living room. 'Inappropriate but I have no other chance.' With infinite care, he removed the jacket and shoes, and laid him against the pillows, almost asleep and without the strength to fight back. Massaiev covered him with a blanket and Guntram closed his eyes for a moment,

losing his conscience a few minutes later.

* * *

The gentle caresses of a large hand over his cheek woke up Guntram from his slumber. For a fleeting instant he thought everything had been a nightmare and Konrad was once more with him but his eyes took him back to reality.

"I will never grow tired of watching you, my angel," Constantin said and grabbed quickly Guntram's arm before he could jump away from his touch. "Be nice!" he growled, "or do you prefer that we have this conversation under different circumstances? Remember, your three bodyguards' lives lie in my hands."

Constantin released the boy's arm when he was sure that Guntram had understood his position and decided to cooperate. "That's much better, angel," he praised and let the boy sit on the bed, his back stiff but partly lying against the pillows. For a second, he studied the terrified face in front of him and smiled in triumph. "I only want to talk with you without Lintorff's interference or his hounds snooping like they always do. We have many things to discuss about our future."

"Constantin, I told you in London, there's no future for us. I thought you understood this," Guntram said with a very weak voice.

"Angel, you are not thinking clearly, that is pretty much obvious. You never recover yourself from my former wife's attack and you were terrified all the time in St. Petersburg. When you went to Zurich, you changed airs and perhaps you mistook that fact by a real healing process. Being away to what was familiar to you, helped to forget what you suffered under her. You should not worry any longer about this because she's finally out of scene."

"Is it true? Is she dead like you told Alexei?" Guntram asked in shock.

"Yes, but not by my hand. You should thank Pavicevic and Aliosha. Beginning of July, the house where she was staying in Hungary was attacked by four men. Her guards were killed instantly and painlessly; seven men in total. Alexei is still very good from what we can see in the security recordings. Lintorff was kind enough as to send them to me. Pavicevic and Mihailovic took their time with Olga. Six hours to be precise and I guess they kill her because they had a plane to catch. They left the bodies of my bodyguards but took hers away. Over the past month, the Russian police have been finding pieces all over the Federation. If I remember correctly dismemberment was the punishment for the traitors and rebels. I wonder what could have set on fire Lintorff so much against her. It's not the first time we exchange our laundry, but normally such displays of barbarism and Middle Ages' customs are reserved for his side."

"Goran is a nice man! He would have never done something like this!" Guntram shouted.

"Pavicevic nice? Well, I guess there's a first for everything. In Krajina, he gathered a whole Bosnian village and buried them alive. His only concession was to shoot the children in front of their mothers to save them the pain of suffocation through swallowing earth. I guess there were about two hundred seventy-five people living in that place. Should read the U.N. Report."

"Not, Goran. He has always been kind to me," Guntram whispered.

"Yes, that's what I was informed. They say he even paid from his own pocket your dowry to the Order: five million dollars. Not much for his finances, but very symbolic. The greatest killer of them all, supports you. I suppose no one would ever dare to say a word out of place to you. But I don't want to discuss such gloomy matters with you. I'm here for something else."

"Constantin, it's finished."

"There's the rumour that Lintorff has taken you as his Consort -nice euphemism for whore between you and me- and he practically eats from your hand."

"I'm not his whore! I love him!" Guntram shouted, enraged without giving much thought to the consequences of his outburst. He regretted his move because his head started to spin and he practically collapsed against the headboard, totally spent. 'What's wrong with me? I've never been this tired. Everything looks blurred.'

Repin just witnessed Guntram's useless fight against the sedative. "I apologize, my angel. I should have not called you that. It's unfair. After all, what you're suffering has a name, Stockholm Syndrome. He took you away from me, isolated you and played the nice and generous man with you. It was a matter of time since you would bend to him. When you come home in February, you will see how wrong you were."

"I will not return to you! I love Konrad!"

"You love him? Really? I thought you despised our business and he's not better than I, only looks more respectable. He just ordered the torture and killing of my wife for some unknown reasons. We have seven widows

more and around fifteen new orphans in Russia, Guntram. I will have to provide for them. Maybe he doesn't sell weapons or drugs, but he controls the ones who do it. He's just a top predator with a fancy on you, nothing else."

"That's not true! He is an honourable man!"

"Yes, and Pavicevic is a good person, Guntram." Constantin sighed. "What I wanted to discuss with you is your return to me."

"I will not go to you! I told you so!"

"I will pay Lintorff in December and I expect him to return you to me that time. The children miss you very much, angel, and would be very happy to have you for the holidays. Of course, you will come to my house in St. Petersburg."

"I'm not going back! Why can you not understand it? I don't love you and I don't want to live with you! I want to stay with Konrad and help him to raise his children!"

"Ah, that's what he has offered you. Sharing his children with you. Orphans do anything to be a part of a family, but what if I could offer you the same, but with your own people? Nothing "borrowed" as Lintorff does."

"I have no family left! Only one uncle, but I know nothing about him!"

"When you were a small child, you had a plush animal. A brown teddy bear from Steiff. Chocolate colour with a red ribbon as tie. Your father gave it to you when you turned two years old. You named it Jacques because of the children's song you loved so much. You and the bear went everywhere together. The bear had belonged to your father before and he gave it to you under the promise that you will look after it. You kept it till you turned twelve and gave it to your lawyer's daughter because she liked it very much."

"How do you know that?"

"Your lawyer decided to save the bear from his daughter," Constantin continued with the story without flinching, "and sent it back to a member of your biological family."

"That's impossible! I know no one of them and the Guttenberg Sachsen hit my lawyer with the door on his face! He never could contact my uncle Roger or his family!"

"I thought you might like to have your bear back. This person gave it to me so I could return it to you," Constantin said, knowing that the seed had been planted. He rose from the bed and went to his cupboard, opened it and took a large box. "I'm told that it's a collector's item nowadays, this bear was made in 1915 and has been in your family for some time. It belonged to your grandmother and she gave it to her middle son, Jérôme." He placed the box on Guntram's lap and urged him to open it. "Jacques still keeps his tie," he said kindly.

"Who gave you this?" Guntram said without touching the box lying on top of him.

"I'm afraid that I can't tell you. This person is on the Order's black list. Lintorff would be most interested to shed his or her blood. To protect his or her physical integrity, I must keep his or her identity a secret. You can't tell what you don't know, Guntram. This person approached me, truly worried about you when he or she heard that you were in the Order's hands and would like to see you away from them. Guntram; they killed your own entire family! Forced your father to commit suicide and took everything you had! Your family owned a small size bank in France, lands and two factories!"

Still in shock, Guntram opened the box he had to stifle a gasp when he saw the familiar form of his old teddy bear. The sound of the silk paper being moved was not enough as to cover the sound of his ragged breathing. Automatically, he turned around the bear's tie, and there it was, his name written in a tag, exactly as his father has done it so many years ago, so he wouldn't lose it in the park or the school. With great care, he took the plush animal from the box and caressed in awe, all the memories of his time with his father rushing through his mind.

"You can take it with you, if you want."

"Who's he? Is it my uncle?"

"I'll show you when you come with me. Here it's too dangerous."

Guntram saw an envelope addressed to his name, with the familiar handwriting he knew from the bear's tie. 'No, it can't be! My mind is playing tricks on me!' He took it and looked at Constantin who only raised his eyebrows. With great care, he broke the red seal, with the Crenel cross over it. Inside was only a piece of paper and a small flat key. He opened the letter and there was only "Bank St. Lazarre. Geneva. 157-903-0054 GF" written.

"What is this?"

"A safe box in this bank. It does not belong to the Order or is associated with them. Masons since many generations. You told me once that you loved a Bronzino drawing that was in your bedroom and it was a copy. Well, it was not. It belonged to your grandmother and she gave it to your father and he to you. Before he left you, he replaced it with a copy and hid the original in that safe box, along with some family jewels and gold bullions. He never told

your lawyer about it because he wasn't sure about the man's good intentions. It remained a secret and I believe that Nicholas Lefèvre would have contacted you to hand over the key in your 25th Anniversary. Your relative believes that you're old enough as to have it now. The safe box is under your name. You only need the key and your passport to open it. Come, take it with you. See if Lintorff lets you go as far as to Geneva to check the truth of my words. The picture must be the one you remember and it's very valuable as it's clean and catalogued."

Please Constantin. Is it my aunt?"

"I would keep the key and the paper a secret, Guntram. The minute Lintorff finds out its existence, he will never believe that you have nothing to do with your family any longer. He will kill you for lying and launch a real hunt over them. His paranoia has no limits, angel. You were there and know perfectly well that Morozov started a war with him so he would kill me. He even used you to pit me against that crazy German. He almost destroyed all my fortune because he thought I was betraying him! And we only were business partners. Imagine what he would do to his official bed partner! Is it true that you sleep in his own bed?"

"Konrad would never hurt me! He loves me!"

"His bad temper is legendary, dear. Have you forgotten the stories Massaiev told you? The Hand of God Sword and so on?" Guntram paled as he remembered it. "I will return you to him tomorrow morning. Aliosha can take you back to San Capistrano. You must rest now a little before you leave."

"Where are my bodyguards?" Guntram felt a strong pang of fear in his stomach.

"The Italians out and the Russian, just for old time's sake, still in one piece. Now, tell me, what were you doing today in the Vatican?"

"Let me go now!"

"Answer the question, angel. I'm making a supreme effort to keep my temper in check after you have told me in my face that you fuck that monster!" Constantin used a very low voice. "You're in one piece yourself because I'm perfectly aware that you're irreplaceable. I know that if I touch a single hair from you or just make you nervous, you could drop dead. Once you return to me, be certain that I will not be so lenient with you as I was in the past!"

"I was in a meeting with two Cardinals. One of them, D'Annunzio commissioned a portrait of Cardinal Molinari Righi for the Cardinals Gallery in the Vatican. I worked on this during the previous two weeks and today I showed them the art concept and they approved it. It will be made in oil and should be ready before February 2006. The sketches are in the portfolio I was carrying tonight." Guntram spoke at full speed as Constantin's aura of cold hatred was foreboding something very bad.

"Good. You see how you can nicely speak to me, angel? It's just a matter that you get used to it once more. At least we know that you can also return to your activities in the bedroom and that's very good for us."

"The doctor said..."

"Yes, I know, with two days rests between exercises. Lintorff is an anal retentive bastard, but he's not so crazy as establish the tight schedule of fucking you every third day as it's so usual nowadays. I can also live with that. It's better than none. Can you do it twice in a row?"

Guntram went livid and shook his head negatively. "Pity. I'm sure you will understand if I take another lover to compensate the lost time. Mikhail Petrovich will continue to look after you as in the past. He appreciates you, Guntram. Now tell me, how's your career progressing? You study with this Ostermann."

Guntram was too afraid to answer and breathing once more raggedly while his mind only repeated 'he wants you back, he wants you back,' "Snap out of it! I had enough of your panic attacks!" Constantin yelled at him and shook him from the shoulders before he would plunge into the well-known dark abyss he had escaped from only a few months ago.

"I met a man in Sylt, Andreas Volcker. He wants to include me in an exhibition next December in Berlin. Only four pieces. One of them is already sold to the Vatican too. A Madonna made after some charcoals of a woman and her baby I saw in the countryside at your *Estancia*. All of them liked it and want to include it in the collection. It's a great honour."

"It's a real achievement indeed, Guntram. I always knew you had talent. I was looking at your portfolio, while you were sleeping, and you have changed. It's much better than before. More intense, without all the restraints you used to have. Before you were obsessed to get all the details in the picture, now you only draw what you consider essential and leave the rest to the imagination. You stopped to try to prove that you could draw and now you go along with your creation. What did D'Annunzio say to you?"

"Not much, only that he liked it because the Madonna was full of Grace and that one of his secretaries

said that he had felt the same he had when he saw Fra Angelico's frescoes," Guntram repeated without hearing what Constantin had just told him. "Please, don't force me to give it to you, Constantin."

"Of course not, but I will like to see the others in advance. You should not waste this chance you have. Ostermann is highly respected in the artistic circles."

"He's my manager now. Takes fifty percent of the final price. He's an excellent teacher and mentor."

"And they say that I'm the mobster! Robertson was only taking thirty-three percent and I believed he was almost like a greedy pimp!" Constantin chortled. "At this rate, you will have to paint the Sistine Chapel again before you see some money!"

"I'm still learning. It will take years before I paint something worthy. I need more discipline according to him and he's right. How can I break something if I don't master it totally?"

"It's a way to see it. Hard but good. All right, angel, you look very tired. I'll leave you to rest. Tomorrow, after breakfast you can go." He bent his body over Guntram's and the boy closed the eyes in fear, but Constantin only kissed him with care and tenderness on his forehead. He caressed his cheek once more and smiled when the youth opened his eyes again, shocked by the delicate touches, a sharp contrast with the violent jerks or the possessive strokes he had received. "You see, my angel? Isn't this way much better than what we endured in London with all those goons around you?"

Guntram only nodded, wishing that Constantin would go away. Without thinking it, his hand clutched the teddy bear and its soft fur made him realise something else. "Constantin..."

"Yes dear, what is it?"

"Take the bear with you. I can't have it Zurich," Guntram asked still afraid of the Russian, but knowing that he would not be able to lie to Konrad and tell that someone from his family was still alive and very close to this father. Perhaps his own uncle Roger.

"It's yours, angel. Of course I can take care of it till you come home, but wouldn't you like to have it back?"

"I can't tell Konrad from where it comes," the boy whispered, feeling his head turn around once more.

"Tell him the truth Guntram; it's your teddy bear and you had it in St. Petersburg. I only returned Jacques to you. Perhaps the poor bear will suffer some major surgery while looking for listening devices, but once Lintorff realises it's clean, he will let you have it. You're also entitled to have a past. You're not his doll, created for his pleasure. Take the bear and the key. Hide it well and see if you can go to Geneva without his bodyguards. Once you enter in the bank, it should be safe enough and you could have enough privacy as to look its contents."

"I don't know."

"It's your Jacques and it's your decision if you want it back or not. No one can say that he's not a real German; from the Kaiser times even!" Constantin tempted Guntram, knowing that if he accepted to lie to Lintorff, he was much closer to break his resistance. 'Lacroix is very clever; this was a good idea indeed.'

"It could work out," Guntram whispered, his eyes glued to the bear with abnormally long limbs. "I regretted many times to have passed it on to Laura. She was four and liked it so much, but her father told me she had lost it in the park." With great care, he put the bear back in the box and covered it with the silk paper. "Thank you Constantin for bringing it to me."

"Not at all, Guntram. Excuse me by the way I forced you to come here, but it was the only way Lintorff does not think you're a traitor. Meeting you in a coffee could end with a bullet in your head, angel. My men will shake Aliosha a little, and that should be sufficient to convince him of your innocence in all this. He sees traitors everywhere."

"What should I tell him?"

"The truth: I brought you here and fell asleep for several hours because of the sedative we gave you to prevent any damage to your heart. That I asked you to return to me and that I will pay him in December. Also you can mention that what he did to my wife was of a dubious taste and that it was my privilege to punish her for ruining my life."

"All right, let me go now, please."

"No, tomorrow morning, it's very late, almost 3 a.m. and his hounds are like crazy looking for you. I would prefer that hounds master, Pavicevic is here and contains them if they explode at you when they find the Italians. Just a simple precaution. In fact, I would prefer that he picks you up directly. Sleep now." Constantin ordered in a soft voice and turned off the light before leaving the bedroom.

Still terrified and concerned about Alexei's fate, Guntram slid under the covers. He was perfectly aware

that his chances against Constantin or any of his men were near to zero. 'What has he done to Ricardo and Pietro? They are nice men! They were only protecting me! I hope he has not killed or hurt them! Ricardo has two children! How did it happen? How did he know where I was? I could never escape him, not even with Konrad's help!'

His hand touched the box in the darkness and he removed the bear from it, remembering well its long shape and still soft hair. He took the animal to his face and buried his face in the material to suffocate the urge to cry in desperation and terror. The strong scent of apples engulfed his senses and triggered a memory of his father kneeling down to pick him up and hold him against his chest. Alarmed, he sat again in the bed, still surrounded by the darkness, he smelled it again. He was certain that the perfume was fresh as there was no way it could have remained in the bear for so long. It had faded several months after his father had died. He switched on the light on the bedside table and carefully examined the bear. It was very clean, he remembered he had not washed it nor let anyone touch it. Perhaps Chano's wife had washed it, but that was almost ten years ago and the plush looked fresh, like out of the dry cleaner. It was his bear, there was no doubt, there on the right leg some hair was missing as he had cut it when he was five years old and the tie was the original one with his father's handwriting in permanent ink. He remembered well as he had copied hundred of models from him when he was learning to write from the age of five onwards. The paper's with the bank's address was also written very similarly as both "n" and "a" had the same inclination and shape The initial "G" was his father's no doubt.

'Must be my Uncle Roger. I should be very careful. Konrad hates his guts.'

* * *

"Come Guntram, you have to get up, it's late, child." Massaiev shook the boy awake. "You must shower and dress before breakfast. Pavicevic will come for you at twelve and it's already eleven."

"Am I really going home, Mikhail?"

"Yes, of course. I told you you're valuable. If boss takes you away now, Lintorff will consider it a provocation and retaliate. We don't need more trouble at the moment. Come, hurry up, child. I'll pack your bear again."

"Do you know who gave it to Mr. Repin?"

"No, I don't, Guntram. I ordered those croissants you liked so much when we were here."

"Why are you so nice to me?"

"Guntram, I always regarded you like a son. I was with you all the time when you were so sick and I'm glad that you look healthy again. We miss you at home and we'll be very glad to have you back in December. Mr. Repin spent many hours here with you while you were resting. He kissed you good-bye before he left, but you didn't realise. He needs you back, child. Since you are gone, he only works just to get what Lintorff wants and recover you. Everything will be different now."

Guntram had to make a great effort to hide his grimace at hearing that Repin had kissed him and tried to stand up but everything turned violently around. Massaiev immediately caught him by his arms before he would fall and sat him again in the bed. "What did you give me?"

"Just a mild sedative so you wouldn't be nervous. Nothing hard. Your doctor dosed it. It will be away in a few hours more, but we can forget the shower if you're so weak still. Wash your face and hands and get dressed with fresh clothes. I brought some of your things from St. Petersburg. They're in the closet."

Fighting against the pounding headache, Guntram managed to finish all the tasks and rejoined Massaiev in the suite's living room. The Russian took him to the adjoining dining room where his breakfast was served and he drank a cup of tea mechanically. Without saying a word, Mikhail placed a croissant in front of him and Guntram said: "the doctor forbade me to eat fats or processed foods, Mikhail."

"Eat something else then. You had nothing since yesterday and that's bad for you."

Guntram preferred to nibble the pastry before facing a confrontation with Massaiev and remained silent. Some distant footsteps alerted him that someone had arrived and he almost rose from his chair to be violently jerked down by the Russian. "Sit down! Don't move till I tell you!"

The hotel's butler opened the door and Goran was standing there with Milan Mihailovic at his side.

"What an honour; the *Summus Marescalus* and one of his Executioners are visiting us, Guntram. Not everyday you see them," Massaiev taunted the Serbs.

"Remove your hands from my little brother and run before I kill you," Goran growled.

"Business first, gentlemen. Do you have it?"

Milan only got a pendrive out from his pocket and threw it over the table. "Your people should learn manners, Pavicevic," Massaiev huffed. "One second, we need to check everything is fine. Piotr Alexandrevich!" A small man entered the room and took the device to vanish again into the living room. "Guntram, finish your breakfast. You still have time."

Feeling the oppressive ambiance over his skin and the faces from the three men, could only announce a storm as even the smallest thing could have set the room in flames, Guntram finished his dish and his tea without uttering a word or looking at the two Serbs. Some ten minutes later, the longest in Guntram's life, the small man returned and spoke briefly in Russian with Massaiev.

"Everything seems to be in order, gentlemen. You can take Guntram now. He's still weary from the drugs, but otherwise fine. Don't forget your teddy bear, child." The Russian moved the big with carton box from the other side of the table toward Guntram and he took it, more afraid than before. He tried to stand up but once more, he had to grip the table to avoid falling. 'It feels like the worst hangover ever.' "Good-bye, Guntram. We'll see each other very soon."

Milan helped Guntram to walk while he stubbornly clutched the box, not letting it go. Guntram had to close the eyes when the sunlight hurt his eyes and he felt like throwing up. Milan almost pushed him inside the black Maybach standing there.

Goran joined him in the car while Milan went away. Inside was Albert von Lintorff looking very seriously. "What did they give you?" Goran barked harsher than he had intended.

"Jacques is mine! I will not give it to you! You will not butcher it like you did that woman!" Guntram cried and cowered against the car's door doing his best to separate himself from the passenger's seat.

"Which drugs??" he roared, furious as he realised that Guntram was certainly high.

"What do you have in that box?" Albert shouted and tried to remove it from Guntram's hands, but the youth was too nervous to think clearly and gave the man a punch in the face the minute he touched the box. The strong slap he got in response, enraged him more and jumped against Albert who easily trapped the small boy in a grip in a second. Guntram squirmed hard against him while Albert increased his hold over the neck. As suddenly as the attack had started the boy collapsed against the man's chest and went unconscious.

"What the hell was that?" Albert shouted while the car was driving through the streets. "Get that stupid box, Goran!"

"I would bet all my money they gave him Rohypnol. It has a paradoxical effect. He could almost not stand in that room."

"Shit! We take him to Santo Gesú now! Konrad is going to kill us all!"

* * *

Guntram woke up in an unknown room with an IV attached to his left arm and Goran and Albert sitting around a table in the hotel looking room. He groaned at the light, hurting his eyes and the Serb rushed to his bedside. "How are you feeling little brother?"

"What happened? Where am I?"

"You're in Rome, in the hospital. The doctors will release you in the later afternoon. You had enough of an unknown benzodiazepine type substance in your blood as to organize your own rave, Guntram." Albert said from his chair.

"I don't remember taking it."

"What's the last thing you did yesterday?"

"I went to the Vatican and showed my paints to the Cardinal. They liked my things."

"And later?"

"We had pizza with Alexei. Where's he? Oh God! I remember now, Repin came to the restaurant and Massaiev made me take my pills with a strange tasting water. He forced me to drink half the bottle! Is Alexei all right? Constantin said that the Italians were out and he only hurt!"

"He's in the hospital. Don't worry, he'll get two or three weeks holidays," Goran said. "What did Repin want from you?"

"Massaiev took me to this place and I fell asleep. Repin woke me up during the night to talk. He said he wanted me back in St. Petersburg and that he would pay Konrad in December. I don't want to return! But if he can get to me in front of the Vatican, he can get me anywhere!"

"No, he won't," Goran said.

"He told me you killed people, Goran! Women and children and that you and Alexei killed his wife and seven more men!"

"I did not! He kills his own wife and blames it on me? Coward!"

"He says you dismembered her before killing her and spread the limbs all over Russia!" Guntram said horrified at the memory and Albert chuckled humourlessly.

"Whatever they gave you was certainly a hallucinogenic drug. Goran cutting people into pieces and distributing the meat like a butcher? Please!"

"He said you buried a whole Bosnian village alive," Guntram stammered and both men laughed.

"Guntram, do you have any idea of how much work that is? Of the required logistics to make the hole, throw the people in, more or less five hundred, and cover it? All in one day? Something like this is on CNN in less than two hours!" Goran chuckled, "The war was bloody and horrible, but I was mostly into smuggling weapons! That's how I met Michael Dähler. He caught me and made me spend a full night in a NATO prison. These Russians have a very feverish imagination!"

"I don't know if that's true! I'm only telling you what he told me. He wants me back! He knows even how many times per week I make love with Konrad!" He yelled hysterical and both men fell into a deathly silence.

"How does he know it? Did you tell?"

"Never!"

"What's that doll you carried along?" Albert asked.

"Doll? I have no dolls!"

"Teddy bear!"

"That's Jacques, he's mine. It's a present from my father. I had it in St. Petersburg and Constantin brought it for me. He also had some of my old clothes. I don't know why! He made me speak about my career and then he said I was too tired and ordered me to sleep. I woke up again at eleven."

"Nothing else, Guntram?" Albert asked, sensing that the boy was not totally forthcoming with them.

"He kissed me, twice. He said I should be nice or he would kill Alexei," Guntram confessed. "I swear I told him I loved Konrad!"

"Albert, with all the drugs Guntram had in his system, he could have only spoken a few words, I'm surprised he remembers so much," Goran interfered.

"I only know, Goran, that he was in a hotel room with his former lover and is in perfect health conditions while his bodyguard is in a hospital bed and two of my men are missing," Albert rebuked the man, rising from his chair and coming to the bed. "Why were you in that place?"

"Alexei told me to go there to celebrate my commission. Jean Jacques told him that it was a good place."

"The bear told him?" Albert asked in disbelief.

"No, my bear's name is Jacques. Jean Jacques is the Duke's chef. Alexei's boyfriend!" Guntram shouted back. "Repin took my portfolio too!"

"No, Massaiev gave it to us. With the Cardinal's sketches."

"There were more things in!"

"Forgive me if I don't believe that Repin took all these risks just to kiss you and steal some papers from you! We had to pay a lot to get you back!"

"That's all, I swear! I'm not a traitor! He says he will pay Konrad's money in December and take me to Russia whether I like it or not! He will make me live with his children! He's obsessed with me and he can beat all of you as in a children's playgame! Guntram shouted, becoming more and more hysterical.

"Out, Albert." Goran ordered the man who looked at him furiously. "It's over."

* * *

"Are you on his side now?" Albert hissed in the corridor.

"He's telling the truth. I believe him."

"We don't know! He could be exactly as his family! Traitors all of them!"

"He's not. He's terrified of Repin. He tried to commit suicide to escape him!"

"Are you sure that's true?"

"I saw the scars! You just saw them too! Do you really think he's a traitor?"

"Konrad will decide that, He's hiding something. Repin only took him for a ride and nothing else? Gave him a teddy bear?"

"The thing is clean. We x-ray it. He can have it. I'm more concerned about how this happened, Albert. As you said, your men are missing."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Perhaps there are other traitors around, don't you think? Your people's efficiency leaves much to be desired. It seems all was done on purpose, Albert."

"Are you calling me a traitor?"

"I will reach to the bottom of this, Lintorff. I don't care if you are a Councillor or the Griffin's relative. After all, he has decided to change the succession again."

"Your man Antonov handed the boy to Repin! Only a few broken ribs and an arm? Looks like the beating you get to cover your rubbish! He took him to that place!"

"Yes, strange that at 6:37 he called the butler to tell him to suspend dinner and at 6:44 he called your people to tell about the change of plans. Where were they when they were supposed to follow them? Why is his call not registered in your logs, Albert?"

"I don't know! We're not fucking secretaries!"

"Find an answer soon because the Duke will want to know. He will arrive tomorrow morning. I'm taking Guntram home now."

* * *

Goran was concerned. Guntram had said nothing in the trip back to the house and almost not touched his food. He only asked to be excused and went to bed with 'the blasted animal, I hope his dog eats it.' Antonov had certainly nothing to do with the mess. He was certain of that and the Duke had been the first one to say that the Russian was not guilty. His people were still looking for the two missing Italians but nothing so far. No bodies, no more money in their accounts, wives truly sorry. The Roman *Komtur* was doing his best to find out how the Russians could have entered in his territory without arising suspicions. Repin had terrified Guntram only to deliver such a stupid message? That he will get him back in December. The money he had asked for ransom was nothing compared to what he could have demanded, like for example to be released from his debts to the Order. No, he had started one of his games.

In two hours the Griffin would be in Rome and he would set things in order.

* * *

Guntram was unable to sleep and sat on the window bench, overlooking the countryside in total darkness. It was very late but his mind kept replaying the conversation with Constantin and he couldn't stop peeking at the bear, sitting in one of the chairs. The paper and the key were not in the box any longer and he was glad. If Goran or Albert would have asked about it, he would have broken down and confessed. Or perhaps, the key had never existed and he had imagined it as a product of the drugs.

"That's how my life will be from December onwards. Stunned the whole day so he can do whatever he pleases. Perhaps he will withdraw them so I paint the days I can't fuck. He took me away effortlessly in front of the whole Order. He will do it again and again. It's like Konrad told me, be nice and get a golden cage or get the other. That's why Massaiev was there; to remind me that he's my "keeper". Now, I'm 'safe' because his wife was killed by Goran and the others. That's a lie! Goran is a good man! Spooky, yes, but he wouldn't hurt a fly! He was always nice to me."

"Shit! I lied to him and Albert, but I can't let them know that one member from my family is still alive and with Repin! It has to be my uncle Roger! I could phone Chano, but I would only endanger him if Konrad finds it out."

"I miss my papa so much!"

The door opened and Guntram almost shrank as a small ball, doing his best to disappear. "*Maus*? Why are you out of bed? You should be resting as the doctor ordered you," Konrad's voice resounded in the large room, his tall frame almost blocking the door.

Partly reassured, Guntram rose from the bench and slowly approached his lover, still thinking 'does he

consider me a traitor, like Albert does?" Konrad only pulled him into a strong embrace and hugged him for some time and the boy felt something breaking inside him and started to cry like a child to release the tension. The words started to come out of his mouth without order and mixed with his sobs as he did his best to control himself.

"He came out of nowhere and hurt Alexei... He will take me back in December and drug me the whole day... He knows when we are together! You killed his wife and Goran scattered her body all over Russia! You're a mobster!"

"So Repin finally exploded because I took Guntram and wants to ruin my chances with him. It was not just only about money as I thought originally." "Guntram, hear me well, nothing that criminal could have told you is true!"

"He will take me back and I don't want to go! He hurt Alexei and Goran tells me nothing about Pietro and Ricardo! They are dead! I know it! Constantin told me they were glad to get a bullet in their heads!"

"So we will have to look in the dump sites near Rome. Retaliation for his seven men." "Kitten, hear me well, you're with me now and I swear he will not take you away from me. You're my Consort and will help me raise my children. We want a family together."

"He knows that we have sex every three days! He knows everything. He entered in the restaurant like he owned the place!"

"Goran is looking for the ones who sold you to him. Once this is solved, there will be no further problems. Don't worry about Alexei, he will be back tomorrow. It's just some bruises and one broken arm. In three weeks he will be as new." Konrad hugged the frightened boy once more. "Don't be so afraid, my love, I'm here and everything will be all right. In two days we'll return home."

"He kidnapped me in the middle of Rome! He drugged me!"

"Yes, I know. He did it because he wants to prove that he's a better provider than I. Simple as that. Repin must believe that you're with me because I'm a better option."

"That's not true!"

"I know my love, but a low scum like him judges people with his own parameters. He's furious because I have you now and have given you a place by my side." Konrad reasoned with Guntram while he pushed him away from his chest. "You should be resting, kitten."

"Don't go, please. Stay with me."

"I was hoping to get an invitation," he chuckled merrily. "Go to bed and wait for me. I have to change myself."

Upon his return, Konrad, changed into his nightclothes, found Guntram in bed, without his own ones. "Kitten, you've just been released from a hospital and want to do it?"

"Please, I need to feel you," Guntram pleaded and Konrad removed his pyjama jacket, tossing it aside before joining the boy under the covers. With great care he put his arms around him and kissed him tenderly, not expecting that Guntram would kiss him back with so much passion, almost jumping on top of him. "Kitten, I do want to turn fifty," he chuckled but increased his hold over the youth.

Guntram didn't waste his time with words and only kissed Konrad, willing that it would erase the bad memories and the burning sensation he felt where Constantin had touched him. He felt Konrad trying to recover his dominant position and he let him sit on the bed and assume a kneeling position. The man let him go for a second to get rid of his trousers and quickly grabbed Guntram and hugged him, almost crushing him in his need to feel that his love was certainly back with him and once more indulged himself in the inebriating kisses he was receiving. He felt Guntram positioning himself on top of his lap and placing his thighs around his hips while his arms laced his neck. Konrad's mouth abandoned the young man's lips and kissed his neck, collar, his teeth delicately nibbling the white flesh and making him moan, to suck his lover's nipples, driving him mad with desire.

"Take me now, please."

Konrad had never seen his lover so beautiful as that moment, his body bathed in the moonlight and his pupils dilated by desire, making his eyes much larger than they normally were. He tried to disentangle from Guntram to get something to ease his penetration but the boy applied more strength to his hold over his neck not letting him move. "Now," he whispered and Konrad went mad with desire.

Guntram whimpered when he was penetrated no matter if his lover had tried to be gentle and was waiting for the pain to disappear. They moved in unison, enjoying the pleasure they were giving to each other, his sole concern his partner's satisfaction. Both climaxed together but didn't split keeping the other close to his heart.

"I thought that I've lost you," Konrad confessed.

"No, you won't. I want to be with you till the end."

"You're my life, Guntram. Without you, I would destroy everything."

"Don't let him come near me ever again, please Konrad. I don't want to lose you too. I love you."

"Never again. You're my only love. We are a family now and I will defend it to my last breath, so help me God."

* * *

The electricity in the air could be felt by all the men sitting around the table in the library; Konrad, Goran and Albert.

"Well cousin, Can you explain me how my Consort was kidnapped in your territory and his bodyguards killed or beaten in front of the Vatican?"

"We are investigating the facts, Konrad."

"Investigating or covering your incompetence?"

"I'm doing my best with the available resources! I still have my doubts about this incident. Repin kidnaps his former lover, who now shares your bed, and only speaks with him and gives him a teddy bear? Please! You're letting your personal feelings interfere with your judgement. Any other person would be under severe questioning."

"Of course, why didn't I think about it by myself? Guntram kidnaps himself, takes benzodiazopins of an unknown origin, probably produced in his atelier, just to jump in the bed of the man he fears most in this life," Konrad sneered to become very serious once more. "Answer the question, Albert."

"We found Ricardo Taviani's body near Ostia's harbour. One clean shot to the head with a 9 mm. The other, Pietro Mariotto is nowhere to be found. His wife told us he was having an affair with a Romanian girl from a brothel. We looked for her but she has vanished. The local *Komtur* is after her and this man. What should we do about the wife?"

"Nothing, leave her alone. She has enough. Find Mariotto and execute him along with his little slut. She must have been the contact."

"It will be done."

"Now, regarding your own responsibility in all this."

"Konrad, I take care of the bank, not this!"

"You're perfectly aware that your *Komtur* has been lax in his watch and this is because you have been lax on them. Goran and his people will oversee your work from now on, Albert."

"I will name Karazan Bregovic as your liaison officer with the *Komturen*," Goran said. "You obviously are not up to run your own territory."

"You can't fire me! I'm a Lintorff and my line was the one who put your one in power!"

"Because you're my cousin, you're on probation now. Otherwise, you would be six feet under, Albert. My consort was taken from me by the same people you appointed as my bodyguards. One of them is dead and the other is on the run. What's next, Albert? Repin can shoot me during Mass at St. Peter's? This was a direct blow to us and be very glad that nothing happened to my consort or we would be speaking in much different terms! Go back to Milan and stay there! Italy belongs to Karazan Bregovic now!"

"It's an insult to all of us!"

"You have become self indulgent and lazy in your duties toward the Order! I will have to straighten your eldest son so he's worthy of being a councillor in the future!"

"You have again a serpent in your nest and are too blind to realise it! Guntram is in league with Repin!" Albert shouted enraged.

"Repin obtained something more than a kiss and a talk, Albert. We had to give him the passwords for the five accounts his wife had in England. All accounts were emptied ten minutes after Goran gave him the data. Almost £386 million. A very profitable night for him," Konrad admitted sullenly. "It was certainly about money. He used Guntram as his pawn, exactly as I did in St. Petersburg. You have your orders now, dismissed."

Chapter 24

"I think I found Jacques! Look, in the picture. It's him; it's a Richard Steiff teddy bear, model created in 1902, fifty-one centimetres, dark chocolate mohair felt, circa 1905, estimated price £1,000 to £3,000?... Sold for £4,348! Who pays so much for a bear?" Guntram was baffled, his stare fixed on the brilliant pages of the Christie's 1999 catalogue of Teddy Bears.

"A piece with provenance, like your own one, is more valuable. Have I told you about our insurance company services? We specialize in collectors items like this thing. Friederich, with such noble origins, this bear will require using the Lions' service. It's already sitting in a high chair at Guntram's studio."

Friederich chose to ignore the childish bantering; without a doubt Konrad was for some dark reason, jealous of the attention the old toy was receiving. His pupil could live with Guntram forgetting the world around him when he painted, but that he had kept the bear with him or taken it to Ostermann to ask him if he knew someone who could tell him anything about the bear as he remembered that it had belonged to his grandmother, Sigrid zu Guttenberg Sachsen, therefore it should be almost an antiquity.

"Or perhaps we should keep it under a glass," Konrad mumbled, upset that he was purposely being ignored.

"Must be its colour. I don't remember this particular dark shade when I was a child. Most of them were beige or light brown," Friederich commented while he sat the teapot and pastries over the table in the library.

"Maybe it's only dirty," Konrad suggested and Guntram looked at him with real fury in his eyes.

"Where is Luitpold, my Duke?" Friederich asked and Konrad blushed violently much to Guntram's astonishment.

"Who's Luitpold?" the boy asked, believing that he was going to hear one of Konrad's adventures.

"No one," Konrad barked and throwing a killer's look at his Tutor.

"He's more or less the size of Jacques, although he's forty years younger and in a honey colour, Guntram. He was very well loved and carried all over the house by its ear. Perhaps we will have to remove it from its box," he pondered, serving the tea to Guntram.

"No! Leave it as it is. It's well packed and protected against mots!"

"Yes, that's true. I remember his Excellency asked me to bring it to Steiff's in Zurich so it would be cleaned it and packed, not six or seven years ago. But I don't remember where the box is."

"Don't take me for a fool, Friederich! You're perfectly aware that Luitpold's box is on the second shelf counting from the top in my dressing room! To the left!"

"How dumb of me, my Duke," Friederich exclaimed in mocked contemplation, before leaving the room.

"Do you really have a teddy bear, Konrad?"

"It's packed since I was ten. I only asked it to be repaired because the ear was about to fall off."

"We might have to put them together. They could be friends."

"If I were you, I would hide my bear before the children come and find it. I don't think it would survive another generation, especially if the babies carry the Lintorffs' genes," Guntram had no other choice than laughing and dropping the subject.

The bear remained in its chair much to Konrad's annoyance, but he never mentioned the subject again.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
November 24th

I'm still trembling from the nerves. This morning I went to Ostermann's studio to help with the packing of my four paints for the exhibition in Berlin; the Madonna, a group of children reading; some of the women I paint with in the studio, copying a nude model and a portrait from Marie Amélie von Kleist, as she accepted to let me make some sketches from her face but with dark brown hair as I feel it looks much better than the platinum blonde look. She comes a lot to the house as she studies with Armin Banking and Finance. Both are in the second year. Can you believe that I have to sit with them in the room they're studying per Konrad's orders? It's horrible! I do my best to make

myself scarce and mind my own business with my pencils or watercolours, but I'm perfectly aware of Armin's romantic intentions toward her.

I hate completely to be a chaperon, third wheel or whatever it's called. It's not as if Armin is going to jump on top of her and drag her under the oak table. They're twenty-two or twenty-three years old and I bet she's not a virginal maid to be protected. Konrad can be so old fashioned. They are just cousins in second or third degree. Gertrud is Albert's cousin. IF Ferdinand von Kleist would have told me something like "take care of my daughter's virtue", I would be defending it, but he doesn't care at all. The mother also not.

It's really not my problem if they run away to their things after school or after studying here on weekends. That bloody garden-forest is sixty acres and very cold for me to run after them. I guess he's in love with her since he was twelve and now it's his big break.

Back to the story. We were packing the things when a private courier arrived with a letter for me. "I'm not your post office, boy." Sweet Ostermann told me while I opened the letter not knowing who could have sent it. I use the e-mail mostly with my friends from the University or former school classmates. I guess everything I write is monitored by Goran's people, just for security reasons. After all, Konrad leaves all his papers, blackberry, laptop and many other things on my desk or in the bedroom. Inside the envelope was only the paper with the safe box directions and the key. I was frozen and lost the minute I saw it.

I didn't know what to do and I thought that if he can send this, then he can take me away too.

I asked Heindrik to drive me to the bank and first he complained a lot but gave up when I told him I had a letter from Repin. He colourfully swore in Swedish and left me in front of Goran's office as "the Duke is in meetings, dear. Perhaps in two hours I could make a hole in his schedule," according to Monika van der Leyden, his secretary.

"When did you get this?" Goran asked me in a way that chilled my bones, looking at the paper and key, without touching them.

"An hour ago. At Meister Ostermann's studio."

"And you're perfectly aware of its use and provenance, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am. Repin gave it to me in Rome and told me someone from my family had given it to him along with my bear."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know."

"That's not an acceptable answer, Guntram."

"I thought it was from my uncle Roger and the Duke hates him! I didn't want him to go after him! Then, I only got the box with the bear and I thought that maybe I had dreamed about it with all the drugs I had in!"

"Roger de Lisle is a traitor and so are you for hiding this information to us."

"I'm not a traitor! I don't even know if this is from him! Why would he give it to me if he never cared about me?"

"You lied to us. You said the bear was in St. Petersburg with you but you had given it away at the age of twelve, to your lawyer's and he sent it to a "living relative of yours" who happens to be in league with Constantin Repin, informing him about our methodologies. Am I wrong, Guntram?"

"No, Goran, you're right," I whispered.

"I will increase the vigilance over you, Guntram. This is very serious and dangerous for you. I will speak with the Duke. Leave the things here and return to your teacher's."

"Yes, Goran."

"One more thing. What is inside the safe box?"

"I don't know. According to Repin, it should be one Bronzino drawing, very valuable, from my father's, some gold bullions, photos and nothing more. I can't remember well."

"Go back to work, now."

I spent the rest of the day in the studio trying to paint but it was impossible. Finally, I settled for studying. At four, Heindrik drove me home and I remained in my studio with Mopsi. Late in the evening, Konrad, Goran and Ferdinand arrived and locked themselves up in the library. Friederich told me they wanted to see me.

They were sitting like in a courtroom. Konrad in the middle, Ferdinand at his right and Goran at his left. They wore sour and stern expressions and none of the greeted me or offered to sit.

"Keeping vital information from us is a serious offence, Consort," Ferdinand started and I looked at him, shocked to hear him using that word with me.

"I didn't consider it important, sir."

"Unimportant? A link to one of the men who rose against us and tried to kill your own Consort and Griffin?" he asked in disbelief.

"I didn't believe it was real, I never saw this paper again, till today! I thought it was a taunt from Repin!"

"We decide what is real and not! Not you, boy!" Ferdinand shouted me. "You didn't tell the Summus Marescalus and much less your Griffin that a member of your family wanted to contact you and that you had physical evidence that could lead us to him or her!"

"I didn't have anything! The paper and the key disappeared!"

"You're a traitor like your entire bloodline! We accepted you like one of us and granted you our protection and you betrayed us!" Konrad said in low voice and I looked at him.

"I didn't betray you nor the Order. I don't even know if this is true or another twisted game!"

"You will be punished for this."

"As the Hochmeister wishes," I said. "He knows better."

"Tell us the name of your lawyer." Goran said for the first time.

"No, look for it by yourself."

"This is not a game boy!" Ferdinand roared and hit the table with his fist.

"I have nothing to say. Do what you have to do. I will not endanger a family's life because of your paranoia." I took one step forward, removed the seal and left it over the table. "I never saw my uncle in my life and never knew about him till this time. I have no reasons to believe that this is from him."

"Is it your teddy bear or not?" Goran asked.

"Yes, it's mine. Now, give me back the key and paper because they are mine, not yours and I'm sick of your threats."

"You have no idea of what we could do to you," Ferdinand said menacingly.

"I was already in a torture séance, thank you. I survived it and said nothing. Can you tell the same, Ferdinand? Or are you just one of those desk officers? The only one who can speak here is Goran."

Goran, to my surprise, chuckled, visibly amused. "It's true, Guntram. Not even the Duke was on the receiving end as we, little brother. Dähler is damn right, he calls you Dachs, badger because he says that even if you're midget size and frail, you have more teeth than a crocodile. Not many dare to insult us."

"Or tell Repin to piss off," Konrad smiled in an ironic way.

"Next time you address to me with such a tone, boy, I'll spank your bottom, so you learn manners!" Ferdinand said partly sneering.

"We don't believe you are a traitor. If you were, you would have kept the things and used it against us. You came to us not even an hour after you found it and that's all right, little brother," Goran said and I looked at Konrad, totally abashed.

"Pick up your ring, Guntram," he simply told me. "Tomorrow you will go to Geneva and open that safe box with Goran. Of course you can keep the painting or the gold, but we will keep any document in there. We will also investigate who opened it and you will not interfere any longer. Is that clear?"

"No, Konrad, I can't let you hurt any member from my family!"

"We are your family, Guntram. They abandoned you in 1989 and now they are only trying to use you to attack us. They never cared about you before and now, they come with golden presents and love when you became my consort? You can keep the toy as it was a gift from an honourable man. Perhaps your father even saved that money for you and asked Roger to give it to you but he kept it who knows why." Konrad rose from his chair, circled the table and embraced me and kissed me on the forehead in front of the other two. I felt very uncomfortable, but they said nothing or made any gestures. "You can breathe again, Guntram," he joked with me but two seconds later he said: "you must always inform everything. We don't like leaks of any kind or from anyone."

"Konrad, whoever is this person, is my only family left. Perhaps is someone from the Guttenberg Sachsen because both things belonged to my grandmother."

"The Guttenberg Sachsen have no problems with us. In fact, we buy wine from them and finance several of their ventures. If they would like to approach you, they can do it at their convenience. If you want to meet them, I can introduce you to the old Udo Guttenberg Sachsen; he's the patriarch and would be delighted to meet you. You are a member of the Lintorff family."

"Like I, for example," Ferdinand told me. "You're invited to all their Christmas parties and one day you find yourself fighting with your two sons over a hard gingerbread cookie and you realise that your youth is over."

*"They're not that bad, Ferdinand. You can go now Guntram. Friederich will call you for dinner."
I was dismissed like a child and here I'm writing before dinner. Probably tomorrow I will have to travel
with Goran to Geneva.*

* * *

"Do you believe him, Konrad?" Ferdinand asked.

"Of course, he came to us. Knowing him like I do, he was thinking that he was protecting the snake from us, then he was afraid for not telling us about it, but didn't know how to get out of the mess and finally exploded when he saw it back, probably thinking this is a threat from Repin."

"I have checked all his materials, friends and movements for a long time and he has no contact with him or ever had," Goran said

"Investigate all what you can over that account. I was expecting him to make a move over Guntram. Execute him on sight, is that understood?"

"Very well, my Duke."

* * *

No matter how many times Goran had tried to reassure Guntram in the car, the young man was more nervous than ever. It was a mix of longing, fear of what he might find inside and desire to see it. His growing concern over his uncle's fate also weighed on his soul. Goran had told him countless times that there was nothing to be worried about because he believed in his innocence, although he had been somewhat sneaky and little forthcoming in Rome; "don't you ever do something so stupid and much less for people who cares nothing for you!" The recommendations were very simple; "You can touch the jewels, the gold and the painting. The rest of the papers will be examined by us first and then given to you. We don't want any more leaks or troubles."

The Serb parked in a garage and led Guntram through many small streets they reached an old stylish building in a quiet area. The huge and imposing archway made the youth lose the little courage he had left and he stood there, almost refusing to enter.

"Come on, Guntram. Only Masons, nothing dangerous unless you have your money with them," he pressed and almost dragged him inside the bank, toward the receptionist, a middle aged woman. Guntram stood, mute as before and Goran sighed irritated at the delay and waste of time.

"Good morning, Mr. de Lisle is here to check his safe box."

"Yes, of course. May I see your identification cards, sirs, and the safe box's number, please?" she answered without flinching and Guntram gave her the paper and his passport, and Goran his Swiss ID card.

"Are you a Swiss resident Mr. de Lisle?" she asked.

"That's none of your bank's concern, Madam," Goran replied very irked.

"Do you have your key with you, sir?"

"Yes, I do," Guntram whispered.

"Would you like to go to the vault alone?" she asked with some emphasis in the last word, looking at him in the eyes.

"No, I'll go with Mr. Pavicevic."

"Very well, Sir. Someone will accompany you soon."

"Thank you, Madam," Guntram whispered while she rose and left the place with their documents. "Why does she need to take all these precautions? Don't they check such things at the vault?"

"Normally, yes, but if you're the third in command of their main rival, they should be cautious. This is a very small institution. I wouldn't be surprised if Mornay, the CEO, comes by himself to open it."

Some time later, after waiting in the foyer, Guntram entertained with the turn of the century chandelier and the Art Nouveau decoration and Goran in his own private war of looks with the two large security men who had come almost immediately, an old man came out of the elevator and approached Goran very warily.

"Good morning. My name is Charles de Mornay, I understand you must be the Vicomte de Marignac," he said, extending his hand to the boy and ignoring Goran on purpose.

"How do you do, sir? Guntram de Lisle, at your service," the youth answered, shaking the banker's hand under the barely concealed look of contempt from Goran.

"You look very similar to your father. I met him many years ago. It was a great tragedy. Such a clever lawyer and good man."

"Thank you very much," Guntram whispered, starting to feel sick.

"Are you all right? You don't look well."

"I have a heart condition, sir. Just a second, please."

"I could accompany and stay with you, if you prefer it."

"No, thank you. Mr. Pavicevic is a friend of mine. I asked him to accompany me today," Guntram rejected the offer kindly.

"I assume you know where your loyalties lie, young man."

"His loyalties are with his own kind, Mr. Mornay," Goran interfered, throwing an assassin's glance at the old man.

"There are many doors opened for him beside your own, Mr. Pavicevic."

"We existed long before you and we will continue to exist for many centuries more."

"We will see. Follow me please, Vicomte." The banker walked back to the offices, leaving the foyer and descending the grand marble stairs to the first underground. Another man was waiting for them and slightly bowed his head to the old banker. "Vicomte, this is Mr. Dubois and he is in charge of the vault. He will assist you in whatever you might need."

Mornay left the room after saying good-bye to Guntram, ignoring Goran once more as the other did the same. The middle age clerk asked Guntram to sign some papers and show him his small key. "Ah, one of the oldest ones. I'll take you there."

"What do you mean with one of the oldest?" Guntram asked truly puzzled.

"These ones are hired for thirty years. Rare nowadays, but it was usual to have one forty or fifty years ago. You pay in advance and it's yours for thirty years. You have one more year grace, but if you don't remove your items, they'll belong to the bank. It's on the conditions. Your contract expires on December 8th 2015. You should update your data or we will send the reminder to this address in Argentina."

"Yes, of course," Guntram answered, taking the card and pen the man had offered him and started to fill it with his address in Zurich.

"Have you ever been inside a vault? It can be a bit claustrophobic," the man asked jovially.

"No, never,"

"Well, it's not so impressive as people think. It looks like the mail boxes room in the post office. We have to open it together. I will ask you your fingerprint for security reasons, sir. Just, touch this screen." Guntram placed his right hand on the device. "Thank you. Now your companion and he have to sign also these papers."

"Why do they want so much to get rid of me? My fingerprints? Do they think I'm an amateur booked by the police?" Goran pondered when he also signed and let his right hand be scanned. There was something very wrong in all their procedures, completely outdated and ridiculous.

Both men followed the old clerk through several corridors till they reached to a brightly illuminated room after passing a gate with iron bars as thick as a man's arm. The man inserted his key first and turned it around, asking Guntram to repeat the same and the box was liberated from its metal niche. The clerk took it and carried it with some effort to the aluminium table in the centre of the room. "Please, wait till I'm out to open it. It's a security precaution for you, sir," he said and Goran looked at him very suspiciously. The man left the room in haste and closed the iron gate.

"This is it, Goran," Guntram whispered, looking at the long, narrow, bronze colour shining box. "I'm not sure if I should."

"It's yours, you have to decide."

"All right, I guess I should," Guntram inserted once more his key and turned it to the right, easily opening it. He removed by complete the cover and inside were a large black leather tube, an old Chisties' catalogue from 1955, five small jewels boxes, one medium size box and a large blue metal box, along with a closed envelope, with his coat of arms and simply addressed to him with "Guntram" written in dark ink. He took the envelope and when he was going to open it, Goran removed it from his hands.

"Remember what we said about papers?"

"It's mine, Goran. It's a letter from my father. Give it back! I already know that the Order executed my own family. What could be more hideous than that?"

"No, Guntram. I'll check it first."

"Do you really want that we fight here for a piece of paper? I swear I'll give you any documents in here, but the letter is mine."

"You wouldn't last two seconds against me."

"I can ask that you're removed from here. Now, give me my father's letter back. I will not repeat it."

"As you wish," Goran growled and returned the envelope to the incensed boy.

Guntram took the letter and broke the seal quickly looking inside and only finding one handwritten page that he got out. Very quickly, he closed the envelope before Goran would see that there was a small visit card inside too. "See? Only a letter. Can I have some privacy?"

December 7th, 1988

My dear Son,

I hope your life has been good and full of happiness these past twenty years. You were a true blessing for your mother and me. We were always very proud and considered ourselves fortunate that you would come into our lives. Alas, God had different plans for us and we couldn't be together. I always loved you, since the first moment I saw you sleeping in that crib at the hospital. The nurses let me hold you, and you opened your eyes and looked at me for a brief moment and I loved you with all my soul.

I've been diagnosed with cancer. There's not much to do now as it's in a well advanced stage. Surgery will only delay the inevitable for a few months and the result will be the same. I don't believe that I would be able to endure it and I prefer to decide my own fate. It's selfish from me to come back to you and die at your side, forcing you to share my pain and sorrow. The damage on your psyche would be much harder that if you're only informed of my disappearance. I can only promise that I would to my best to remain with you as long as I can.

I hope you have taken good care of Aloïs, but I believe you have renamed it Jacques. We all change names during our lifetimes. He was a good friend during my childhood and hopefully yours too. Perhaps, your children inherit him too.

In this box is all what I can leave you. Don't believe anything they tell you about me. I always did what I believed to be the best course of action. All my deeds were carefully meditated beforehand and I acted with the best intentions. I never wanted anything for myself and would give gladly my life for you, as you are my greatest treasure.

Live a long, happy and honest life. Love your brothers in this Earth and respect the commandments of our God. Pray that we would be all reunited in Heaven when our hour comes. I receive my death with joy and the firm conviction that it's for your best interest.

You were a wonderful Son for me and I'm very proud of you,

Jerôme de Lisle Guttenberg Sachsen

Guntram sighed after finishing his reading. He felt very sad and alone without his father. In an effort to suppress the tears he wanted to shed, he extended the letter to Goran with a "you can check it, now. He loved very much and I never knew it till now."

"Little brother, keep it. I see this is personal. I will not read it. It was most rude of me to ask for it. Do you want to see the rest of your things? There are no documents here."

Guntram was still too moved to speak so he only nodded and took the large box out. Inside were forty small gold bars in five hundred grams and fifty ounces of Platinum, all of them stamped with the Credit Suisse logo, and carefully organised inside the box, with tags specifying the number of them. "Do you have any idea of what is this, Goran?" he asked dumbfounded.

"Gold and platinum. Good as a saving method. The value is more or less stable and it's easy to trade without arising suspicions. At today's prices the gold should be around €300,000 and the platinum another €50,000. Goran explained him.

"So much?"

"It's a good sum, but I believe the jewels and the painting are more valuable. Open the boxes.

"It looks like a topaz." Guntram said at looking the first necklace with a shiny but opaque light brown gem in the middle of an array of small diamonds, accompanied of a bracelet and earrings.

"Boy, I will never take you shopping with me," Goran snorted. "That's not a topaz! That is a very rare and very expensive yellow diamond! That monster must be around four carats!"

"And this one? It has a funny colour," Guntram asked after opening the second box containing a

necklace and matching earrings.

"Boy, you need urgently to spend a week or two in Amsterdam. That's a pink diamond! Give me one of those and I'll get an F-2!"

"I don't know! It's not my field of expertise!" Guntram protested while he opened the next two boxes containing two small animal brooches in each one of them. They were very delicate and Guntram liked them immediately, feeling that they were more than a simple ornament. "They're very nice, a panther, a lion, a giraffe and a bird."

"You're hopeless. Can you look inside the boxes and read the tags? Even the papers are attached to them!" Goran whined in frustration.

"Fabergé? Was he also making jewels? I thought he was only into eggs."

"You need to study more, Guntram. Really. If those are original and real, well, the price is very high."

The boy opened the next large box and inside was a small crown with short and long alternated points ending in pearls

"I would say that is a viscount crown, very unusual to see one. I don't understand why your father had it if he was the middle child. It should have been in your Uncle Pascal's hands or your grandfather's," Goran explained to Guntram, very disoriented. "Was the man not killed in June 1989, just a month after the traitors were punished?"

Guntram placed it back reverently in its box and opened the last one, containing a big necklace with diamonds and emeralds from Harry Winston. He only cast a glance and closed the box quickly, too overwhelmed and took a deep breath before grabbing the large tube. "This should be the Bronzino Madonna. It was in my bedroom when I was a child and I always thought it was a copy. I guess I started to paint because I loved it."

"Should I open it for you?"

"You have no gloves with you. I will not let you touch the paper with bare hands. It could be ruined," the boy smiled to temper his words and Goran smiled at him. Guntram fished in his overcoat a pair of white gloves and put them on before removing the lid and very carefully getting the paper out. With great care, he unrolled the drawing and had to close the eyes when he recognised the familiar, soft, angelic face of a blonde woman with her rubicund baby, raising his hands toward her face. "Yes, it's her."

"It's unearthly beautiful and human at the same time. Now, I know from where comes your style."

"What should I do with all this?" Guntram asked, engulfed in a mixture of grief, surprise and bewilderment.

"I don't know. You must think about it at home. Do you want to take it with you? I think you can't leave the painting and the crown here."

"You're right. I'll take the letter too. Perhaps some of the jewels too; the diamonds and the Fabergé with the certificates."

"You should ask for a valuation. Here, put them in my briefcase." Goran

"Is it not dangerous to walk in the streets with all this?"

"Carrying nitro glycerine is dangerous, Guntram. Carrying a bag full of diamonds in a war zone is dangerous. I'll take it and we leave everything in the car before we go for lunch."

"Yes, I could eat," Guntram smiled weakly as he put his father's letter in his own jacket's pocket and not into Goran's briefcase as it had been the Serb's idea. He helped the man with the boxes and the tube. "Should we take the catalogue too?"

"Yes, but any good house will repeat the procedure to identify and certify the work. It's customary."

"I'm not going to sell it! I want to keep it with me. I thought it was lost when my father's flat in Buenos Aires was sold."

"What happened to his money?"

"In my account for my school expenses. I don't remember how much money was it, but the school fees were very high. According to my lawyer what he left me plus the flat was barely enough to pay for the school, but not enough for the University and I should work. I had a capital of \$50,000, but after the Argentinean government seized everything, it turned out to be \$14,000, frozen in an account. My lawyer used part of the money to pay the notary to write the documents to return the flat Constantin gave in 2003. I thought it was wrong from me to keep it and the Duke agreed with me. Do you know that governments tax you even if you're donating something? Almost one percent of the fiscal value. Abusive."

Goran said nothing but somehow Guntram's answer raised all his alarms. His father had many millions before his death and had only left enough money as to pay for some years of his child's support? And now in a box,

allegedly meant to be opened after his 25th Anniversary were almost two million dollars in jewels and gold? That painting could be worth almost a million. Strange, very strange. Perhaps the lawyer in Argentina had taken some of the money, but not to that point. He would investigate all this as there were many loose ends for his taste.

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's diary
December 2nd, 2005

I'm studying at full pace as I have my tests on December 10th to 12th in London. I'll fly with Heindrik there and stay at Konrad's house in Kensington. I have ready all my presentations and Ostermann checked them first and said they're good. Three subjects, this time and if I pass them, I will have completed my second year of the BA. I'm nervous but confident. I've made my practices with Konrad's furniture here and even the famous Lions Service from Meissen could be photographed in detail and serve as model for a presentation. Friederich had a hard time, but he agreed to let me do it. I guess it was a compensation for making me "baby sit" Armin and Marie Amélie for the past month. Those two are something serious and hot. Two days ago, I caught them in the act under the table. Yes, exactly. She was giving him a "foot job" under the huge oak table in the daily dinning room while she put her more serious face pretending to be studying Statistics. Had I not dropped two of my pencils, I would have never realised what they were doing. I blushed like a tomato and left the room. It's difficult to study with them around. Fortunately, they only come twice per week and on Saturdays.

I left all the jewels from my father at Konrad's bank. I don't know what to do with them. They're gathering dust after they were catalogued and appraised. I prefer to leave the gold where it's. I don't want to drive once again with all those things in a trunk.

The visit card inside the letter was very strange. Only a name; Michel Lacroix and a mailbox address in Brussels. I read it in the toilet of the restaurant we went with Goran and wrote down the address in my sketch pad. I destroyed it because I don't want anything that could lead them to my uncle or whoever is in league with Constantin. I wrote him a letter and asked Ostermann to post it for me when he was going out. He complained a lot even if I had already glued the stamps! He will be furious when he sees that my contact address is his studio. I would like to know someone who knew my father besides Nicholas Lefèbre. I told nothing to Konrad and I feel bad for it, but I think it's for the best. If he writes me back, fine. I'll see what to do. If he never answers me, then I will forget the thing.

Chapter 25

Ferdinand von Kleist's Diary
December 12th 2006

Today I did what I never thought I would ever do. I rejected 2.15 billion dollars in perfect good health. There's always a first time for everything, but I would have preferred to try something else. Ivan Oblomov met me in our offices at 2:00. Without any kind of preambles or niceties—should be glad if I got a “hello, Ferdinand”—he gave me a memory stick and said: “open, check it and tell me if everything is fine for you.”

“I hope it has no viruses, Ivan Ivanovich,” I joked.

“Buy a real copy of Norton Antivirus,” I preferred to keep myself quiet or we would have had troubles. Everything was there and the transfers done matched with our records. Repin had paid everything back before February.

“Yes, but the interests should be recalculated. You have paid for a full year when it's only ten months.” I was desperate to find an excuse to stop what was coming next. We never thought that he had been serious about December. Hell, we didn't think Repin was able to meet February's deadline!

“We were thinking you would charge us for paying in advance,” he said ironically. “Boss says you can keep it all. He wants that you give Guntram back to me tomorrow. I'm flying to Zurich this afternoon. No need to pack.”

“I'm afraid it's not possible. Guntram is in London, taking his tests. Should finish in a week or so and I have to ask the Duke his opinion on the matter. The doctor was not satisfied with his general condition. Flying for so many hours might be taxing for him,” that was all I could think at the moment.

“We had a deal; the money is paid, we want the boy back. Repin will overlook that your boss was playing with his boy.”

“Guntram is not a toy that can be moved just like that! He has made friends in Zurich, attended a studio with a well known and respected teacher, has an exhibition in Berlin in a few weeks and has to finish several commissions for the Vatican, if I see correctly. We had a deadline of February and we intend to respect it,” I said and he was truly upset.

“Von Kleist, your Griffin is a son-of-a-bitch and an idiot if he thinks he can get away with this. Repin will start to send you your precious associates and representatives in plastic bags if you don't return Guntram as soon as possible.”

“It's not in my hands to “return” the lad! Take the money back and we'll speak in February as agreed.”

“We're perfectly aware of what you've done, naming him Consort and all that crazy chivalry shit of yours. Repin saw him first and was always good to the boy. Give him back before we start to visit your territory.”

“The minute you cross the border, my people will repeat what we did to Mrs. Repin, Oblomov. Guntram is one of us now and we have no intentions of betraying one of our kind. Lintorff will agree to renegotiate the terms of the original contract as the guarantee does not want to return to Russia, as he already explained twice to that brick-head you call boss.”

“Kleist, this will be war for all of us!”

“We must find a new compromise; Oblomov, you and I don't want to fight and are sensible businessmen. Our bosses are like to two children fighting for their candy and we must find a way so they stop bickering. Tell Repin that Guntram has that Art show in Berlin and that he will return once it's finished. I'm sure he wouldn't like to ruin his chances to be known. It's in a trendy place and I saw pictures of his works and they're good. One is already sold to the Vatican. The exhibition opens after the holidays. I must have one of the catalogues right here.”

“You sound like a used car salesman, von Kleist.” He dared to use a derogative voice with me and I was nearly throwing him out of my office, but for Konrad's sake, and our own, I ignored his lack of manners. What else can you expect from a Russian?

“The lad does not want to come back to your employer,” there you have, Oblomov, remember that you're nothing but his lap dog, “and between you and me, the boy was never a real guarantee, your oil wells in Georgia were the real thing. The property deeds will be returned immediately. The documents could be ready in two days and we can sign them here or in St. Petersburg if you prefer.”

"If you set a foot in Russia without the boy, the boss will shoot you dead and send your body in a box to Lintorff."

"Can we not be reasonable on this matter, Ivan Ivanovich? We can meet again, let's say on the 15th, here and I'll have the papers ready. I can offer to return half of the interests."

"No!"

"Your boss should be glad. Guntram is practically useless for what you want him. Twice per week or three if he's in an incredible good condition. Less than a wife! Repin gets rid of him and even gets compensation! The boy is permanently distracted when he's painting. Loses his pencils all over the house and now, he has a horrible dog and a flea infested teddy bear. Most of the time he doesn't know who he's speaking with or cares about it!"

"If he's such a nuisance, give him back to us. We all like him exactly as he is. We were all glad to have him around, even after he was so sick."

I have no doubts about that. Guntram is a fantastic lion tamer. In the year he has been with us, Konrad is easier to deal with, and I dare say he's happy with the boy around. He has stopped seeing conspiracy plots everywhere and looks for more proof before reacting to challenges. He comes in a good mood to work and Monika has a very easy life nowadays. She only looks for art books and I've seen her running away for several hours to get one when she could just order it by Amazon, and Konrad said nothing at all! Holgersen and his people loaf the whole day and they don't have to get rid of lovers as in the past. Even Goran is nice and not so grouchy, musing the whole day in his office; looking for better ways to dispose people or checking if we all are loyal to Konrad. That only costs us a fifteen minute talk with the boy per week! Inadvertently, Guntram saved Albert's neck after the fiasco in Rome when he told Konrad that Albert had been very kind with him in the hospital and was truly concerned about him.

Guntram lives in another galaxy, exactly as Oblomov told us, but he's great to have around and loyal to Konrad (to the point of stupidity. If I were him, I would have never told him about the safe box... and he has even left the most valuable things in Konrad's bank!) He's nothing like his bloody uncle or family! Must come from his mother's side or the Guttenberg Sachsen. I assume, he's truly in love with Konrad—for some unknown reason—and I caught him twice already, quickly hiding the notes the lad leaves in his briefcase. I wish I could do the same with my Cecilia, but if Gertrud finds them, I'm dead in the courtroom!

"Is it really worth to start a real war between us just because of a boy?" Oblomov told me.

For this one, yes! He has even fixed the succession issue! "Not really, this is nonsense, Ivan Ivanovich. Why don't you ask Repin how we could sort out this matter peacefully. Only with what he's saving from the interests he could get a full harem!"

"He had already one and preferred Guntram over it."

"A new Picasso or a Van Gogh!"

"The money is back into your accounts. I will come back on the 16th and the boy should be ready to leave for Russia. If not, order several plastic bags in XL size."

"The Hochmeister does not respond well to threats, Oblomov."

"This is no threat, just a warning. Good afternoon, von Kleist." He slammed my door, and I knew that he was serious about it.

Konrad ordered me to keep the capital and return the rest. The lawyers are working full time to finish the papers and have them ready for the 16th and this time, he will negotiate with Oblomov personally. It's very obvious, he will not return Guntram under any circumstance and I wonder what he could have hidden in his sleeve. Repin is a beast when crossed. Blowing up a metro station just because he had some troubles with someone in the Interior Ministry! There were pieces of that journalist in a balcony after his car exploded!

The way he has been "cleaning his backyard" over the past year! Absolutely impossible! He killed all Morozov's people and everyone who had a connection to him! He was going even after his former wife's friends!

Majardze should get rid of the problem in Madrid as soon as possible. The less we need is the uncle coming and telling Guntram that he loves him and wants to be a family again. The boy is so silly that he would believe anything that snake could tell him!

** * **

*Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 14th 2005*

I'm back from London. I passed all the tests and I'm promoted to the third year. I'm very relieved because I was a pile of nerves the minute I was setting a foot out of Konrad's house. Heindrik asked me if I wanted to go to a Museum and I said no. I had enough with the Rome experience. His answer? "Excellent, we go to Forbidden Planet. It's in front of the British Museum and I could take a look at the Star Wars merchandising," I tried to refuse and impose myself but "... save me your tantrum, Guntram. You can choose something, too. I'll take you for an hour to the mummies."

We went to the bloody comic store and I returned with a book about Ralph Mc Quarrie's Art concepts for the films.

I will start to work in the illustrations Coco van Breda, one of Meister Ostermann's students. She wants, and Ostermann is thinking about me, to publish a book of classical children stories illustrated by me. I'm supposed to make some drawings for Cinderella, located in Louis XIV court.

* * *

December 16th, 2005
Frankfurt am Main.

A visit from Konrad von Lintorff himself was a reason of concern for the one hundred seventy-eight employees working in the six stores of the large crystal building in Taunusstrasse. Since 8 a.m. from the CEO to the last coffee boy had been running to have everything perfect shining and in order for his arrival at 11 a.m.

It was a bad omen that his only planned activity was a meeting at 3:00 with the CEO of TransCaucasus, therefore he should have time to make one of his inspections.

Upon his arrival, the Duke had locked himself in his office with Ferdinand von Kleist and Goran Pavicevic, ignoring the rest of the world and shouting with his own CEO, Martin Weiss, for daring to interrupt him.

It was a matter of time that the storm would explode all over their heads if the Duke was in such a bad mood and locked up in his office.

* * *

"Konrad, Repin wants Guntram and nothing else. Money will not be enough. Perhaps we could extend some credits to his subsidiaries, but we have checked his financial status and he stands much better now," Ferdinand said desperately, playing with his pen with his fingers.

"My Duke, I have removed several of our agents in Russia, but not all of them. Many of our associates have business there and have no time to leave their companies if he sabotages them. Only Fortingeray has invested three billion euros in steel and trains," Goran added.

"So I should give him Guntram back? Is that your conclusion, gentlemen?"

"Never!" Goran shouted. "He stays here!"

"What kind of life would you give to the lad? Trapped forever in your house because the minute he sets foot out, Repin will jump to his throat? Remember Rome!" Ferdinand almost shouted and took a long sip of his coffee to release the tension.

"I can protect Guntram, Milan and Ratko will stay with him!" Goran said.

"Do you plan to sleep with him too?" Ferdinand asked and immediately regretted his choice of words when he saw the fire in the Serb's eyes. "I'm sorry Goran, I didn't mean to be disrespectful to you."

"Watch your tongue if you want to keep it," he only growled and focused his attention on the silent Konrad.

The Duke had not spoken a single word since the morning too focused on his thinking. He had only briefly talked with Guntram, when the boy was still partly asleep in bed. 'No one has ever been so generous to me ever,' he mused as he remembered his previous night's kisses and tender words. 'Goran is right; I will never let him go. He's my children's tutor and my only love.' "Gentlemen, I have to speak with Oblomov as he's the only person who can convince Repin to drop this," Konrad said finally.

"Oblomov wanted the boy back too! It seems he keeps Repin happy and off their necks!" Ferdinand shouted.

"Ferdinand, Oblomov is more reasonable than his boss and willing to take over. A war with us will be

more costly for him than for me.”

“If we get a single trouble because of Guntram, the associates will kick you out!”

“And they will learn the same lesson the de Lisle learned in 1989! The Council is on my side and they named him Consort! He got an ample majority!”

“The-boy-is-not-the-problem-but-his-former-lover!” Ferdinand shouted irritated.

“Any suggestions?”

“No, just don't charge like a raging bull!”

“Ferdinand, I'll make an offer and if they refuse it, we will proceed to the next level. Do I have your support Goran?”

“As always my Griffin. The *Komturen* are upset at the Russians' penetration of our territories and would like to settle the score once and for all. It's impossible to walk in the south of Spain without crossing them!”

“Has the issue in Madrid been solved?”

“Uncle Mladic is very pleased with my cousin, Slobodan Majardze performance.”

“Excellent. Shall we have lunch, gentlemen? There was this place near the ECB where I used to go with my father and they serve—”

“Not again *Rouladen*!” Ferdinand whined.

“There are other things too and the wine list is from is from Franken.”

“Ever heard of trying new things? There's a whole new world out there, Konrad.”

“No, why? If something is good, stick to it.”

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's diary

December 16th

I never thought that Armin and Marie Amélie could make so much trouble in so little time. I know they're sweethearts for some time and I'm glad for them, but today was too much for my taste. As they had still finals, till the 19th, both were coming here daily.

In the morning, I was ready to go to the studio to paint the whole day the in peace, but no, Friederich—in league with Heindrik, had other ideas. Both caught me at the old Guards Hall where bodyguards, and sometimes Friederich, when he's not in his office, hang around. The Swedish was looking very comfy and immovable. “No, Guntram, it's too cold to be outside and it's snowing. Stay at home today and rest. You were running too much yesterday,” the House Manager told me. Is it my fault that Konrad came back from a long trip and wanted to spend some time with me and we were up till three or four a.m.? OK, we also celebrated my grades and according to him, “you're very funny after two champagne glasses.”

“I'm going to the studio! I'll be back at 5:00, I said, but once Friederich has an idea, he has it and he's very stubborn.

“Miss von Kleist will be here at eleven for lunch and studying with young Armin. It would be very kind of you to accompany her.”

Heindrik snorted without lifting his gaze from his laptop's screen, checking who knows which figures.

“Can Armin not look after her? I'm in holidays! I don't want to see more books around!”

“It would be better if you are present, Guntram.” Yes, of course. I have to chaperone little Armin because he will jump to her bones and I don't think she will run away. For Christ sake! They're twenty-two years old and I'm twenty-three since October. What am I supposed to do? Pour a jar of ice water over Armin if he sits next to her? Come to think, maybe that's the idea because there's always one jar of water over the table; I hate this chaperone job!

“I don't want to look after a brat!” I complained

“Welcome to my life, Guntram,” Heindrik, the Wise smirked without raising his eyes from his work. I did want to show him the finger but Friederich was in the room

“You're so funny Holgersen,” I answered back, truly upset with him.

“It's not funny. It's the tragedy of my life. Make an effort and be nice for once. Stay here, warm and quiet. I'll take you for a round of chocolate and cherry cake to that place you like so much. I have to finish these reports or I'll get trouble with Dähler.”

"All right. Make it two pieces and we're in peace, Heindrik."

"Fine, two. Now, get your dog too and let her loose in there. She's a better chaperone than you." Sure, the minute one of them gets funny idea, Mopsi barks. I guess we should get her a husband soon. Defeated, I went to my studio to get my watercolours, pencils and black ink to work with the illustrations so it's not a total waste of time.

"Don't look so sad. I'll bake that apple cake you like so much for tea," Jean Jacques told me when I passed next to him and I smiled.

As announced, Marie Amélie arrived at 11 a.m.—snotty as usual. I don't know what's her problem with me? Before, she ignored me and that was great, but since I'm with Konrad, she likes to be nasty to me and I have to put my best face as she's a lady... and I'm being very generous with the definition. Her mother also dislikes me. All right, Konrad should have gotten someone much better than me, but we are happy together as we are and I have never interfered with their business. It's not like I'm going to run away with his money and leave her penniless.

Both children behaved reasonably well and I only got one jibe: "Oh, that's the Cinderella story! Mama and I visited the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and I believe that would be an incredible set for it. You can feel very related to it, right Guntram?" I only smirked because pouring the whole ink on top of her head would be a waste of materials and I could ruin the carpet too.

"You're absolutely right, Marie Amélie. Your face would be perfect for Cinderella. She made a fantastic job with the prince," I answered and she had the good grace to keep quiet for some time... till lunch. Armin, the charming prince, was too busy drooling over her to hear our exchange.

We ate in peace as both lovebirds were busy with each other, chatting in German and for some reason, Dieter, the butler seemed very uncomfortable with their talk. Once the table was cleared, we all returned to study and I forgot about the world as I was working. Mopsi barked once or twice but I shushed her because I wanted my peace to focus on what I was doing. I will shout with a clear conscience: "it's not mine!" if something happens.

Just before tea, at 4:00, I was expecting to get the cake; they decided to go out for a walk to the old hunting lodge four kilometres away. It's a small house, now with some sofas and chairs and very nice because it's by the stream and Konrad and I like to go there in the summer to read under the old trees. The grass around it is more or less destroyed because a mole lives there and it makes holes everywhere. Perhaps the animal is trying to dig out its own Pompeii. "It's a lost battle with them," according to Konrad.

Of course, I protested against their crazy idea because walking under the snow for four kilometres is too much for me. She called me sissy and Armin, the idiot (hey, that's a good name for a future Hochmeister. If the Spanish had Carlos, el hechizado, we can have Armin, the mutton-headed) only laughed with her "joke". "Come on, Guntram, don't be a grandpa or is the Duke already turning you into one?"

"No, dear. Uncle Konrad, is funnier than Guntram," Armin commented. "It's just a walk!"

Sure!. Under the snow, at 2° C, with a heart condition. Totally forbidden to be in the cold as your body increases your blood pressure to fight against the cold. When I came here, Konrad or Alexei where taking me out for small rounds and only if it was sunny. In St. Petersburg, I was almost never out. "No, thank you, Armin. I'm not supposed to be out for so long in the cold."

"Nonsense, Guntram. Get a good coat and come with us!" she ordered me like a real Lintorff.

"Why don't you go alone? It would be better."

"Guntram, don't be dense. Join us. Friederich will never let us go by ourselves," she told me. Great, you need me to cover your rubbish. "Pretty please?" she added and made her puppy eyes which are very impressive and moving.

"All right," I gave up because I didn't want to have Romeo complaining and accusing me of being "uncooperative" or a "minion" of Konrad (hey asshole, that's my boyfriend!) or a "sissy" (I wonder if you would dare to repeat that word to uncle Konrad or to Constantin)

I went for my coat and when I returned to the library, they both were ready. I decided to leave Mopsi and she was immediately running to complain to Friederich, who caught us by the foyer. "Guntram, outside is very cold for you."

"It's only for an hour, Friederich. It's not snowing any longer. We're going to the lodge and back."

"Take your mobile with you. If it starts to snow call Holgersen."

"Perhaps it would be a good idea if we take the lodge's key with us, Mr. Elssäser," Marie Amélie suggested. "If it's too cold for Guntram, we can wait there."

Reluctantly, well, with a face that Ratko and Milan would love to have, Friederich got his keys out and gave me one. Wow, I was promoted to adulthood. I have my own key now. "All right, Guntram. Get some snow boots."

No, adulthood can wait for me. Under the snickering faces of the other two adults, Armin and Marie Amélie, I went back for the bloody things.

We walked down the main road and it was truly cold, freezing and they took great pleasure in asking me if I had my snow boots, the overcoat, the gloves, the underwear, etc., with me. Back to high school, but in the Beverly Hills 90210 version. I was stuck with Sabrina the Teenage Witch and Wonder Boy! I started to walk faster to leave them to their own devices and I must have done it very fast because I left them behind after some minutes. Almost a full hour later, I reached the small house almost breathless because of the effort. Yes, I'm not so fitted as before and it was starting to snow again. I opened the house and switched on the heating, making a hot tea for me while I waited for them. Some fifteen minutes later, they arrived in good condition. Just when I was starting to worry because maybe they took that shortcut and with the snow you could easily lose the track.

But they were almost on fire. Really. I had to move aside when I opened the door so they wouldn't crush me in their haste to reach to the wall. Fuck, Konrad and I wait to be alone to make our own porn home movie and Constantin never did more than a few touches or a kiss in public (well, Ivan Ivanovich or Boris Malchenko) I felt truly uncomfortable and went back to the kitchen, closing the door behind me. When I was drinking my tea in peace, Armin, partly dressed, came in and told me to go home because he and she wanted to do it.

"It's snowing! All right, let me call Heindrik."

"No way, if you do that, we'll get all of them here! Come on, Guntram, you can't be such a sissy!"

"I was happy at home and it was your idea to come here!"

"You get laid with my uncle and I get nothing and here I have an opportunity. Call Heindrik from the road!"

"It's snowing!"

Marie Amélie entered the kitchen only wearing her short dress, with many buttons off and those Eskimo fashion boots. "Armin, I'm waiting!" she whined and I blushed like an idiot because I was sure what she was waiting for and honestly to announce it so openly, it's too much for my taste. Maybe, I'm a prude, but women should be more modest.

"One second, baby"

"Are you still here, Guntram?" She noticed me.

"Having tea," I growled.

"Be nice and leave us alone, will you? Or do you want to play too? Wouldn't be so funny like with Annette, but perhaps you can do something after all."

I didn't blush this time because my brain was trying to connect with my ears. Did she want a ménage à trois? With me? Is she crazy or just stupid? I must have gaped at her because the next I knew was that Armin was shaking me from the arm.

"Go home, will you? Be quiet about this," Armin growled at me very upset. OK, sports with Annette is fine, but another man in the equation is bad.

"Don't you want to stay, Guntram? Perhaps we can teach you something," She pressed and I was very shocked and tried to hide my embarrassment by putting on the snow boots. "Or do you only like sugar daddies? Have you ever been in bed with someone who's not twice your age?"

"Mind your own business, girl!" I barked because I had enough of her.

"Armin! He's insulting me!"

"Insulting you? I still have not given my opinion of you and frankly my dog does not deserve to be compared with the likes of you!" That was not a nice answer, but at that point I had enough. I'm dragged here, left in the middle of the road and now called "rent boy"? There's a limit for everything.

"Fuck you faggot!" Armin shouted at me and slapped me like a little girl. You need some lessons from Massaiev to know how to hit boy! If you want to hit like your uncle, then know the rest too and be ready to go to the end. If not, don't do it. I returned the blow exactly as Yuri had thought me. One single hit and with "all you have, Guntram, your size doesn't give you the chance of a second," I broke his nose and lip and he went mad. Armin pulled out a knife from his pocket and brandished it over my chest very closely. Boy. That's not impressive; a stoned man twice your size is. I took one of the kitchen knives hanging from the metal bar and the minute he came toward me, I launched the knife against the opposite wall, not to hurt, only to warn, because the next was going to be on his leg or arm. Yes, I learned some things at the slum and then, Yuri taught me some more, like this Israeli fighting method, Krav Maga, "just in case you need it," The knife just passed along his head and neatly stuck on the wall.

"Next one is to your heart and Milan or Ratko are not here to hold your hand."

"You fucking animal!" he roared, but changed his mind about attacking me, because I had the second knife ready.

"You're staining the floor, go to the bathroom, I had enough of you two," I took my overcoat and left the house with the keys still in my pocket. Marie Amélie shouted several things at me but it's not worth to write them down. What was she expecting? She provokes a fight between two men and she thinks that we'll insult or scratch each other faces? I'm not tall or a super Alpha like all these men here, but I'm not a sissy!

I walked back home at fast pace, furious, nervous and with my heart hammering in a nasty way. I had to stop and throw up on the side of the road. Bad sign. I sat in one of the trunks because I felt bad with the cold, the snow and the previous fight. That's nothing for me any longer. Next time, I'll keep distance from those two and if he impregnates her, it's not my problem. Her father should be more careful! I'm twenty-three not forty!

A black Audi screeched its tires next to me and there was my favourite Viking, Heindrik, royally pissed off with me. "Get inside the fucking car, Guntram! Do you want to freeze to death?" he yelled at me. So much for the famous Swedish aloofness. "You should have phoned me the minute those two arrived and threw you out!"

"How do you know?"

"First, you walk in the snow without telling me, and now you do it in the middle of a storm? Do you want to give me a heart attack?"

"I just went out!"

"What were you thinking? You almost killed the little imbecile!"

"How do you know?"

"Video, boy! How did my men pass from watching Playboy TV to Kill Bill? Are you nuts?"

"He started and if you can't stand the fire, stay out of the kitchen!"

"Since when you know how to defend yourself?"

"I'm sorry, Heindrik if your job was endangered."

"That's not the point here! You could have killed him!"

"And he not? Should I remind you that he pointed me with a razor and even threatened me with it? No! How dumb of me! I should go to my knees and cry like a little girl because I'm the stupid boy your boss fucks every night!"

"Don't raise your voice to me! What he did was wrong! What if you missed? His nose is bleeding!"

"I won't. Do you want to try it also?"

"Where the fuck did you learn that?"

"Yuri Rimsky, my former bodyguard and Massaiev too. Former KGB and former French Army. I can disarm one of you if necessary. It's the Israeli method. I'm sick of their permanent jokes and be called a sissy or worse."

"Yes, we heard it, but you shouldn't do that! What if you would have hurt him? He's Albert von Lintorff's son!"

"What if he hurts me? Do you think I stand a chance in a fight with a heart condition and my size? He's 1.85 and I'm 1.73! He learns combat training with Goran! But I forgot, he's rich and can be a brat all what he wants, fucking fourteen years old girls and stomping over all what's beneath him!"

"It's not like that! What you did was stupid and dangerous!"

"All right, next time, I'll shoot someone down," I retaliated and had to get my pills out because with the shouting I was feeling worse and in a lot of pain.

"You couldn't get a weapon from any of us!" he said with a lot of self confidence. Well time to try our Argentinean pickpockets' methods. I learn several things from the children in the school. He parked the car and Milan was running to us with Ratko and four more bodyguards, almost unable to control their laughter, in tow.

"Should we stop the other two, Mr. Holgersen? It's pretty messy over there," Hartick asked.

"Of course! Move there!"

"Pity, some more minutes and we would have gotten a winner for this year's XXX Picture," Milan snorted. "I definitely would buy it! Where did you learn to hit like that? Right to the centre! Almost my style," he said proudly.

"Wait we tell Goran," Ratko added with great satisfaction. I guess I never saw him so happy.

"Please, I'll get in enough trouble with the Duke," I said, realising in how much shit I was getting into.

"Not so cocky now, uh?" Heindrik smirked. "He even said that he can disarm us!" he snorted.

"Have you lost something, Heindrik? Something bigger than your mouth?" I asked like a little lamb and

got his Glock from my jacket and offered to him. All of the men there paled.

"Give me that before you hurt yourself, little prick!" Heindrik shouted and advanced toward me and I knew that that was the moment where I had to draw the line to all those men.

"Stand back or I'll shoot."

He charged and I shoot to one of the lampposts on the other direction to the Castle—no chance I would do it against a place full of people. The Serbs whistled in unison when the bulb some twenty-five metres away exploded. Heindrik stopped when I aimed at his head this time. Without problems, I dismounted the ammunition clip and threw the weapon at him and then, the rest. "I wouldn't have missed, Heindrik. First place in shooting championships for four years in a row. Retired at eighteen because I had to work. My medals are still in Russia."

"Do you want to come hunting with us?" Milan said.

"I can't shoot an animal," I answered.

"See, Heindrik? You and the Strolch were never in danger!" the serious Ratko chortled. "Go inside before you kill one of those pricks, although they deserve it."

I nodded and went inside to be shouted by Friederich for walking under the snow. He said I was almost blue from the cold and sent me to bed... Yeah, with a hot tea and some apple cake. He never mentioned the shooting or hitting Armin and I'm sure he knows about it. I went to our bedroom and honestly I didn't care if Konrad was going to shout at me. I'm sick of all of them! Before they ignored me, but since I'm with him, some of them snicker or despise me. Not the Serbs or Alexei, of course, but Heindrik and all his boys.

I took a hot shower and I still felt poorly, very cold and changed into my pyjamas. I drank the tea Friederich had left and I felt slightly better. When he came to pick up the tray, he entered in the bedroom to check if I was warm.

"About today..." I started, but he shut me up.

"Sometimes, a man has to do things that are not in his nature in order to preserve it. The men learned a valuable lesson today: don't judge a book by its cover. Don't repeat your actions again because it's not our Lord Jesus Christ's way."

* * *

Constantin Repin had never been so furious in his life when Oblomov told him that Lintorff refused to give Guntram back. "It was to be expected," Lacroix had told him. "Lintorff will not give up Guntram. I've asked around and the youth is everything he always wanted. It's more than the physical coincidence. We must convince Guntram to leave Lintorff. If he comes to the meeting, don't hesitate to tell him the truth. He will be shocked and leave with you."

Oblomov had returned without the boy and Lintorff had taken the money but returned the interests, showing that he was willing to fight for Guntram. The excuse had been: Guntram has to work with his exhibition in Berlin, has a cold and is studying for his tests in London. He wanted to kill Lintorff with his bare hands!

"Do not worry, Mr. Repin, he's willing to meet his family. He wrote me in November and used the studio as his contact address. Obviously he has told nothing about me to Lintorff and wants to keep it quiet. I know he has given the jewels to him, but keeps the painting with him along with the teddy bear. He's clever enough as to give away what seems to be the most valuable in order to keep the Duke unaware of our contacts," Lacroix tried to reassure the Russian over the phone after he had exploded to him.

"What was on the letter?"

"Nothing. Just a formal letter asking me if I knew something more about his father."

"Did you answer it?"

"Not yet. I want to see how things develop between you and Lintorff on the 16th. If he refuses, we have another line to penetrate his defences. I've heard these journalists from The Independent Times plan to speak with Guntram during that charity party the Lintorff Foundation gives for its employees and volunteers. Somehow, a journalist, Linda Harris, was invited."

"Will it not be dangerous for Guntram?"

"No, I don't think so. They're sent by Marianne von Liechestein, Lintorff's mother. She hates him with real passion and vice versa. Lock them in a room and Hiroshima will be nothing compared to their clash. She has been working together with Roger de Lisle and these activists. A dangerous and stupid strategy as they're unprofessional and believe that making a huge scandal could stop Lintorff."

"Probably they will get a bullet in their heads when he has enough of their yelling," Repin smirked. "Yes, I saw them in London. Lintorff had a very bad time, but it didn't prevent him to do what he wanted."

"The only way to destroy Lintorff or the Order is to attack him on a personal flank. Before it didn't work because the tool was reluctant to act, but this time Guntram will do his job well. Once he looses him, Lintorff will be devastated and you will let me work alone."

"With all due respect, you have nothing to go against him."

"Money is not the only driving force in this world, Mr. Repin."

But here he was; sitting in front of a large meeting table with Ivan at his side, waiting for Lintorff. And the German was late. The Degas on the opposite wall was a good one but somehow out of place in the seriously decorated room.

"I apologise for my delay, Constantin. We had to take a detour. Some people demonstrating in front of the DAX," Konrad said peevishly, advancing to the middle of the room, going straight to take the head of the table, followed by Ferdinand and Goran, sombre and grouchy as always.

"I understood punctuality was the politeness of kings."

"I'm nothing more than a Duke. We were never Electors," Konrad mocked Constantin's fury.

"Speaking of royals, there's one Vicomte missing in this room."

"Vicomte? Ah, you mean Guntram. No, he will not accompany us today. He was very tired after flying to London for his tests. All of them passed with flying colours, but you should receive his grades pretty soon. He can start his third year, next spring."

"You're perfectly aware of my terms."

"Terms? Yes, the lawyers finished the papers this morning. They have been working non stop since Oblomov visited us, but everything is ready," Konrad said and pressed a button only once.

Before Repin could explode, three young secretaries entered the room carrying several folders and silently left them over the table. "Thank you, Louisa." The Duke waited for the women to leave the room before he spoke again. "Everything is there, Constantin, it was really unnecessary to come all the way from St. Petersburg."

Constantin only looked once to the folders in front of him. "Do you take me for a fool, Lintorff?"

"Those are all the guarantees you provided for the loans. Nothing else. We have not charged you a penalty for returning the capital in advance."

Constantin lost his patience for the first time in a long time, hitting the table with his fist. "Give me Guntram back!"

"Ferdinand, do you remember if we have any papers establishing that we took a person as guarantee?"

"No, my Duke. It's against all regulations, Sire. Slavery was totally abolished in 1895. I believe Russia was the last country to finish serfdom in an attempt to look just a bit modern," Ferdinand answered.

"Therefore, our business is concluded, Mr. Repin, unless you would prefer to discuss some more investments in your region."

"You have no idea what you have unleashed upon your head, Lintorff!"

"Guntram has expressed his desire to remain with his own people and he has been granted a position in the Order. He's one of us, now," Goran growled. "Get yourself another boy because this one is no longer available."

"Remember your words, Pavicevic."

"It goes in both directions, Russian. I already visited your family once."

Oblomov looked at von Kleist, hopeful that he would stop the confrontation as always, but the German remained unmoved. "There's no need to go to these extremes, gentlemen. I'm sure we could find a suitable solution for all of us."

"I'm willing to negotiate with you, Ivan Ivanovich," the Duke said. "I understand this is a hard blow for you, Constantin, but these things happen and we have to learn to live with them. I was in your place once and I would have given anything to have someone as honest as to tell me the truth in my face since the first day."

"You messed with his mind! You drove him mad!" Constantin shouted.

"I? Who deprived him of the most basic medications for his condition? His doctor or you? Why did he try to kill himself? Because he loved you so much that he couldn't live without you?"

"Guntram was perfectly fine till you took him away! He was only shocked by the experience. He didn't realise what he was doing!"

"No, of course not. He broke a mirror with his fists and cut his wrists in the middle of the night, doing his best not to be heard by your man," Konrad sneered. "Since he's living in Zurich his health has improved

dramatically. My own doctor told me that he was not giving him more than a year! He had panic attacks, arrhythmia, fluid retention and something incredible for his illness; high blood pressure! If you take him with you, he will die within months! Is that what you want? To buy him a nice grave and visit him there?"

"Guntram suffered an ordeal and was slowly recovering! He was in coma for two weeks and the doctors were not giving him much hope! I stood by him during the worst and he returned to me! He was happy with my children!"

"With your children, not with you! He hated your business and your lies! What were you thinking? That you could hide a serpent like Olga Fedorovna? I've been forthcoming with him, even if it was against my interests and he loves me for that."

"You? Forthcoming? Are you delusional or just the greatest liar I've ever met? You're warned, Lintorff. Give me Guntram back and I will look after him much better than you! You have till January 7th!" Constantin roared and left the room in a whirlwind.

Oblomov sighed and gathered the folders with resignation. 'After all, Troy started because of a similar mess.' "Ferdinand, speak with the Duke and I'll do the same with Constantin. Perhaps we can stop this bloodbath."

"Ivan Ivanovich, giving Guntram to your boss is not an option. The minute we betray one of our own, our reason to exist, dies," Ferdinand answered slowly. "It has been like this in the past and it's our way. Honour and Duty above all."

* * *

*Guntram de Lisle's Diary
December 16th (cont.)*

I finished my tea and Friederich took the things away, ordering me to sleep a little, till the Duke's return. I fell asleep almost on the spot because now, without the tension. I felt very bad and tired. I guess it was more than eight when Konrad woke me up with a kiss and asked me how I was feeling. I was totally taken aback. He should have been shouting at me for attacking his precious nephew!"

"I'm fine, Konrad. About this afternoon, I can explain it and I'm sorry I was so brutal."

"It's all right Guntram. I'm just surprised you can do it so well, but you owe me a bulb for the garden. You can pay for it now," he smiled while he spoke. "Heindrik is very impressed and no one ever has stolen his weapon. Goran wants to know how you did it."

"If you can steal a wallet, you can do with a weapon. Yuri, my former bodyguard, the one who saved my life, taught me some Krav Mag. Armin should have not drawn a knife on me."

"I should be very careful with you. Who knows what you can do to me."

"Nothing, you really know how to hit. I've seen you training with Goran. I'm not match for either of you."

"Four years regional champion in your category?"

"I was lucky."

"Tell me something, why are you still afraid of Repin?"

"Because he's unpredictable. The one who used to take care of me could hit me without a warning and he knew how to do it without leaving marks. Constantin was also brutal, he never hit me but in his own way, he terrified me because he could hurt anyone just to get his way. He always knew what to tell when he wanted to bend me to his will. He turned me into a child and you can't compare his men to yours; they're criminals. They enjoy to cause pain or humiliate people."

"Do you think you could come downstairs and speak with Ferdinand and me?" He asked very softly. "We'll have dinner later. Being in the cold for so long, all this excitement and walking so much is bad for your health."

"You should be furious with me. I risked Armin's life."

"If you draw a weapon, Guntram, you have to be prepared that your opponent does the same. He should be glad you were so calm about it. If he would do something so stupid to any of Repin's men..."

"He would have been dead in less than a second," I whispered. "I know. I saw it happen once in St. Petersburg. A new boy answered back Ulianov and he just stabbed him in the neck. Massaiev took me away immediately, but I will remember it for the rest of my life. We were just going to the winter garden and they were there,

arguing and in a second Ulianov killed him," I told him.

"He has been disrespectful to you on many occasions. I always wondered why you never complained to me, but I see you can defend yourself very well."

"I'm not a lady!"

"Never thought you were one, but you're sick and should not be under stress. Armin knows it and he deliberately provoked you and forced you to go outside. I'm most furious with him and with Marie Amélie!"

"They're just two teenagers with more hormones than brains, Konrad. Let them be," I shrugged.

"No, you're wrong. I know them better than you and she had no right to tell the things she said to you. Get dressed and meet us in the library."

I did as I was told and went there. Ferdinand was already sitting there and Konrad looked like a volcano one second before it explodes. Not good at all. They asked me to sit next to Konrad.

"I would like to apologise for my rudeness to your daughter, Mr. von Kleist."

"No, Guntram. I've seen the tapes along with our Hochmeister and I have formed an opinion of her behaviour. She knowingly insulted the Consort several times during the day and in the past, according the reports and endangered your health twice today. I support our Hochmeister's decision. She has proven to be unworthy of us."

"Mr. von Kleist we all said stupid things today and I was the worst of all. I will apologise to your daughter tomorrow if you let me."

"There's no need for that, Consort. Insulting a council member is a serious offence, even if you don't participate of our meetings. She's well aware of this. I thank you that you have never complained about her behaviour to our Hochmeister."

"I don't understand," I mumbled.

"She has insulted me with her vulgar remarks," Konrad said, "and this, I don't consent. She has been expelled from our Order. She might remain under her family's care, but she will be no part of our companies. I have removed her name from my will and cancelled all the funds I established in her name."

"But Konrad, you..."

"I would like to offer my deepest apologies to the Consort and beg for his mercy," Ferdinand said gravely and I gaped at him.

"Mr. von Kleist, you and your sons have always been very kind to me. I would not like that today's incident would hurt your family in any way." Perhaps this would soften the Basilisk.

"Very well, the Consort has granted his forgiveness to your line and renounces to any claim against you. You should be thankful, von Kleist," Konrad said. "You may keep your honours, but Marie Amélie von Kleist is shunned from our records."

I wanted to complain about his decision and tell him that this was out of scale for some idiotic remarks and sending me out, but one sharp look from him, told me that this was not the moment to cross the Hochmeister or Griffin.

"Thank you my Griffin," Ferdinand said and knelt in front of Konrad to kiss his hand in servitude. I was speechless. "My life is devoted to yours, Consort. You have granted my sons the opportunity to grow in the Order," he intoned and kissed the ring I wear.

"Ferdinand, do not make Guntram weary."

"Yes, Konrad."

"May I retire, sir?" I asked, feeling very small.

"If you still feel all right, I would like to discuss the situation with Armin von Lintorff, Guntram." Konrad said. "His father will arrive in three hours and although I have an opinion, we would like to hear your side."

"Konrad, we both behaved like stupid children. This should be left as a teenagers' school fight. We will speak and fix it by ourselves. It's nothing else or related to the Order."

"The minute the next Griffin attacks the Consort with a knife, without mentioning his insults to your persona, it's a matter for the Council, Guntram," Ferdinand spoke.

"There's a cut in your jersey," Konrad pointed out.

"I threw a knife at him! I was not thinking at all! What if I would have missed? What if I would have hurt him? I'm as guilty as him!"

"He started the fight encouraged by my own daughter. It's very clear. We have seen the whole footage. You did nothing wrong, were sent to the cold in the middle of a storm—when your heart condition is well known—and threatened with a weapon. You only defended yourself," Ferdinand said very calmly.

"After I broke his nose!"

"After he physically assaulted you!" Konrad roared and I knew that we were treading on a very thin ice for Armin.

"Please, Konrad, don't become enraged. It will not help us to solve this problem. As Ferdinand said, I have not complained at all to the Council, therefore you have no right to interfere in our affairs. We both should be punished. He for not calculating the consequences of his acts and I for not evaluating the risks of mine."

"Are we sure we don't want him in the Council in a few years, Konrad?" Ferdinand asked and I looked at him very surprised.

"No! There's nothing there for Guntram! He will run the Foundation if his health allows him to do it!"

"Please, Konrad. I don't justify Armin, but let us speak with each other and give us both a second chance. We will sort out our differences in a civilized way."

"His father can take him home! I have no use for a spoiled baby in my house!"

"But whose fault is it? His or yours?" I counter attacked him. Ferdinand looked at me surprised but I continued. "He's a spoiled brat, I agree with you, but did you or any of your relatives do something to correct it? Were you expecting that he would magically change his ways if you provided him with everything? If he shows not compassion or empathy for his brothers is it his fault or yours? Did you ever make him really work? I was raised in an environment very similar to his, but I had to fight for each little thing. Take care of my pencil's box because I would only get one per year. Get in time to work or they would fire me and I needed to pay rent or buy food. Going to help father Patricio because none of the rich people like all of you would dirty your Italian designer shoes in the mud. You asked me why I was not furious with my father for not giving me all the money that was in that safe box and made me work since I was eighteen. In a way, I'm grateful to him because hardship taught me to be a better person."

"I was trying to correct all this!"

"How? Shouting with him? A slap? Making him suffer under Dr. Dähler? It's useless because the final responsibility for his acts lies in you, not in him. He's just like a child in a harder boarding school! You said that to command he has to learn to obey; well it's wrong! To command he has to learn to be responsible! Like you are!" I raised my voice and had to lie down against the chair because the excitement was making me dizzy.

"Do you still have any doubts about his value as Consort, Ferdinand?"

"Not any more, Konrad. He's exactly as his father, but less bossy. A real Dachs. Löwenstein was also right," Ferdinand chuckled and I couldn't understand him.

"Your arguments will be taken into consideration, Guntram. Let's go eating before Albert arrives," Konrad said and I thought I was in another place because they had switched their moods so fast that it was impossible to understand. Now, they were only concerned about their dinners!

We had dinner and Konrad and Ferdinand were only talking about business and I spaced out. They had coffee in the living room and I had to be there, drawing and quiet as a mouse, because they were busy with their things. At eleven, Albert arrived, very pale and I wanted to die in shame.

Konrad charged in his usual charming way. "There you are cousin. Tell me one good reason for not finishing you off."

"My Griffin, it has been a horrible misunderstanding! My son would have never dared to raise a hand against Guntram! He has no reason to!"

"No, he raised a weapon against him. We should be glad his fighting skills are so deficient."

"Please, Griffin, hear me as I'm the grieved part," I said and Albert looked at me with true hate in his eyes. "We both fought over a childish thing. Children fight and it's part of their education. They forgive each other and forget the offences till the next time they quarrel. Let us speak and solve the problem between us and I swear that we will behave like adults in the future."

"If the children say so," Ferdinand supported me.

"I give you my word that we will never do anything like this, my Griffin," I pleaded and Konrad looked at me, judging me in a cold and calculating way. "I have the upper hand if he ever tries something stupid again," I smiled and that convinced him.

"I will give your eldest a second chance if he apologizes to Guntram, Albert, but don't think he will not be punished for this."

"We both should be punished, Sire," I said softly.

"Rest assured we will speak about your behaviour later, Guntram," Konrad said very coldly and I really felt afraid and cast my look to the floor. "The Consort has mentioned that all this is the result of our ineptitude as

parents, Albert. I can't place myself in that category yet, but I agree with Guntram's view on the matter: Armin has no real idea of what responsibility is. He plays the serious young man and fools all of us but his acts never carry a real reward or punishment. We were born in the middle of wealth and never suffered a thing. Our Tutors did their best to teach us some humility and empathy but we never learned the lesson. How can we rule if we don't really know what the people under us suffer? How can we lay off someone if we never were in the queue of the unemployed? Did we ever have to strain ourselves to make the money last to the end of the month?"

"With all due respect, cousin, we run much more things than an ordinary man," Albert said.

"Yes, of course. We, adult men but what about the children? How much money makes Armin in the bank, Ferdinand?"

"A normal salary, I think it's 2,000 francs."

"No, he makes 1.456 francs and gets another 4,000 for his normal expenses," Konrad said and I paled. *Shit! That's my account!* "How much were you making in Buenos Aires, in dollars?"

"Fixed income was a little under \$1,000 but with the tips it was almost \$1,400."

"And you paid rent and everything?"

"Yes, but the university there is free, not like here."

"Including your medical expenses?"

"I had no medical expenses at that time. A box of aspirins, maybe."

"Very well. From now onwards, your son will receive no allowance from any member of your family, Albert, including Aunt Elisabetta and Carolina. You will only pay for his school fees. He can keep his salary in the bank and Ferdinand, if he ever misses work or arrives late, deduct it from his salary. He will study in the mornings in the University and be in the bank every afternoon and send him to the office boy job. Someone has to carry the coffee for the traders. He's far away to be a Griffin. He will continue to live with us but will pay for his keep. How much was your rent, Guntram?"

"About \$600 for thirty-five square metres."

"He will pay Friederich 800 francs every month, Albert. If not, he's out. In five, years, if I'm pleased with his work, he will be considered as a candidate for my succession, but for the moment, he's out as he has proven to be a brat. Let's see if he can be a responsible man. He's also permanently removed from my will."

"Thank you Konrad. We're grateful to you," Albert said and I couldn't believe it.

"Armin doesn't deserve to lose all what he has been working for!" I protested

"Guntram, as you should know by your own family's history, physically assaulting the Griffin or any member of the council, including you, is punished by your line's total annihilation. It's in our Code and you have accepted it as all of us have," Ferdinand said and I looked at him horrified.

"You have prevented my son's execution and you have earned my gratitude and respect," Albert told me.

"This is our way, young man. I see that all this was a set up from another line."

"I swear Albert that neither I nor my boys have any interest in the succession. Karl Otto wants to be CEO of one of the hedge funds and Johannes is a scientist only caring about bio-plastics," Ferdinand said. "Perhaps Karl Otto will be in my place one day but that's for the next Griffin to decide."

"Your daughter gave the cold shoulder to Armin since he was thirteen and the minute he's appointed Griffin she decides he's a good candidate? She started the fight and she had provided him with the drugs! It was a miracle he didn't kill Guntram with all the stuff inside of him! Your Johannes is a chemist!" Albert howled, ready to attack Ferdinand.

"Johannes is in Munich at the Max Planck! He has nothing to do with this! He and Guntram are good friends and there's not a single call or e-mail between Marie Amélie and he for the past three months! They don't like each other!"

"That's true, Johannes and I speak now and then. He's kind to me," I supported Ferdinand.

"And I see nothing wrong in their friendship, both have similar natures," Konrad closed the argument.

"That little bitch tried to be in your bed Konrad! Then she ruined Karl's wedding just because he was going to be your successor!" Albert shouted. "My son had amphetamines in his body for a full weekend! He doesn't take them! He says she provided them to him as a natural supplement. You have seen the bottles!"

"It's the word of one against the other and it does not excuse your own son's idiocy. Were I to judge them as I would like, none of them would see the next morning, but it's Guntram's right to decide what to do with them." Konrad used such a cold voice that I had to grip the armrests to keep myself sat. "You already failed me in Rome, cousin, and Guntram suffered. Your son endangered his life. Get out of my sight before I take justice into my hands

and forget the Code.”

“Konrad!” I shouted rising from my place because this would end badly for Albert or Armin. “This is unfair! I’ve forgiven Armin and Marie Amélie. Consider this matter as settled! Albert and Ferdinand are your friends since the crib! If they were against you, they would have hit long time ago and not through me!”

He looked at me for a long time, irked, really furious, but suddenly his anger cooled down and came toward me. “Please, my friend, stop now. They’re your family, not Repin,” I whispered and my head was spinning around from the tension and the fight.

“Very well, Guntram,” Konrad said. “Albert, bring your son back the day after tomorrow. Guntram, go to bed now.”

I did as I was told because I knew he was one step from killing.

Chapter 26

December 20th, 2005
Zurich

The strong cold Guntram had caught forced him to remain in the house for several days. He felt miserable and preferred to remain in his studio, working on the stories. He already was sure that he would miss his own *vernissage* in Berlin because of his poor health. Wagemann had been very clear; absolute bed rest for two weeks and Friederich was the enforcer.

Guntram had apologised to Heindrik for stealing his weapon, but the Swedish had taken it very sporty, telling him that he had just been unaware but next time Guntram would not be so lucky and finally both had agreed that the boy would teach him how to do it when he was feeling better. "From now onwards, you're the *Dachs* just as Armin is the *Strolch*!"

Armin returned on the 20th and went directly to Guntram's bedroom to apologise, under Friederich stern gaze because Konrad had to leave the house to refrain himself from murdering his own blood.

"I was so stupid, Guntram. I thought she loved or at least liked me. When I fought with you I knew what I was doing, but it was as I couldn't stop myself. Before we arrived to the house, she gave me one of those pills, a "rocket" and they're incredible when you make love with someone. You feel like you're going to explode in a million suns. I took it and she had one too because we both wanted to have a great time."

"Why do you need such a thing? You're twenty!" Guntram asked bewildered. "I bet you can turn a lady mad in bed."

"Of course I can, but she had been complaining for some weeks that I was so boring, like my uncle Konrad; that I was becoming like him."

"To your information, Armin, your "uncle" is not boring in bed at all," Guntram confided with a smile. "I'm glad he's older than I because if he were twenty, I would be a corpse already. A happy one," he chuckled, but stopped his laughter when he heard Friederich lightly cough.

"I've been in love with her since I was thirteen and when she agreed to date me I asked my father for his permission, I really did. I wanted to do the things right as I wanted her to be my wife!"

"What happened?"

"My father forbade me to do it and uncle Konrad too. They said that she was not worthy of my affections! I spoke with Aunt Gertrud and she allowed me to visit her daughter when Dr. von Kleist was not there, of course. I thought they were old fashioned, but now I know that it was because she had insinuated to uncle Konrad when she was sixteen and was in bed with one of the associates at seventeen, just to force the man to marry her! She had a video of it and blackmailed him to make it public! His wedding was cancelled and he killed himself a month later in a car accident."

"Could it have been a misunderstanding?"

"No, my father is sure that this was organised by von Kleist! You saved my life and I will be eternally grateful to you, Guntram. I'm sorry for all the hideous things I told you."

"Don't worry; calling me SpongeBob was not the worst. I was going to start to call you Patrick Star."

"I'm glad you can hit like you do. It really stopped me."

"You were a bit out of yourself and me also. I shouldn't have used a knife at you."

"Guntram, I was stoned and didn't kill you by sheer luck. Amundsen and Hartick had to jump on me to control me when they got there. I was absolutely crazy with that thing. I hit Marie Amélie and perhaps would have killed her when she called me impotent. It was a great luck the men arrived. I never hit a woman in my life and then, I did it with her."

"I didn't know that," Guntram said astonished.

"I was furious that she had suggested to fuck with you too. She laughed at me and said that perhaps with a second man, she would feel something because with me, it was like doing it with a dildo."

"Look Armin, forget about this. Be nice and work hard and your uncle will forgive you too. I'm sorry that you were not loved back. Perhaps one day, you'll find a nice girl who copes with you."

"Uncle Konrad is a lucky bastard for having you."

"Uncle Konrad will skin you alive if he hears you saying such a thing," Guntram smiled and offered his hand. "Friends?"

"Of course, my father adores you," Armin shook hands with Guntram.

"Do you know where Marie Amélie is?" Guntram asked, but Friederich rose from his chair and only said: "I think it's time for you to leave, young Lintorff. The Duke will see you at dinner," Abashed, Armin left the room with his head bent.

"Why can't I ask this?" Guntram nearly shouted.

"Because this woman has no relationship to you, child. She's away and her name will never be mentioned again in this house. I'm very pleased with your behaviour and attitude during this unfortunate incident. You followed our Lord's teachings and I believe your father would be proud of you. You should rest now."

Guntram did his best to comply with the order because he wanted to be able to attend the Christmas Market organised by Pater Bruno and Clara von Ribbentrop, if only for a few hours.

At tea time, Friederich woke him up and told him to get dressed because they would drive together to the Church where it was celebrated. "Most of the people you already know from the Foundation. The one in charge is Gertrud von Kleist, so do your best to stay away from her Guntram. The Duke has granted his permission for you to go -and it's your right because you were helping Mme. von Ribbentrop more than anyone -but fears she might be unpleasant to you after her daughter's incident."

"I understand, Friederich. I'll stay in a corner. I only wanted to see one of those Christmas markets."

"You should see one in Vienna or in Munich, child. Perhaps, next year if your health allows it. Remain inside as it's very cold to be in the gardens."

"Yes, Clara already told me she has a job for me, as children entertainer. I have to take pencils and paper and a good provision of Christmas motives," Guntram said with a grin.

"Good, stay where she tells you."

Alexei's offered to drive them in his BMW, but Guntram wondered why another Audi was following them all the time. "Simple precaution, child," was Friederich explanation and he refused to further extend it and started to tell a story about how Albert von Sachsen Coburg had brought the German tradition of Christmas trees and giving toys for the children to England.

The Church's garden and interior yard were decorated with many tables full with traditional wooden toys, pastries, Christmas decoration and different kinds of wooden nutcrackers. Upon his arrival, Guntram was caught by Monika van der Leyden, the Duke's private secretary who introduced him to her Aunt Sophia zu Löwenstein, the old prince's wife.

"You're the father of Johannes," the old princess said with a playful light dangling from her eyes. "Fortunately, he's behaving well, but we can't say the same from Oskar."

"I'm not married, princess. I'm afraid this is a mistake," Guntram said very nervous and the smile of the old woman broadened, while Monika was doing her best to keep her aristocratic poise.

"Claudia brought him home last Easter and she keeps it in her room. Her mother was not so sure about how convenient it could be, but then, Maria cried that she wanted to have Oskar too and we couldn't refuse it any longer. The condition was that they should remain high."

Guntram looked desperately at Monika, but she returned him one of her cold looks as if the boy were a complete simpleton who couldn't remember something so simple. "I don't know any Johannes but Dr. von Kleist's son."

"You created two entities like Johannes and Oskar and you have forgotten them? The girls will be most disappointed!" the princess shouted in false shock.

"Poor Oskar, he's so nice with his blue coat and red rain hat!"

"And Johannes has such a nice white tail!"

"Almost makes you consider vegetarianism," Monika laughed, unable to keep with the joke and Guntram looked at them dumbfounded. "Johannes is the duck you draw for Claudia zu Löwenstein and Oskar is a teddy bear you created for Maria, her youngest sister. Both live now with my cousin Adolf's family. Shame on you for abandoning your creations!" Guntram had to laugh utterly relieved that he wasn't accused of fathering people.

"I've heard that Clara plans to make you work today," the princess said affably. "My husband has already seen your work and I wondered if you would be so kind as to visit us, let's say, after the holidays and show us more. Tita and Elisabetta have spoken very highly of you."

"I've seen several of his watercolours, Aunt Sophia, and they're very nice. When is your exhibition in

Berlin, Guntram?"

"It starts from the 8th onwards. The *vernissage* is earlier, on January the 3rd, but it's only for the press and collectors. I will not attend it because the doctor forbids me to fly for a few months after going to London."

"*Vernissages* are very boring, my dear. Always the same people and cheese," Sophia commented. "You miss nothing."

"I become nervous with so much unknown people around," Guntram confessed.

"I also, but with the years you forget they're there. Come with me, I'll introduce you to some people before Clara chains you to a table and makes money out of you."

One hour later of meeting several people more, Guntram was very glad to sit next to a young and attractive Colombian woman, Cecilia Riganti in a table with papers and pencils and a line of seven children ready to ask for something. Realising that he will never be able to finish all the requests, he preferred to sit the oldest ones and make them draw by themselves while he painted something for the younger ones so they could colour them.

"You keep them all busy and quiet. Do you want to work for us?" Cecilia laughed, speaking in Spanish much to Guntram's surprise.

"Do you work in a school?"

"No, I'm Mme Gertrud von Lintorff's secretary at the Foundation. I overlook the bookkeeping."

"Must be hard with all those numbers."

"It's all right. There are fourteen of us to check what the other is doing. We present our results to Dr. von Kleist. Would you like something to drink? It's very cold and you had nothing since you arrived," she offered when she noticed how pale and tired the young man was. 'Did Ferdinand not tell me he's seriously ill? Something related to the heart?'

"I don't want to leave the children alone."

"I'll go for it. Tea?"

"Yes, please, Ms. Riganti."

Cecilia went to the large table to pick a porcelain cup and some tea, when Gertrud von Kleist approached her. "Cecilia, be a dear and see if the Weissmanns are leaving. I would like to have a word with..." Gertrud feigned to be lost for a second.

"Margarette Weissmann about her donation for the project in El Salvador?" Cecilia supplied.

"Exactly, thank you, dear."

"Ah, I was going to bring a cup of tea to Guntram de Lisle. I'll ask one of the waiters to do it."

"No, no, don't waste your time, catch her before she runs to MSF or some other charity on the TV. I'll take care of Guntram. Which tea are you using?"

"Darjeeling, I suppose."

"All right, now run. That woman is worth several million and I don't want another third world country orphan to steal them from me."

'No wonder, Ferdinand says she's a witch.' "Yes, of course Madame von Lintorff," Cecilia answered curtly and left the room, leaving the tea on top of the table.

'Time to get rid of the little pest.' Gertrud discreetly got three small white pills, saccharine size and threw them into another teacup, adding two spoons of honey to change the bitter taste and took an apple-cinnamon flavour tea bag before adding hot water to it. She carefully stirred so everything would be well mixed. She took the cup in her delicate hands and walked to the other side of the room where Friederich Elssäser was speaking with Pater Bruno. 'If I give it to him, he might suspect. I need someone else.'

"Aunt Gertrud!" A young girl pulled unceremoniously her dress. "It's me, Claudia zu Löwenstein!"

"Yes, dear. How are you? You've grown so much."

"Thank you, Aunt. I'm in the third class now."

"Impossible! You look like a young lady. I thought you were in the fifth class!"

"No, Aunt, that's my sister Katherine."

"Could you make me a favour, I'm in a hurry and Pater Bruno is still speaking and does not look like he's going to stop any time soon. Could you give this cup of tea to the old gentleman with him and tell him its the tea Cecilia prepared for Guntram but she had to leave?"

"Yes, Aunt Gertrud," the girl answered, happy to be useful, especially to Guntram who had been so nice to her. She held the teacup and the dish with great care as she didn't want to spill the tea and be called clumsy and walked toward Pater Bruno very slowly and lightly treading.

"Pater Bruno?"

"Yes, Claudia?" The priest interrupted his conversation with Friederich and another man.

"This tea is for Guntram."

"I'm not Guntram, Claudia," he answered and the girl just froze, clutching the teacup stronger than before.

"Perhaps she doesn't know where he is. Last time I saw him, he was drawing in one of the tables," Friederich said.

"Miss Cecilia said it was for him, but she had to leave."

"All right, I'll take you to him."

"It's too far away, I'm afraid I will drop it," Claudia confessed, embarrassed.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll carry it for you and then you can give it to him," Friederich said kindly.

"Thank you very much, sir," she said, enthusiastically passing the cup to him and almost spilling the hot liquid on the man.

Guntram was glad to see Claudia again and thanked her for the tea as he confirmed the story that Cecilia Riganti had gone for it. He only took two sips to avoid offending the little girl, because he hated honey in the tea, and continued to work for the smallest ones, now helped by Friederich who could understand them much better than him.

Some thirty minutes later Guntram felt his head turning around and an acute oppression in his chest. First he tried to dismiss it, but the dizziness was overpowering. "Friederich, I don't feel well at all, can you excuse me and we drive home?" He had some difficulties to pronounce the words and the man saw how pale Guntram was. He offered his apologies quickly and had to help Guntram to stand up. "Too much punch, child?" he joked to release his nerves because he felt something was very wrong with Guntram. "No, I attacked several of these macaroons. I'll pass dinner tonight."

"Can you walk to the car?" Friederich asked when he had to steady the faltering boy.

"That sentence is for the pub, not for the Church," Guntram smiled weakly and wondered how the lights could have diminished so much in so little time.

"Are you all right, Guntram?" Adolf zu Löwenstein asked when they passed by his side on their way to the entrance door.

"Just dizzy, nothing to worry about."

"I'll help you to your car, Guntram, you don't look well," Adolf said when he noticed how pale the youth was and how he needed to lean himself against the wall for support.

"Thank you, Adolf."

Guntram managed to leave the room on his own but he nearly collapsed on the foyer. Adolf was quick enough as to catch him and Friederich dashed for Alexei. "Did you take your pills?" asked zu Löwenstein, "you look exactly as my father did the first time he had a heart attack."

"I have no pain or any numbness. Must be something I ate."

"Did you drink champagne or something? It's bad for the heart medications."

"No, nothing, just some tea and macaroons. Perhaps those."

Alexei arrived almost running and unceremoniously checked Guntram's pulse and cursed softly in Russian. "It's very fast and erratic. To the hospital with you!"

"It's not so bad. I just..." and Guntram couldn't say more as he collapsed in the Russian's arms.

"I'll call an ambulance!"

"No time. Can you drive us to the *Hirschbaum Klinik*? It's ten minutes from here."

"Of course, give me your car's keys. Mine is parked away. Is it a heart attack?"

"I don't think so, not yet. His pulse is very bad. He was doing just fine!"

"Father told me the last week was very stressful for him," Adolf said while he opened the car's back door so Alexei could get inside with Guntram and Friederich took the passenger's side.

"If it's that, it would have affected him much before," Alexei mumbled and decided to control the hypertension before it could cause real damage. "Mr. Elssäser, do you have his pills? Give me one orange that looks like hard jelly."

"Are you sure, Antonov?" the man asked, but gave him the pill.

"It's this and hope it works or risk a heart attack, if it has not started yet," Alexei took the pill and punctured it with a small Swiss army knife and forced Guntram's mouth open and squeezed it inside his mouth and to his relief the boy swallowed it in a reflex movement. "That's great boy, just hold a little more till Dr. van Horn sees

you.”

* * *

“Until we have the lab results, we can't explain his condition. His catecholamines levels are fine and there was no heart attack, only a severe episode of hypertension and angina. My Duke, Guntram's latest tests are not three weeks old and everything was fine, and his cardiac arrhythmia was under control with the medications. Although his condition is serious, it was stabilized,” Dr. van Horn explained to a very upset Konrad von Lintorff very late that night.

“Could the wine have been the cause?”

“Sir, even if he would have drunken one glass of whiskey, it wouldn't be sufficient as to provoke such a rise in blood pressure. Even after the pill, and in the way your bodyguard gave it, it works in less than ten minutes, he had 160-210 mg! It's very high, even for a healthy person. Normally, Guntram has a low blood pressure with values slightly below the standard. We thought it could be an allergic reaction, but he had none of the other symptoms, therefore we need to wait for the drugs screening tests. In the moment, he's sleeping and I would like to keep him here for a few hours more. He could go home in the morning.”

“Thank you doctor. May I see him?”

“Yes, of course. A nurse is with him. Excuse me, please,” the doctor said before going away at full speed.

“Konrad, Guntram is sleeping now, why don't you take a coffee and eat something? I'll stay with him.” Friederich said very softly, placing his hand on his pupil's shoulder.

“I don't understand it, Friederich. This morning, he was fine, happy with only a cold which Wagemann told me was not dangerous!”

“The cold has nothing to do with what happened.”

“Was he not taking something against it? These things have substances to make you feel active when you should be in bed.”

“Konrad, there are no contraindications with those pills. I'm also shocked. One minute he was drawing for the children and the next he asked me to excuse himself and go home. He told me that he felt very dizzy and that perhaps the macaroons could have been bad, but the doctor said that it couldn't have provoked such a reaction. According to Adolf zu Löwenstein, he also had a salmon sandwich at the beginning of the party. He didn't touch the alcohol, only a tea with honey which Cecilia Riganti, sent him. I remember Claudia zu Löwenstein, asked me to carry it because she was afraid to break the cup.”

“Cecilia Riganti? Ferdinand's mistress?”

“I don't pry on other people's lives, Konrad,” Friederich said very stiff. “Guntram only took a sip because it had honey and he hates it. I've been trying to make him take some for his sore throat, but he's worse than a child. Can't stand it at all!”

“Stay with Guntram, Friederich. I have to speak with Goran,” Konrad said and left the room in the private suite the youth was staying.

* * *

“Goran... Yes, he's stable and fine. He will come out tomorrow. I need you to investigate something. Discreetly. Cecilia Riganti, sent a tea to Guntram through one of the Löwensteins girls... Of course the child has nothing to do! She must be six or seven years old! Her own father drove Guntram to the hospital! I don't understand why she had to send the thing through a child when she had offered to bring it by herself... Exactly, don't involve Ferdinand. Perhaps he's sore about this incident and used her to get rid of Guntram... If there was something, it should appear in the blood or urine.”

* * *

Dr. van Horn couldn't believe the tests' results: an unknown amphetamine from the 3-Methoxy group? What the Hell was the boy thinking? Didn't he know it was dangerous even for a normal person! These youths were

impossible! Even the small dose present in his urine was sufficient to provoke a severe episode of hypertension, something deadly for him.

He hated when a patient disobeyed so blatantly and the Duke will hear him what he had to tell. Furious, he crossed the corridors with the papers in the hand, to find the man, sitting in the boy's room, watching him sleep. For a second he felt sorry for the man, so in love of a stupid junkie, exactly like his nephew, not even a week ago in the clinic for almost overdosing. Both boys must have been sharing their pills.

"May I speak with you? In private," the doctor growled and increased the speed of the IV line and went to the suite's living room with Konrad behind him, closing the door softly.

"Have you found out what is the problem?"

"If you have a heart condition you shouldn't do drugs. It's basic knowledge!" Van Horn couldn't help to let all his frustration flow. "This is the most stupid thing I've seen in my life! Read the results yourself!" he said, extending the paper to a full brooding Konrad.

"Is this an amphetamine, like speed?"

"Yes, traces of it. Very low dose, almost imperceptible, but taking less, will not help in his case!"

"I'm convinced that Guntram didn't take it."

"Your nephew had a large dose of methoxatamine! This one is also from that kind, but not the same. The structure is similar, but according to our biochemist, it's different to anything he has seen before."

"When did you take the samples?"

"Immediately after he entered the hospital."

"But here writes traces, not the full dose as it should be, if he were in the middle of a trip."

"Sir, I understand that you can make one hundred doses with only one gram of this substance. This is not precisely done in a pharmacy and who knows what precursor was employed! I've heard they use window washer fluid and water! Or perfumes!"

"How is it sold?"

"According to the biochemist, it's a powder that can be eaten, smoked or injected intravenously in case of real large doses."

"What would happen if you dissolve this substance in boiling water?"

"I've never heard of these things put in hot water. Very rarely people mix them with room temperature water, but as they're highly soluble in water, the crystals go to the bottom of the glass. Very unpleasant taste and smells horrible, like nail polish remover or paint thinner. Will have to stir it while drinking to get something in. I know that people who want a purer kind of speed put the powder in acetone, warm it and add alcohol to dissolve it. They filter it several times and always keep the liquids in the refrigerator to allow the crystals to be formed. In theory, the hot water should lower the effects because it burns it. Amphetamines are medications! More than 35° C ruins them!"

"How long does it take to affect you?"

"Depends on how it's taken, sniffed a minute or two, as a pill, thirty to forty minutes, like any other medication."

"What if Guntram took it with his tea?"

"No one would be so stupid! Water boils at 100°C! Teas range from 70° C to 95° C and I know it because my wife is a fan of such things. Have you ever heard about taking your medications with hot liquids? Never! It's basic!"

"The last thing Guntram had was a hot tea and nothing else. My butler was with him all the time, Dr. van Horn. It should have been there."

"It might well explain why they found traces and it only provoked a sharp increase in his blood pressure when a full dose would have killed him instantly. But why did he put it there? Normally such things are taken with juices!"

"Perhaps he didn't know it was there. He complained about the taste and didn't drink the tea," Konrad pondered more and more convinced that it was a poisoning more than Guntram trying recreational drugs. "Will he recover?"

"Yes, of course. The drugs will flush out of his body in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. The main effect is over. He will feel very bad tomorrow, but fortunately there are no further damages to his original condition. I will increase his medications for a month, just to be on the safe side. He will need a lot of rest and should not move around much." The doctor felt his indignation melt away and an increasing sense of guilt overtaking him because he had believed that the boy was into drugs. 'How can I be such an idiot? He's like a little mouse.'

"One more thing, doctor. I would prefer if we keep these lab results to ourselves. It would only stress Guntram more. It was only an acute episode of high blood pressure."

"What if this incident repeats again? We should call the police. This is almost like murder."

"The police would only make him more nervous. We will investigate this and I will appreciate your cooperation and discretion."

"Of course, my Griffin. I'll brief Dr. Wagemann."

* * *

Guntram woke up feeling weak like a beaten kitten, all his body was aching. 'The worst hangover ever.' He turned his head to the right and saw an IV line attached to his arm and a few metres away, Konrad totally asleep on the couch. 'He looks so sweet with his messy hair and undone tie. I hope he has not worried himself about me.' Guntram turned to his side, just to get a better view and the small creak woke Konrad up.

"Hello, kitten." He stood up, stretching his stiff neck muscles and approached the bed, carefully kissing the boy. "How are you feeling now?"

"I don't know. I swear I was in a Church's party and not in disco in Marbella."

"Shh, don't worry, the doctor has everything under control, my love. You'll be fine in a few days and I'm going to stay with you at home for the holidays."

"What happened? I remember I felt very sick and then nothing else. Were the macaroons guilty?"

"No, *Maus*, you can still attack them, within reason, of course. It was just a high blood pressure episode. Perhaps it was the excitement and the stress of the past weeks. You only need to rest. I'll call your nurse. She has to get some more blood samples and give you breakfast."

"That would be nice. I'm kind of hungry. Strange."

"Probably because of all the sugar you took, how many of those sugar bombs?" Konrad joked.

"After the second, I stopped counting."

"Children eat such sweets without restraints, Guntram."

"Someone sat me at the children's table. While in Rome do as the Romans do."

"Don't get too tired. I'll get your nurse and she's quite bossy, so be nice to her."

"Did you finally meet your match, Konrad?"

"Almost. If she had a bank, I would be very concerned." Guntram laughed at his sour expression, thinking how cute he was. He had to repress a sigh when he only got a kiss in the forehead and Konrad left the room.

* * *

Contrary to his expectations, Ferdinand's mistress was willing to help, believing that Guntram had suffered an allergy attack. She was desolated and told him that she was sure she had prepared a black tea cup because "that's what normally people take". Goran was sure that she was telling the truth because he could not catch any inconsistencies in her story. What truly disturbed him was why Gertrud von Lintorff had sent her away to speak with the Weissmann woman when they had paid their share to the Order and added some more later.

"What did you do when Ms. Von Kleist ordered you to go away?"

"I went there because she offered to bring the tea for him. Do you think that he could be allergic to black tea? Could it have not been something else?"

"Did you speak with them?"

"Yes, of course, I convinced her to visit us after the holidays so we can show her our projects in El Salvador. I'm convinced that the authorities will let us name the schools after the benefactors. I'm hoping to start a war between the ladies, so we get something larger, Mr. Pavicevic."

"Did Ms. von Kleist join you?"

"Yes, of course. She's very dedicated to her work."

"Thank you, Miss Riganti."

Logic would tell that Ferdinand might have been in league with his wife, but he knew the man for more than eighteen years and he would have never moved a finger for his wife or daughter. For some reason, he despised the little snake since her birth no matter how many times the Duke was telling that she had "all the traits of a real Lintorff". Gertrud von Kleist would have never dared to do something so stupid as to try to poison Guntram! She was

well aware of the risks and the Duke would kill her without a second thought.

Where would a lady like her find a newly designed drug like this one? It was the next generation and not produced in Europe: imported from South East Asia and in very small quantities because it was very expensive. What Armin had taken was the old type from the same family; old traditional “speed”, but this one was “exactly like that one, but you don't get depressed while landing. It's gonna be a bust!” according to one of his sources. “You feel like you're going to explode in bliss, but your body is catatonic at the same time. Everything seems to be funny.”

He took out his mobile phone and dialled the Duke's number. “My Griffin, I need your permission.”

“What is it?”

“I need to speak with Claudia Löwenstein.”

“No, leave the child out of all this. I'll talk with her father and he will ask her. Something else?”

“Gertrud von Kleist had the teacup for a moment. Should I speak with her?”

Konrad's fury rose to an unknown level, but he hid it as Guntram was in the same room with him, drawing peacefully with the dog sleeping next to him. “No, Goran. I'll take care of the matter by myself.” He hung up almost punching the phone.

Guntram felt that something was amiss with his lover and looked at him and asked: “troubles?”

“No, kitten. Everything is fine. I'll go to my studio. I have to make some business calls.”

“I can go to my studio.”

“No, stay here where is warm. Friederich will bring tea very soon.”

“All right, I promise to leave the macaroons alone,” Guntram smiled and stretched his body to get a kiss, but it didn't loosen Konrad's righteous fury.

The Duke went to this private studio and closed the door before dialling Adolf zu Löwenstein's private number. The man answered at the second ring and asked about Guntram. “He's much better now, but we believe that some allergens could have been in his food. I understand that your daughter brought a teacup for him. Friederich saw her.”

“Yes, she did. Claudia was very proud that Gertrud asked her to carry it. She's dying to be like her older sister, Katherine,” Adolf answered. “My wife has to stop a fight almost every day because Claudia touches her things.”

“Must be exhausting for her,” Konrad commented lightly to conceal his murderous rage. “Are you certain that it was from Gertrud and not from Cecilia Riganti? I understand that she was helping Guntram with the children.”

“No, it was your cousin. Cecilia was with the Weissmanns, my wife was there too. Gertrud came by later. Do you think that it was the tea?”

“No, no, of course not. Guntram had a hypertension episode and with his general condition, it can very taxing for him. He's much better now.”

“My father sends his best wishes for him. He would like to know, when it would be suitable to visit him. I think, he's jealous that Guntram got more pills than him.”

“The Prince will get more if he insists on his escapades to the *Königshalle* like he does. I saw him yesterday keeping company to a large steak,” Konrad said. “Guntram will be delighted to see your father at his convenience. The doctor has grounded him till further notice. Why don't you ask him to come for lunch? I've taken holidays till the New Year. The Princess can be sure that her husband will stick to the diet for one day.”

“Thank you very much, my Griffin.”

“Good-bye and send my regards to Helena.”

Still unable to believe that he had been attacked once more by his own inner circle in less than a week, Konrad thought about his next step. Everything pointed in Gertrud's direction, but it was only a child's and an outsider words' against her. Why would she attack Guntram? He had saved her two boys and Ferdinand's position within the Order. Guntram had not spoken against Marie Amélie although he had many reasons to. For some reason she was against his kitten since the first day. He had always preferred men to women and that was no secret. The succession had been changed but her sons would get all the money he had promised. Guntram had only made him happy and given him the greatest present of his life.

He was unsure.

He hated to be disoriented. He took his mobile and once more called the Serb. “Goran, could you come to my house now? I want to speak with Ferdinand and his wife and I need you to moderate us.”

Konrad took a deep breath but he couldn't find once more his inner steel core; the one he had built over

the years and allowed him to treat the rest of humans as what they were: greedy, impulse driven creatures, using only their intelligence for their selfish purposes. Once more he had a snake in his own nest, but this time from his own blood and flesh.

* * *

Ferdinand had not yet left his briefcase at the foyer's table when his mobile had rung loudly. He sighed before answering because he was too tired to speak with Konrad about the deal in Dallas. "Hello, Konrad. I've just arrived home."

"Bring your wife to the house, Ferdinand. Now."

"What has Marie Amélie done now?"

"One of your women tried to kill Guntram and I will set things right. Bring her or I will send someone for her."

"What? Are you out of your mind?" Ferdinand roared.

"You have an hour or someone will take care of your new slut," Konrad said in a very cold voice before hanging up the phone.

Still frozen in his spot, Ferdinand mechanically closed his phone and put it in his pocket. A cold sweat wet his forehead and he felt dead. He would not let Konrad touch his Cecilia. More determined than ever he went to fetch Gertrud and this time he wouldn't care if he had to hit her in order to drag her in front of her cousin.

* * *

"Friederich, give me the key for the small house. I need it now."

"Dinner will be in an hour, Sire," he protested softly but removed the key from its ring.

"Cancel it! Stay with Guntram! He should never know what happens now!"

"Is this related to yesterday's events?"

"Yes, it is. Stay out you too. When Goran arrives, tell him to meet me there. Let him say hello to Guntram."

"Konrad, don't do anything that you might regret later."

"If I don't stop this, I might regret much more later. Guntram has been attacked twice in a week and the source is always the same! I will not risk all what I've fought for and my greatest dream because of a woman's ambition!"

"Always rely on the physical evidence, my child. The rest is immaterial."

"I will do what I have to do to protect my family, Friederich."

* * *

The Serbs were nervous. To be called at this hour without any kind of explanations could only mean one thing; an execution. Milan looked at Ratko and only grunted inquisitively.

"Not the boy. He has done nothing bad. He's sick in bed."

"Good. Where's Goran?"

"Out, looking for his lady friend."

"Mighty one, it seems. The royal treatment."

"Seems so, but the council has not been called. Strange."

* * *

Still alone, Konrad sat at the large dinning table in the small lodge. He closed his eyes, utterly tired. 'Since I was born I never knew one moment of true happiness till now. I've wasted forty-seven years of my life for nothing, just to enrich the same people that want to kill me. I did my best to fulfil my duties, but it's never enough. They want more and more from me. I'm on the limit of my endurance.'

The soft footsteps he heard could only be Goran's. He looked at the approaching man who sat next to

him but said nothing.

"Guntram is unaware of everything," Goran said.

"I prefer it that way. Whatever happens now, stays here."

"Milan and Ratko wait for your orders."

"My cousin Gertrud did it. She gave the tea to the girl. I want to hear her before I finish this."

"The substance used is very rare, my Griffin. Not from here. I've asked around and it's something that comes from Repin's lands. We should also consider that he might have tried to kill Guntram. "If he's not mine, no one else shall have him". He's unstable."

"That's plausible, but Repin loves Guntram. He would go against me first before touching a single hair of him."

"She has nothing to gain from his death. Her children were never in the succession and they still keep all the money. Guntram has no interests in the Order; he's just your companion and your children's tutor when they're born. They will be the next Griffins."

"Without Guntram's presence, everything would have been passed to Albert's line and let's do not deceive ourselves; he's unable to keep the power. Georg and Gertrud could finish him in less than a year. This way, Armin will only act as surrogate Griffin in case of my death and until my children turn twenty-five. Or perhaps she was only furious that her daughter had been expelled."

"Using the same method employed with Armin? No one could be so stupid."

"Or bold, Goran. We finish this tonight."

"Who will replace Ferdinand, sire?"

"I don't know. He's my best friend."

* * *

The sulk face of Friederich when he asked Ferdinand and Gertrud to go to the far away house for the meeting raised all the alarms in Ferdinand. The five armed men standing next to his car convinced him that this time there would be no escape for him. "Come Gertrud, let's go now," he said softly.

"Why? I'm not moving from here!"

"Woman, move if you don't want to be shot in the middle of the courtyard! This way your sons still stand a chance!" Ferdinand whispered and took her by the arm with force before pushing her inside his car. Without saying one more word, he drove to the lodge, parking in front of the house. Milan opened the door for Gertrud as Ratko placed at Ferdinand's side.

"The Duke awaits for you, madam," Goran said from the door and advanced toward her, taking her by the arm.

"Remove your hands from me! I'm a Lintorff."

"We're aware of this, therefore you will be judged under the Code."

Gertrud ignored Goran and entered the house with her head very high. She walked purposely toward the dinning room, the only lit room in the house. Inside, Konrad was sitting at the head of the table, wearing a blank expression in his face.

"This is outrageous! How dare you to accuse me of this?" she shouted. "Your little whore feels sick and you believe that I had something to do with this?"

"Sit down, Gertrud. No need to be vulgar or forget your upbringing. Ferdinand, sit next to your wife as this also concerns you."

Ferdinand took his place and pulled Gertrud down so she would obey her cousin. Goran sat next to Konrad.

"We found a potent drug in the Consort's blood which endangered his life. Had it not been by the wrong dosage, it would have killed him." Goran used his sternest voice.

"Nice story, Serb. What else?" Gertrud answered.

"You're accused of poisoning our Consort, Gertrud von Lintorff. You will be judged and punished according to our laws," Goran continued to speak, ignoring her retort.

"Your laws? They are useless and I do not recognise them! You're only a band of lunatics, brandishing swords around! If you have any accusations against me, go to the police, Pavicevic! Your little whore provides drugs to my daughter and Armin, overdoses and you blame me, Konrad? I'm your own blood! Can't you see that he plans to

take all for himself! You're like a zombie, following his every command!"

"Shut up, woman!" Ferdinand shouted, enraged and afraid now for his sons' fate as he knew where all this was leading he and his family.

"I will not be quiet like all of you! You're a mockery of your titles! You, Ferdinand do nothing more than follow my cousin's orders without questioning and flatter him all day! Pavicevic, you kill whoever is in your path and Konrad, you're nothing more than a sociopath, egocentric, hedonist, megalomaniac control freak!

"You poisoned Guntram de Lisle. You used a child to bring the poison to him!" Goran exclaimed, his patience wearing thinner.

"I was not even near the boy! I wouldn't waste my time and credentials by coming near him!"

"Mind your words, Gertrud. He's my Consort, therefore your superior," Konrad said emotionless.

"Another joke! He's nothing more than your Catamite! Consort! What an insult to our traditions! You run like a pathetic old man after a boy who could be your son, if you were able to produce offspring, but nature is wise and never allowed it! You're a pervert throwing your money after the former whore of a Russian!"

"Guntram's reputation is much better than yours, woman!" Ferdinand roared.

"He's just a little slut. At eighteen he was jumping into the man's bed and took all the money he could from him! I've investigated him. One luxurious flat in Buenos Aires, another in Paris, several good paintings and a very long list!"

"He has nothing of those!" Konrad roared. "He had the decency of returning them after he broke up with Repin!"

"He destroyed that man's marriage! He destroyed your engagement with poor Stefania! She's heartbroken! She gave you her best years and you threw her out like a useless thing!"

"Did you or did you not give the cup of tea to Guntram?" Konrad asked seriously.

"Of course not! I'm not a maid!"

"Cecilia Riganti affirms that she asked you to do it."

"Never! Can't you see that it's a lie from another whore? Ferdinand's whore! I've tolerated his repeated infidelity with that woman, right under my nose, to avoid a scandal and she accuses me of murdering? Konrad, that woman wants me dead to get rid of me!"

"Another witness said that you gave the cup to her telling it was from Cecilia Riganti," Goran said.

"Who? It's a lie!"

"Claudia zu Löwenstein."

"Are you accusing me on the testimony of a six-year-old little girl? Children lie all the time!"

"Her father would not lie to me," Konrad said.

"What more proof do you have beside some gossips and a little girl's word? Fingerprints of mine? The poison I used? Did someone see me pouring the arsenic? Any videos from the party?"

"The drugs found in Guntram are similar to the ones your daughter supplied to Armin von Lintorff," Goran stated.

"Marie Amélie never used drugs! They got them from de Lisle! He used them on himself and it was a pity they didn't work!"

"Armin said that your daughter provided the drugs. We found her fingerprints and his on the bottle, never Guntram's," Goran pointed out.

"He was living with a drug dealer! A mobster! He threw a knife at Armin!"

"To defend himself, woman!" Ferdinand shouted. "I saw the security recordings!"

"Armin would say anything to keep his place here! He lied to fool you Konrad! Those two are in tandem! Ferdinand confiscated all the pills my daughter had! This man ruined her with his lies and now you're so blinded that you accuse me for his own deeds! This is insufferable, Konrad!

"I'm not a fool, Gertrud! For some reason, you're against him and decided to kill him to punish him for your daughter's actions! I will punish you, myself!" Konrad said without flinching a muscle in his face. "This is all your doing and I only need to see if Ferdinand was in league or not with you."

"I swear I had nothing to do with this mess. I was in America! I didn't speak with my wife!"

"There are five calls from you to Cecilia Riganti," Goran said calmly.

"Yes, I know. I call her every night!"

"Can't you see it, Konrad? They did it together and blame it on me so you can kill me!" Gertrud said desperately and burst into tears.

Ferdinand was speechless and could only look in disbelief at his wife, her sobs echoed in the room. Konrad felt uncomfortable to hear his own cousin, cry so much. "They want to kill me and get all my money! She will leave my children penniless! She's from Colombia, all of them drug dealers! It would be very easy for her to get the poison!"

"That's a stereotype, woman!" Ferdinand cried. "My Cecilia is unable to hurt a fly! Konrad, I swear on my boys' heads that I had nothing to do with this! I like the boy and I supported you on the 16th even!"

"I'm aware of it, Ferdinand," Konrad only said.

"How did I do it? When did I do it? Which were my motives? What real evidence do you have against me? If you were so sure about your accusations, the whole council would be here!" Gertrud shouted through her tears. "It's a game that those two devised against me! It's not a secret that I don't like this boy for you! I've always told you the truth in your face, Konrad. He's not good for you! He's just an adventurer, looking to squeeze out up to the last penny from you!"

"Guntram is not like that, Gertrud," Konrad said softly, his resolution not so strong as before. It was true. He had not a single material evidence against her and to execute her on such weak grounds could endanger his own position. No, he would have to find another punishment that could be as horrible as this one. "Call the Executioners," he said and Milan and Ratko entered the room.

"You have insulted my Consort and me in front of the Council. You have been unable to educate your daughter, the same I accepted although she was born out of the established line. You do not respect our decisions, Gertrud von Lintorff and your line has been involved in attacking another line and mine. Therefore, our punishment is as follows. You will resign from your duties at the Foundation from tomorrow onwards and you will never be admitted by any of us. No member from the Order or from his family is allowed to speak with you or help you in any way. Your fortune is confiscated until your death, when your children can inherit it. You must leave Europe and never return here. This is our decision. As for you, Ferdinand von Kleist, you have proved to be a weak leader of your house, therefore you will send your mistress away tomorrow. She will return to New York and you will never contact her again. You will resign from your duties at the bank and if the Council agrees, you will resign from your position as *Magnus Commendator*. Your sons will remain with us if they want so," Konrad said and sat again in his chair.

"Our *Hochmeister* has spoken," Goran intoned. "Executioners! Take them away from our presence!"

Milan and Ratko took Gertrud away before she would have jumped on her cousin and Ferdinand followed them meekly.

"Is your decision final, my Griffin?"

"The Council and the Board should decide if they want to keep Ferdinand. I will not vote or say a word against him if he presents his resignation tomorrow. If he gets their support, he will continue with us."

"And if not?"

"Michael Dähler or Adolf zu Löwenstein will take his place."

"Ms. Riganti has nothing to do with this, my Griffin. I'm sure."

"I know, but Ferdinand should be punished somehow; my cousin acted right under his nose. The woman is out. Elisabetta von Lintorff will take Gertrud's place temporarily."

"Georg von Lintorff will not accept this. He will revolt against us."

"He will do nothing that could endanger his own money. He's perfectly aware that I can destroy him in a matter of weeks. He will not lift a finger for his sister."

Chapter 27

December 20th
Rome

The elegant building of *Bellissima- Top Models*, was located near the Spanish Steps. Piero della Rosa, owner and manager was on the brink of a nervous breakdown after a fight with one of his best known faces. First, she had broken up with her best sponsor; almost €10,000 per month with a visit now and then, when he was around Rome and other services paid aside. If he needed some more girls for his friends, he was always paying and never complained about the prices. 'The cow should understand that she's thirty-eight, not twenty-one any longer. Too old for this job'

'I'm getting tired of this stupid slut. Ten years ago, she was hot, but now she's old and bitter. She should be very glad that this stupid German gave her a flat and money for starting this TV show. She's out since a long time ago! Not a single designer has called her since 2001. Grannies don't do well in catwalks! Besides, she's getting fat. Must be the menopause.'

'I still don't know why I waste my time with her! I have much good looking girls working fine and discreetly! This Russian is her golden opportunity and she should take it because I'm sick of getting the door in my face to get sponsors and interviews for her damned show! She's not Claudia or Naomi! Just Stefania!'

Still very crossed he decided to give her another call, but this time in different terms. She'd better be in London in three days or she would be fired.

* * *

The sharp and noisy ringing of Stefania's mobile interrupted her talk with the manager of Bottega Venetta in Rome. Frustrated at the interruption -because she had almost convinced the man to supply shoes and purses for three months in exchange for an interview on the second show, she excused herself and left the showroom.

"What's up now?" she mumbled, already knowing that it was Piero.

"About the Russian. He only wants to meet you and offers €10,000 for an interview. He admires your career and is thinking on investing in a models agency in St. Petersburg. I've checked him and he has a lot of money and several agencies in Central Europe. Look, that girl, Larissa Rumanova comes from his agency! She just got a contract with L'Oréal and another with Belfast. It's a perfectly legitimate business!"

"I'm not a call girl! If he wants me, he should come and visit me at your office!"

"Boris Karamazov is a well known manager. He has four agencies. All the Russians girls in *Haute Couture* belong to him and the designers like them because they're elegant, tall, quiet and most of their customers are Russians nowadays. We can't afford to lose the Russian Market. They swim in money and spend it like crazies. They have shopping malls where the cheapest article cost a million dollars."

"I'm a celebrity."

"You were a celebrity so move your dammed ass to my office to pick up your ticket if you don't want to look for another manager! I'm sick of your diva airs. You're old. Even the boring German got sick of you!" Piero yelled very vulgarly.

"I don't need to hear this! My father has a—"

"Yes, your father has and he hates you. You will not see a single cent from him till he dies and the motherfucker is in perfect health! Plans to live up to his 90th birthday! So, do your work or put an ad in "*Tuttoaffari*"!"

"Stronzo!"

"Move your ass and do your job!"

Stefania couldn't believe that he had hung up on her! But if the show didn't work at all, she was doomed. Fucking Lintorff! Since he had decided to fuck with a French-Russian little whore, insignificant excuse for a boy, most of the friends she had acquired through him had disappeared; one even had had the audacity to ask for one of her younger girlfriends' phone number after turning her down!

* * *

I don't remember a Christmas so happy in my life. Not even when my father was alive because I was always thinking that he would go away soon. No, this one was just perfect. I'm so happy!

The week after I was in the hospital—I swear I will never take one of those macaroons ever again!—Konrad stayed in the house as he had promised me. He spent all his time with me and was so tender and loving! He took care that I had everything, checking every second that I would be warm, had my pills, happy, and without any stress. We remained most of the time in the library, where he worked sitting next to me, kissing, hugging or just holding me. I don't think he was very productive but he was on holidays!

Sometimes he took me out for a short walk in the garden and more or less he made his peace with Mopsi... Well, he bribed her as I found him feeding her under the breakfast's table, just to get rid of her. She's very possessive of me and does not like if he's around on top of me. Once, when we were on the garden, Konrad told me: "I can't live without you, Guntram. Promise me that you will stay with me." He sounded so desperate that I was speechless. "I love you more than my own life. Don't you ever go away!" I could only say: "I love you too, but it's not in my hands. I'll love you till my last breath." He hugged me to the point of almost breaking my ribs and whispered: "Promise me that nothing and no one will split us up! Only God!" "Konrad, I love you because you made me want to live again. Before I only wanted to die but now, I want to get better and grow old with you!"

"You will live many years and I will do all what's in my hand to make you as happy as you make me. No one ever made me feel what I feel next to you. You're my life, Guntram. I never knew how empty my life was till you came to me. You're a present from God."

I was speechless; so moved I was and could only smile and kiss him. "I'll stay with you my love as long as I can."

We returned to the house and Friederich decided to take a photo of us. Coming to think, there's not a single picture of us together. Konrad accepted gladly and I let him do it because I knew it made him happy. Friederich took several in the garden, covered by the snow and in the yard near the cherry tree. Konrad said that he wanted one copy for his office and I blushed.

I was surprised to hear that he had cancelled the Christmas lunch with Ferdinand's and Albert's families. He told me that I needed to rest and he was very tired after the past week. He had invited Albert, his whole family, Elisabetta and Armin, the eldest (Albert's younger brother, a bohemian who is a film maker) and his wife and children for New Year. A total of twelve people more. I asked why Ferdinand was not invited and he only told me that he was having some troubles with him and his wife and preferred to keep distance till everything was sorted out.

On Christmas Eve we had a light dinner in the small dinning room and went to bed early. The whole staff was very happy that day. I guess this year's bonus was nice.

On Christmas morning, Konrad was like a child, an oversized one, but so sweet in his eagerness. He shook me awake at 7 a.m.!

"Is it not possible to sleep longer one single day in this house?" I complained jokingly.

"You're the one who sleeps the longest! Look, you want to sleep now instead of checking if you got something for Christmas!"

"What makes you think that you got something?" I asked, doing my best to be serious.

"I was very good this year," he said haughtily and I laughed, rising from the bed to kiss him. "But I got my one already," he returned my kiss with much more passion, making me lay against the pillows while he climbed on top of me.

Just when I was thinking that I was going to get finally lucky—against the doctor's orders; absolute bed rest for two weeks—he broke the kiss and jumped out of the bed, completely dressed and shouted; "Hurry up or you'll miss it!" He dashed out of the room, toward his studio.

Sighing, I left the comfortable and warm bed. It's useless. He lives on a permanent caffeine rush. I washed and got dressed very informally with black corduroy trousers and light blue shirt and beige jersey, before joining him in his studio. He closed with a loud thud the folder he was reading and took it with him before going the stairs down, to the big (monster size) Christmas tree that had arrived yesterday and we had been decorating under Friederich's frown.

Friederich had been very kind as to help me hide Konrad's present—yes, despite the size of this castle and who knows how many rooms it has, it's very difficult to hide anything from him!—and had left it, wrapped under

the tree. I was surprised to see other two large square boxes under the tree, obviously wrapped for children because of the old toys paper, topped with a large red ribbon.

"Konrad, if you think that two boxes will keep Albert's children happy, you're seriously mistaken," I joked.

"They're not for them! They're for Klaus and Karl, but I think it's fine if you open them."

"It's not all right to open children's presents," I said, thinking that perhaps those were the children of one of the maids. "Come, open mine!" I gave the painting to him. Honestly, what do you give a man who has a fat bank account? Not many options left. A painting; well a watercolour. Like a child, he tore the paper and got the painting out of its tube. He was looking at it enraptured.

"It's..."

"San Capistrano, the view from the terrace."

"Yes, that's when you told me that you loved me."

"I always loved that place and it was my place to run away when everything was too much for me. The loneliness of the plain was always very appealing to me. It was the perfect place for me to ask you to be my consort. You have captured its essence, but it has a new light at the same time."

"I'm happy you like it."

"It goes to my office, I know exactly where."

"Please don't do that! You have real things there!"

"It's my office and I decorate it as I like. Now, open your present! He nudged me like a child and showed me again the boxes.

"Konrad, this is for two children!" I protested but he shut me up with a kiss.

"Open it, my love. We can wrap it up together later," He whispered in my ear, knowing that I can't resist his voice. I knelt on the floor and saw that both boxes had the names of "Klaus Maria" and "Karl Maria" written in his perfect handwriting. Still feeling bad about it, I carefully removed the ribbon, hoping it wouldn't be ruined, from the "Klaus" box and opened the paper by carefully removing the tape. Inside was a box with a large Steiff teddy bear in a brass colour, with a serious expression. Still puzzled I looked at Konrad and he only showed me the other box. I repeated the process and inside was another teddy bear, but in a dark brown shade for "Karl".

"I thought it would be a good idea to protect our own ones. They are the 1920 model and in a size that a small child can carry."

"I don't understand."

He only gave me the folder he had been carrying and I opened it. Inside were several pictures of an ultrasound in 3D of two babies.

"Those are our children, Guntram. Klaus and Karl. They're four months old. They will be born on May 15th according to the doctors," he told me very softly and I was petrified, unable to remove my eyes from the pictures. My eyes were glued to them, memorizing each little detail and unable to believe that they were there.

"Is it true?" I croaked and he had to steady me because everything turned around.

"Yes, my love. Our children."

"I..." Lord, I was on the brink of a collapse. So unexpected but so wonderful!

"I didn't tell you before because there are risks in any pregnancy and I didn't want to make you suffer till we were sure that the babies were fine and on their way. Are you happy?"

"Are they real?"

"Of course, two boys so far. Klaus Maria is the name for the eldest and Karl Maria for the second. Do you like the names?"

"They're perfect," I whispered.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm in shock. They're so beautifully wrinkled and they have fingers already."

"Children improve with time, Guntram," he told me and I blurted a laugh. "The law does not allow me put you as father in the papers, but I will name you their legal tutor and Guardian of Estate in case something happens to me. They will be as much yours as mine. We are a real family now. Promise me that you will always be there for them."

"I swear I will love them as my own flesh," I promised and got lost in them again, so happy to see them and know that they were really coming to us. "This one puckers the chin exactly as you do."

"NO! Children can change a lot! And I don't pucker my chin!" He said, holding me tighter than before

as I caressed reverently the two bears. "Guntram, you have already one teddy bear. If you want another, just say it. Those are for Klaus and Karl," he joked and I hit him with the folder, making him laugh.

"We have nothing ready for them!" I realised.

"We have two teddy bears and they will arrive in May!" He chuckled at my concern.

"That's not enough time! They need a crib, diapers, clothes, a doctor, toys, milk and who knows what else!" I nearly shouted with him. He brings two babies home and has no idea of what to do? I thought he was the responsible person here!

"Friederich will look for the nurses and they will make a list of what they need. We'll need three according to the pediatrician Wagemann recommended. I was thinking to send them to the old nursery, where your studio is. You can check on them as much as you want."

"Don't give the babies to nannies! I want to be with them!"

"I'm not giving them away. They will look after them and you can be with them as much as you want, but the sleepless nights are for them. It might be too much for your health my love, and we need you healthy and ready to cope with the three of us."

"I'm very happy. No, happy is not the right word. I could burst with joy." I jumped to his neck and kissed him till I heard a cough and quickly disentangled myself from him.

"Excuse me, sir. Has the young sir, taken his morning pills?" Friederich—who else?—said from the entrance, carrying a small tray with a glass of water and my beloved medications. All of them. I sighed and took them. After all, I have to be nice, obey the doctors, only for the babies.

We had breakfast together and Konrad told me that he had a present for me... A painting made by my own mother, Cécile Dubois Strinberg. A private investigator had found it in Lille and it dated from 1978. It was an oil of a young woman combing her chestnut hair by an old wooden window.

I was moved to see it. Nicholas Lefèvre had told me that my mother had been an artist without much luck but I had never found a reference about her or a painting from her.

"How did you get it?"

"It was not easy. It belonged to a family who had gotten it as a present from one of your mother's Aunts and didn't want to sell it. They did it only when the person told them that it was for her son. The investigator followed the wills of your mother's aunts and discovered that these people had one of her works. It's a beautiful painting, although it has not your mastery of technique."

"I just love it. It's incredible to see it. Thank you so much! Did you meet her?"

"No, never. You were born in 1982 and by that time I had no contact with your family. I know that your father was very sad after her passing, but nothing else. We were not friends."

"My father loved her very much. He told me so. He also said that I had her sweet and peaceful nature."

"Yes, fortunately you're nothing like him. He was an excellent lawyer, but we never had anything more than a professional relationship."

* * *

December 28th
London

"Boss is going to give me an ulcer!" Pavel Mikhailovich complained, collapsing on the kitchen chair. "Give me a vodka, I do need one."

Massaiev smirked as he took the bottle and poured a shot for the man. "Hard task?"

"No, chauffeur duties. Easy job. This morning, Irina, his secretary called me and told me that I had to pick up a "Stefania di Barberini at Heathrow from Rome at 5:45 p.m. and bring her to the house in Knightsbridge for dinner with the boss. I thought it was a mistake as the girl is new and I wrote Stefano di Barberini and waited there with the sign, standing like an idiot. At some point a brunette comes to me and shouts, very crossed that she's Stefania di Barberini to meet Mr. Karamazov. No one told me, we were playing again "Great Works of the Russian Literature" again and I almost blew it up because she was a fucking woman!"

Massaiev chuckled at the mistake. "I got her Louis Vuitton's suitcase in the face and she started to run to the car. She was almost exploding when I told her to move her ass to the parking lot. I'm not a fucking chauffeur! I'm a group leader! Boss should send one of the newbies to pick up the whores!"

Massaiev sighed. 'So different that when Guntram was arriving! He was grateful that a car was coming for us and was never that rude to any of us.' "You might be a group leader, but this Stefania di Barberini is Lintorff's former favourite whore; ten years in the position. She got fired the minute the animal saw Guntram."

"Yes, I remember him. Nice kid, and I was expecting someone in this line, but no. I had to drive a bossy, haughty bitch! Can you believe that she went to the back side of the car and waited for me to open her door?"

'Guntram would have never done that. The men were running by themselves to open the door for him. He was always doing his best not to be a burden and treated the men with respect. I think I never heard a derogative remark from him to any of them. Only a few shouts with me at the end when he was at the limit,' Massaiev recalled dreamily.

"I drove the bitch here and if she was Lintorff's fling, no wonder he jumped on Guntram! She's old, haughty and rude. Do you think he will ever be back?"

"Boss is working on it. When do you have to return her?"

"After dinner, to her hotel."

* * *

'With such a bad taste, Lintorff does not deserve to keep my angel for one minute longer!' Constantin thought once more while he used all his patience and coldness to keep his amiable façade of the "models" manager from Russia. 'I have to recover my Guntram before that miserable German ruins him more! In Rome he was terrified and almost shouted at me. Lintorff has completely ruined his training!'

"So Boris, will you tell me about your project in St. Petersburg?" Stefania said, fidgeting with her dinner in what was a clear proof of her deficient education in front of the Russian's eyes. He had enough and decided to go for business before he would literally kick the vulgar woman from his house. 'My angel would have never done something like this. It's disgusting and contemptuous to your host. No matter what was served, he never complained. I couldn't tell if he hated some food or not. I only know what he liked best.'

'Boris? Who gave you permission to speak to me like this?' "My name is Constantin Ivanovich Repin, madam. Boris Karamazov is one of my underlings and he does not need any help for running his agency. I would like to speak with you about a mutual acquaintance."

"Whoever you are, this is outrageous! You brought me here with lies!"

"I like to keep my privacy, Miss Barberini. I'm a discreet man."

"I'm leaving right now!" She shouted and rose from her chair.

"Very well, send my greetings to Konrad von Lintorff, if he ever again answers a call from you." Constantin smirked and secretly enjoyed her astonished face. "Now that I have your attention, I would like to discuss business with you."

Stefania sat back and whispered: "I'm listening to you, sir."

"Years ago someone said that some people preferred oysters and others snails. Lintorff always kept an open mind and preferred them both, especially if he could take them from some other people's table."

'What is this crazy Russian telling me? I'm not into animals and much less those disgusting creatures!' "I think I don't follow you."

'Forget about subtlety! I will have to draw pictures so she can understand!' "Madam, I'm aware that the Duke decided to transfer his attentions from you to a young artist named Guntram de Lisle."

"It's not like that! I found him on the couch with the little..."

"Please, madam, let's do not be vulgar. We can discuss all this in a civilized way, without adjectives." Constantin would have never let her pronounce a word against his angel in his presence. Many had died for it. "Perhaps you're not well aware of the circumstances of his change of heart."

"Of course I am. His cousin Gertrud, a good friend of mine, told me everything. He brought the boy from Russia and kept him in his residence at Zurich, introducing him as his ward while he was still with me! The boy was the friend of a very rich man, but not rich enough as he traded him for Konrad!"

'Very unlikely but it serves my purposes.' "I'm the wealthy man from Russia. Guntram was living with me till Konrad von Lintorff took him away. I want him back with me and I'm willing to do everything to achieve my goals."

"He's just a clever little whore!" 'Gay and cuckold. As good as it gets,' was Stefania's thought, doing her best to hide the contempt from her eyes. 'What's wrong with them? One blue eyed idiot makes dove eyes at them and

both went crazy? I should have seen it much earlier! Lintorff never cared if I was with other men because he was using me to cover his own shit! He was not the idiot I thought!"

"Keep your opinions to yourself, madam," Constantin growled and his dark eyes shone in a feral way, terrifying Stefania. "Do not compare Guntram with the likes of you. When Lintorff took him, he had just partly recovered from a serious accident and was very confused. Somehow, he blamed me for it and wanted to go away even if his health condition was very serious. He risked his own life when he left with Lintorff. He never was after your patron, madam. I'm convinced that Lintorff cornered Guntram till he accepted him. Tell me, was he in bed with him when he arrived to Switzerland?"

"I don't know. I went to a party once in Zurich in March, but the boy was nowhere to be seen. Lintorff told me he was in bed because he was sick. Later I saw the boy with him in Rome, in July, at San Capistrano and he insisted Konrad to go out with me," Stefania confessed.

"Did they look like lovers? Women know such things immediately."

"No, the boy was sitting next to him, but he was drawing and I thought that I was a fool to be jealous of him because he had no intentions or was competition for me."

"There you have, Madam. Guntram had no idea of Lintorff's intentions. I know Guntram since he was eighteen years old and he never realised that I was after him till I kissed him. In a way, he was never competition for you because he was never playing against you. I would bet a million dollars that he even told Lintorff how beautiful you are."

"Thank you,"

"I want to recover him, but I can't do it on my own. Lintorff even organised an exhibition in Berlin for him! He does it to hurt me because we are business adversaries. Guntram was the most important thing in my life and he took him away from me. The boy has no malice and I'm convinced that he believed each one of Lintorff's lies against me."

"What do I get out of this? Lintorff will not return to me." The mushy moment from the poor betrayed lover was too much for her patience.

"Of course not, but I can offer you my financial support for any project you might like to start; like a model agency of your own or a models school.

"What should I do? Tell Guntram about my time with Lintorff? He already suspects or knows about it," Stefania said disdainfully.

"Nothing like this. It will be helpless. I understand that there's one Art magazine, *Notes d'Art*, which will publish a negative review on Guntram's exhibition. I would only like that you help me to contact the critic and spread the story to your many friends in the press."

"Konrad hates the press!"

"I'm perfectly aware of this. If he has them around his neck, he will send Guntram away in no time. Don't you want to make him suffer for all the humiliations he put you through? I have the resources and you the contacts. We could work fine together."

"Will you get the boy out of my life?"

"He will return with me to St. Petersburg or London. He was living with my children before as I'm a widower now."

"Oh, that's very bad for you," Stefania made her best big sad eyes.

"Indeed, but let me tell you my story while we have coffee," Constantin used his saddest voice of poor deceived, abandoned and betrayed man. 'Pearls to the swine, but the tart has to learn her part.'

* * *

January 15th 2006
Milan

Dudu Mountbatten felt horribly tired from carrying all these stupid complimentary bags from the many fashion shows she had been forced to attend since early morning. The Milan Fashion Week was almost like a marathon of people, shows, photographers, top models, designers, celebrities, old and new fortunes and her new blasted editor had fired her P.A. "to downsize costs; we are not selling as much as before! Who cares about three old uptight good for nothing royals? Brangelina sells magazines! Update yourself!"

Since her dismissal from “Hello” for writing that piece over the Monaco young princes, her career had been a slow descent into the hell of mediocrity, like that sorry “Stars and Stories” tabloid she was working for and suffering a stupid editor, just to see her name in the supermarkets’ stands biweekly, next to the batteries packs. She sighed once more as today’s brightest point had been the invitation for the baptism of Carlo Giacomo Loiacono della Rovere, but the family didn’t want to have photos of the event published. Where were the times when Marianne von Liechestein-Faubourg threw those incredible parties in Marbella? You had all the real jet set and always a new theme for each party. The Million Dollar Party had been her favourite so far and for such a good cause; helping poor children in Muslim countries. The Sultan of Brunei was attending it and people still spoke about it. The party had been a revolution in its own, no invitations; you only had to give a million dollars for charity and you were in: more than 300 guests!

She was a real lady and an interesting character; nothing like what was trendy now! Pop stars; reality show stars or someone who had been on TV or in the internet, but at seventy-three she had finally retired to her magnificent house in Paris. ‘There are no properties like this any more,’

“Dudu, dear! What a pleasure to see you here!” A young woman’s voice greeted her and Dudu turned to see the daughter of Mario Barberini, ‘What was her name? She was very famous ten years ago!’ Her older sister is Simonetta, and she must be Sandra’, still doubtful, she smiled at the elegant and stunning tall brunette and returned her two kisses.

‘I’m surprised to find you here, darling!’ Dudu went for the safe: “How is your father? Still working so much?”

“Madness like always; he should retire after working all his life so hard! His companies only give him headaches. I’m also working here! What a nightmare!” Stefania pouted. ‘The old witch might be what I exactly need; only she cares about these old fashion people. Imagine, she wrote a piece on the Bismark’s’ moving to New York! All the other magazines turned me down, because no one cares about Lintorff and his little slut.’

‘Was she not retired? Do we have also Mature Age Models?’ “Working darling?” Dudu asked with a clear disbelief in her voice.

“Yes, of course. I have a new program in the TV, in Rome. We started two weeks ago and our rating is increasing with each show. It’s called “All Access” and I introduce people to the real lifestyles of rich people. Even Karl accepted to give me an interview and you know how difficult is to get ten minutes of his time!”

“Congratulations, dear! I’m sure it will be a great success!”

“Of course it will! People are tired of vulgarity and need to watch things that make them dream. Armani, Prada, real VIPs, great places to go, what and where to shop.”

“Indeed. I’m glad for you. Now that I remember, were you not a good friend of Gertrud von Lintorff? I was so shocked to hear about her resignation in the Foundation and her move to the Hamptons.”

“Yes, poor Gertrud, she moved there with her daughter. Horrible argument with her cousin Konrad. You must remember him; Konrad von Lintorff,” Stefania asked, full of hope.

“No, my dear,” Dudu hated to confess that she had not the slightest idea of who this man could be.

“He’s the son of Marianne von Liechestein-Faubourg! You met with him several times!” ‘Great, the old hag is senile!’

“Son of Marianne? No, she has two daughters and a boy!” ‘Is she wearing Donatella Versace? Very appropriate.’

“He’s from her first marriage: He’s the Duke of Wittstock and a very rich man; billionaire. Lives in Zurich and he was my fiancé for many years! Gertrud introduced us in Rome!”

“Oh, yes, I remember him, now. Impossible man! Very disagreeable. Once, I tried to speak with him for my book about the Jet Set where his mother was mentioned in several chapters, and he called me a “vulture” just because I’m a journalist!”

“Konrad has no manners at all but that’s not a surprise for me. He avoids the press at all costs. Imagine, every time I was going out with him, he was entering after me to avoid the flashes! His bodyguards were impossible! One of them once hit a paparazzo for taking his picture! I’m so glad we are finished!”

“Oh, darling, how horrible it must have been for you!”

“You have no idea, Dudu,” Stefania said dejectedly. “We had a relationship for over ten years and he lied all the time to me!”

“Oh, no. Another woman?”

“Much worse, a boy.”

“NO!” Dudu almost shouted in disbelief

“A young Frenchman. I caught him with the mongrel! Can you believe that this boy had already been with a billionaire from Russia and exchanged the poor man for Konrad? He has more money, of course. Poor Gertrud tried to stop him, to talk with her cousin, but he was crazy about the boy. Imagine, they live together in Zurich! It's quite the talk! Konrad even paid an exhibition for the boy in Berlin and one of the critics is devastating. Shows him for what he's; an unscrupulous adventurer of the worst kind. Poor Marianne; this man will take away all her son's money!”

“And you dear, how are you after all this?”

“Disgusted beyond words. He asked me to marry him and now I realise that it was just a façade to hide that he's a homosexual! A real pervert! The boy is twenty-three and he's forty-seven!”

“Who is he?” Dudu asked very intrigued, while her journalist's inner sense screamed that there was a good story behind this.

“I don't want to know his name! He's a noble from France. Should be in the critics at the “*Notes d'Art*.”

“This is horrible!” Dudu said encouragingly.

“The poor Russian, who was and is so in love with him, visited me and told me the whole story. They had been together since he was eighteen, living in London. He gave him two flats, one in Buenos Aires and the other in Paris, several paints, paid his studies and supported him while he was playing the artist the whole day long! Now that he has read the real critics, made by professionals, he understands how foolish he was! He even paid an exhibition for him in London and gave him a Renoir for his birthday! He nearly divorced his wife for him and she died of pain! He's so sorry about all this! I should consider myself lucky that I left Konrad, but in a way, I'm concerned because he has that snake around!”

“Snake? This boy is a cobra!”

“Gertrud was horrified when she heard about him! I told her everything I knew and she found out that he was providing drugs for her daughter and her boyfriend. He told Konrad that her daughter's boyfriend had attacked him per the girl's orders and Konrad disinherited her! I'm sure he plans to get the money that legitimately belonged to that poor girl. Gertrud fought with him and he fired her from the Foundation! She had to move to the Hamptons to save her daughter from that monster!”

“That's horrible!”

“Indeed.”

“How could he do it? This...” Dudu forgot the banker's name, Marianne's eldest son.

“Konrad von Lintorff, darling.”

“Exactly. Wasn't he your boyfriend for so many years? How a man could leave a woman like you?”

“Men's perversities have no limits, Dudu. Sex between men is something that a woman would never do. How many are married and run to have sex with transvestites? They do unspeakable things in bed. I'm so glad that I stopped it before the wedding. Imagine if we would have had children! It's so disgusting! On top, Konrad believes that he lives according to the Catholic Church teachings!”

“What a hypocrite! Are you certain you don't remember his name? The boy's.”

“No, Gertrud knows it well. Perhaps you saw him in Sylt. After our break up, he took him to Sylt and introduced him to most of our friends! It's The Talk among Germans! I will only concentrate in my projects from now on.”

“Yes, of course, dear. It's for the best,” Dudu comforted Stefania, still unable to believe her good luck. With such a story, she was back to the central pages! Two billionaires, homosexuality and a twenty-three-year-old little whore? Not even Berlusconi and his girlfriends could match this! She could hardly hear any more what Stefania was telling about her TV program and her plans for the future. She needed urgently to get a copy of this “*Notes d'Art*.”

* * *

January 12th
Brussels

The room was in complete darkness as he needed to meditate on what he had read. The words were engraved into his brain. No more than a few lines could ruin a man's life. Michel had been tempted to throw the offending piece to the fireplace, but he had done a supreme effort to control himself and read it once more.

Once more I had the opportunity to reaffirm my strong commitment to Art during the latest exhibition of "1989" a well known gallery in Berlin belonging to Andreas Volcker. Every year, he gathers a group of unknown artists and kindly offers them the opportunity to show their work for a month in one of the city's leading galleries. I've assisted many times to this event and in general I can say that the results have been satisfactory; young artists struggling to find new ways to express themselves.

But this year, I was disappointed like never before. Along the intriguing concepts of Anne Ho or the bold traces of Thorsten Wald or the magnificent use of colour and light in Maria Herbada's abstract painting, was the work of Guntram de Lisle.

What could this critic said? Nothing. It makes no sense at all to waste my time and the readers' too. Mr. de Lisle, twenty-three years old, can accurately draw but nothing else. Good use of the technique but this is not the High School Annual Exhibition where our Grandmother chooses something for her living room. His paintings are simply dull and affected. No substance or message behind. A drawing of dirty children, some frogs in a pond, women in painting class. I examined his work for a long time trying to find out why he had the support of one of our most respected experts and I couldn't find it.

His young age could be used as an excuse and we could easily forget him after this exhibition if not were by the fact that he has already inflicted his corny view of the world upon us in 2004 in London at Robertson's, a well respected gallery in a solo exhibition. I asked myself why anyone would risk his reputation on someone with more skills to design Cereal packs than for painting and voilà, if found it; Modern patronage. Mr. de Lisle is only known because of his patrons; a well known Russian collector and a Swiss banker now. Patronage is a key word in Arts and real artists like Caravaggio benefited from it and offered us their creations.

Mr. de Lisle should read this critic and realise that he has not yet achieved, or ever will, the level of Masaccio, Leonardo or Raffaello, who were a credit to their sponsors, and go back to school or stop painting and do us all a favour."

Alone in his living room, Michel couldn't understand the reason of it. He sipped some more from his cognac and his brain searched for an answer. 'Why a French Art Magazine would publish this? They never go beyond Paris, London, Geneva or Bern and much less take care of young artists. I simply don't understand it. The critics from the Germans were good. The painting with the frogs was luminous and I had to fight with one of the Ribbentrops to get it. Similar to Cécile's, but more intense and much more mastery behind.'

'This can only come from one place: Repin. Lintorff would have never done something so beneath his upbringing. That's his vendetta for not returning to him in December and using the exhibition as excuse. He destroyed my Guntram through this stupid critic! All the others were good and the Vatican experts can not be so wrong! Not a real single line to justify his opinion about his work; only personal attacks and acid remarks. This is not a critic but a libel against my child!'

'Why would Repin do this? I'm convinced he loves him. He remained with him all the time in the hospital and in St. Petersburg and took him to his own family. He encouraged Guntram to paint and when he returned from Rome he told me how impressed he was with his artistic maturation. 'His talent is a reality, not a promise any longer. You should have seen his sketches, Mr. Lacroix. All of them were alive and full of light. He's finally flying on his own.'

'That's it. Guntram has grown up and doesn't need anyone to paint. He has a will of his own. He's not a child any more. He needs help and many cares but he will not bend to anyone.'

'You can kill a man but you can't take away his honour.'

'Repin is not good for Guntram, but I need him to get my child away from Lintorff.'

'But how?'

* * *

January 13th
Zurich

Rudolf Ostermann was righteously furious with that stupid and unknown critic. He had called the editor of *Notes d'Art* to ask for an explanation and she had no idea at all of the article. His shouts in French were heard by all the ladies working in his studio and Coco van Breda had the good idea to stop Guntram right at the entrance and take him out for a coffee "to discuss business without that dragon you have for manager". None of them could believe that strange review of such an unbelievable bad taste. Even Tita had bought from Guntram and Mathilda von Ribbentrop was furious because an unknown Belgian collector had "stolen" the painting with the frogs she loved so much.

* * *

The small café was almost empty at this hour and Guntram had ordered some tea for Coco van Breda, one of the students at Meister Ostermann's class and the owner of a small printing company specialized in greeting cards and artistic reproductions. Her main source of incomes were the greeting cards or the catalogues printed for many art galleries or auction houses. According to Coco, she needed to find new sources of income or her husband will finally close her business. "I can't compete with the Chinese. Last year, I lost 237.000 francs and Joseph said that it's not the amount, but the fact that he loses money with one of his companies! He prefers that I spend it on a boutique than in the company!"

Guntram was dumbfounded as he didn't know how he could be of any use to her, but Coco immediately repeated her idea; to print a book with children's stories and sell it for the next Christmas campaign. She had tried to buy several books for her friends' children but she had found nothing "sufficiently elegant and classical as to give as present; all of them horrible!"

"Guntram, there's a market out there waiting for us to be colonized! Children like books despite TV and computers; look this Harry Potter saga! They kill each other to buy a copy! You should take some classical stories—those without copyrights—illustrate them and make a book. Let's say five or six of them; No more than fifty pages, full colour. I can give you part of the profits as payment."

"Coco, with all due respect, I can't negotiate anything with you without Ostermann. He will kill me if I make any kind of compromise with your company. I'm glad to work in that book, but perhaps it's too much. I'm not known and who knows if this could be sold."

"Nonsense Guntram. You paint, I print and Ostermann collects the money," she laughed, happy that the young man was willing to work on it. "I've seen your work and I like it. I saw those illustrations you made for those Russian folk tales and I loved them. All of us in the studio loved them. If women love them, they buy the book for their children and we make money."

"What if you lose money?"

"I will not and this year, I got the Lintorff Foundation catalogue. I was surprised that Elisabetta called me for this, but with what it costs, I can recycle the profits to print your book."

Guntram felt bad that he was indirectly going to use Konrad's money for this. "Coco, charge them less. The auction is for charity!"

"Never! They settled the price in 100 francs and normally sell more than four thousand copies of it. Why don't you choose one story and make more preliminary drawings and then we speak with Ostermann about the terms?"

"I'm supposed to study and paint now for the auction something good. Meister Ostermann thinks that he can make some money with my paintings after the exhibition in Berlin. The critics were relatively good. I will not see a single cent from it, but it will be good. The new president, Elisabetta von Lintorff told me that all the money I make will be sent to Argentina. It seems that there is a pact that the minimum you offer is 5,000 Francs and that's a large amount for Father Patricio."

"I'm sure you could find some free time and give it a try."

"All right, Coco, but I can't promise you anything."

They walked back to the studio where Ostermann had finished shouting with the editor and threatened her with never writing a single line for the magazine and speak with many of his own clients to withdraw their support. "Did you take a look at his work? Start to pray that he doesn't go to courts for defamation!"

Guntram went to his usual place to continue to work with some sketches in coal, surprised that most of the women were looking at him with a mix of concern, curiosity and pity. He saw them, passing a magazine along like teenagers in the school.

"Is that *Notes d'Art*? I haven't seen one in years," Guntram said and asked if he could take a look.

"No, dear, it's a stupid magazine," One of them said.

"Stupid? It's one of the leading magazines in Art" Guntram protested. "Just a look, please."

The mortified woman had to give the magazine to the youth who sat at his chair and started to quickly pass the pages till he got to the article on "*The New Russian Avant Garde*" and focused his attention on it. He was surprised that his name was mentioned and chuckled a little at the idea that he had been mistaken by a Russian. 'I don't even have a Russian name! But I'm on *Notes d'Art*. Wait till Ostermann sees it.'

"I'm here! Three lines, but that's a lot!" He announced to the shocked ladies, astonished that he had taken it so well. "Guntram de Lisle's style is refreshing at the same time he shows a great academic background. His compositions on daily life, deceptively simple, denote a classical, but complex conception, with excellent use of light and colour. One of Russia's youngest promises whose name we will be hearing in the future." It's signed by Alain Duprès! Perhaps I should frame it."

All of the women looked at each other in shock. "May I see it?" A very tall one asked and read aloud what Guntram had just spoken.

"Are they mad?" Coco asked.

"It's not that bad how I paint! Guntram protested, bursting out in laughter. "I could do much better, but Alain Duprès is one of the best in his field. I don't like to be called Russian, but most of my work is there. I sold many things there. Irina Shayluk is also mentioned. She makes fantastic nudes. I met her in Paris during an exhibition and I admire her work."

"Guntram, I'm afraid that there's another critic of you for your exhibition in Berlin. We missed this one and the other is so awful!"

"You shouldn't care what the press writes; they do anything to sell a newspaper!"

"They wrote about my cousin going to a cabaret every time he was in business meetings in Thailand!"

Full of dread, Guntram ceased to hear the women and looked for the Art Critics Section and found his own. He had to read it twice because he couldn't believe that Constantin and Konrad had been mentioned. He had to sit again because he felt sick and embarrassed. His mind was in turmoil as he could only think in Konrad and how furious he would be that their relationship was in a magazine.

"If there's another critic so good, perhaps it's an internal problem and they used you to vent up their frustrations," one of the ladies suggested.

"That's must be. You should speak with Ostermann. He knows all of them much better than us. I can only say that I like what you paint and I'm not a grandmother!" Ms. Esterhazy protested with the other ladies joining her soon.

"Neither am I!"

"I wanted to buy the painting with our class, but Clara wants it too and she's there."

"If you want to buy something from Guntram, you should wait for the auction!"

"No, no, no. I'm going to publish a children's storybook illustrated by Guntram for next Christmas and I'm confident that you will all buy a copy for your own little ones," Coco intervened immediately, rising a collective murmur of assent.

Ostermann left his office, still enraged with the woman; seeing all the women chatting like parrots and a very silent Guntram sitting in his place, looking utterly defeated, was too much for his nerves. "Boy, you shouldn't care about that idiot. D'Annunzio likes you and I think that if you work, maybe it will be good in a few years."

"D'Annunzio likes me because of the Duke's collection. Nothing else. This is not the first time I hear something like this," Guntram answered.

"Rubbish! If you were bad, he wouldn't have bought that *Madonna* from you! The man is almost as good as I!"

"*Meister* Ostermann, Guntram has a very good critic at the same journal. Is it not strange? Here, in the Russian painters' article," Coco said and showed the magazine again to the teacher.

"Damned old queens! They should fix their problems at home and mix no one else! I'm going to kill that little idiot, excuse of an Editor! You, stop whining like a little girl and start to work! I want to see those sketches finished by this afternoon!" he roared.

"Does it make sense?"

"If you want to return home in one piece today, yes, it does. Go back to work. You have wasted a full morning of my precious time," Ostermann slammed his office door.

"I never wanted to get the Duke in the middle of this," Guntram whispered.

"Dear, don't worry. He's old enough as to endure some critics. You should consider speaking with a lawyer," Esterhazy advised him with her voice loaded with real affection. "It's very bad what he writes about your art."

"Oh, he can write whatever he wants about my stuff. I paint because I like it, nothing else. If you don't like it, go to the next gallery. This is not the first time someone calls me "corny". I had many of these critics over the years and they all came from the same kind of people; envious and untalented. What leaves me a foul aftertaste is that the Duke was mentioned. He was never my sponsor or helped me in my career! This man makes him look like an idiot when he's well versed in Arts. It's so unfair! I had a scholarship with the Lara Arseniev Foundation and as you most know, a past relationship with its president, and he was the one who discovered my work in Buenos Aires. We never mixed my career and our relationship. I earned all my grades in the University and my previous manager, Mr. Robertson sold my drawings to banks, insurance companies, private collectors that had nothing to do with Constantin Repin. My critics over my exhibition in London were good. Perhaps I should be more aggressive and "paint with a message", but who am I to tell people what to think? I hate it and it always looked to me so staged. I paint what I see because I love it and nothing else."

* * *

Konrad was in a fit of rage like he had not felt in many years after Ostermann's call. He had faxed copies of both articles till Monika could get a copy of the magazine. He couldn't believe that they had dared to publish such a blatant lie and he was determined to finish that sorry excuse for publication.

"My Duke, this is simply outrageous! I know personally both experts and they're fixing some problems they had in the past using Guntram's name and ours. The editor was not even aware that he had been mentioned twice in the same number! She never saw a single photo of his work! They offer to publish a rectification and a new critic of his work, this time made by an independent consultant."

"I'm more concerned about Guntram's reaction."

"He's working like always, but worried that you have been involved. He told me it's not the first time he's criticized and he doesn't care at all."

"I understand, thank you Meister Ostermann."

Konrad called Ferdinand and Michael to his office. It was time to show the price for crossing him.

* * *

Michael gathered his papers and prepared himself for the meeting at 7 p.m. He was still wondering why he had been asked to investigate a small publication that belonged to one of the minor members; Marcel Theriault, owner of the Luxury Publishing Group, with loans to the Lintorff Privatbank for €78.9 million. Everything seemed to be in order with the man and his magazines respected the Order's rules of no nudity, no scandalous articles, no vulgarity and mostly focused on jet set articles, performing arts, fashion, decoration and traditional lifestyles. Their gem was something called "Jet Set Today" and covered boring things like the Red Cross Ball or some other charity event, a politician wife kissing some babies or harmless articles about movie stars. Acceptable results for it. "We keep it only to create a good image and keep people out of the other trash."

He straightened his tie and left his office to go to the private meeting room but Monika stopped him and sent him to the Duke's office with a "Mr. Theriault is already waiting outside, Dr. Dähler."

"Thank you, Monika," He smiled but only received a cold stare from her that cooled him down. He passed by the fifty-something man, sitting with a miserable face under the Pisarro the Duke had bought some months ago and knocked on the heavy door. Inside the large office, Ferdinand was sitting in one of the couches in front of the small table, looking very upset about something.

"What is their situation?" Ferdinand asked

"Fine so far. Their debts should be renewed in two months. We estimate that we could ask a five point seven percent interest as the group stands much better than before. The total due is €78.9 million and they have always been good members," Michael answered.

"Very well, tell Theriault to come in," Konrad said flatly and Michael obeyed, guiding the man toward the sofas.

"My Duke, it's an honour to be received by you," Theriault spoke very fast and frankly nervous about the

reason he had been summoned by Ferdinand von Kleist himself, with a “the *Hochmeister* wishes to see you at seven in Zurich.”

“How long have you been a member, Theriault?” Konrad said with a polite voice, but leaving all niceties and formalities aside.

“Our family was accepted in 1953, my Duke. We are invited to the annual meeting since 1997.”

“Therefore you're well aware of our rules.”

“Yes, Sire.” Theriault felt a lump in his throat after hearing the cold voice asking it. His mind frantically searched his memory for something they might have published about a member but nothing came out.

“I never liked the press and this morning I find my and the Consort's names sullied by one of your magazines,” Konrad intoned, showing him the article about the critic for Berlin.

The man partly read it and blanched at the “a Swiss banker” part implying that he was somehow involved with an adventurer. Who was this Guntram de Lisle? Consort? Which Consort?

“I will speak with the editor tonight, sire. We will fix this error.”

“You need to speak more with your editor because there is another critic for the same person in the same journal. Anyone would think this is a deliberate campaign against our *Hochmeister* and his Consort. Look in page thirty-six, it's marked,” Ferdinand said.

Theriault was shocked. “I simply don't understand, Sire. This must be a typing error or a mistake. *Notes d'Art* has been on the market for almost thirty-five years and is one of the most respected publications in its category. I don't understand their fixation on one artist.”

“This is more than one bad review for an artist. Guntram de Lisle was appointed Consort by the Council five months ago,” Ferdinand explained. “This can only be a direct attack from you to us.”

“No, never! We are grateful to the Order and have always done our best to serve it!”

“You will close this magazine before February. I don't want any of its employees relocated within your companies.”

“My Duke, you can't ask this from us! This magazine has been for over thirty-five years in the market! It's like the National Geographic for contemporary artists!”

“If you use defamation and scandal as a way to gain more readers, the Order has no interest in keeping you among its ranks, Mr. Theriault. May I remind you of the pending renegotiation of your debts?” Ferdinand said in a polite tone.

“I will fire all the upper staff. I have several millions invested in this publication!”

“Do you refuse to comply with a direct order?” Konrad asked in a dangerous way.

“No, of course not, sire. I just need to find a way. To close the magazine will cost me a lot of money! I can't do it!”

“It will be much more if you refuse. Your debts will not be refinanced and we will go against you,” Ferdinand growled.

“My *Hochmeister*, at least let me keep the oldest workers and relocate them! The French laws are very strict. The new editor will write an article with much better critics for the Consort.”

“No, you will never mention his name again in any of your publications. Close the magazine before February or you will face the storm I'll unleash over your companies. Dismissed,” Konrad barked and Michael rose from his place and took the man out of the office.

* * *

Guntram was so engrossed in the catalogues that he didn't hear Konrad approaching and kissing him on the forehead. He jumped surprised and laugh when he saw it was just his love.

“Do I have to be jealous of furniture catalogues too? Your papers and pencils are enough to ignore me, kitten!” Konrad said falsely upset.

“I forgot about the time. I was taking a look at these ones for ideas for Karl and Klaus' room. Friederich had them today and gave them to me.”

Guntram, is it not simpler if you hire a decorator and then choose what you like?”

“I wanted that we do it by ourselves!”

“Kitten, I have no idea of such things. Just nothing from Disney or any of its factories and no vulgarity. No electronic toys at all or plastics; look for good wooden German toys. Go to Steiff or to Kösen for plush animals

and perhaps a Märklin train. I liked them very much when I was a child.”

“Konrad, they are babies! They can't play with a train! All kids love Mickey Mouse!”

“I hate that rat. It does not enter in this house.”

“All children have them as decoration; half of the furniture has one character from Disney!”

“Says the man who used to have a Bronzino in his room?”

“I never knew what it was! I just liked it!”

“Then, you see my point. We shouldn't ruin the boys' aesthetic taste. Soft colours in the walls, good furniture and look for something functional.”

“All books say that bright colours stimulate babies!”

“If they're blood of my blood, you will be planning to put a tranquillizer in their bottles very soon. Lintorffs don't need external stimuli to make troubles. Ask Friederich to tell you how was a typical afternoon with Albert, Ferdinand and I in the playroom after we had finished our homework. I believe my father sent me to the boarding school at fourteen to save Friederich from a stroke. If my cousin Armin was invited, we had to warn the insurance company in advance.”

“You're so exaggerated!” Guntram protested.

“No, it's the naked truth. Ask Friederich.”

“He told me you studied the whole time! That you made your homework several times till it was perfect!”

“Yes, that it's partially true. He forced me to work very hard in a useless attempt to make me tired. The problem was after it was finished and we were free to play. When I was ten or eleven years old, I wanted to get one of the Rotweillers inside to sleep with me. Totally forbidden. I tried several methods to smuggle one inside, but Friederich was always catching me. One day we, Ferdinand, Albert and I, decided to build a pulley system and lift the dog and get it through the window. It worked.”

“Poor animal! Did it survive?”

“Yes, of course. The dog didn't like heights any longer and the cherry tree needed some extra gardening, but Friederich caught us and punished me. I had to clean the kennels for a month and wash several of the dogs.”

“I understand why he has white hairs!”

“That's the natural ageing process. I was the serious one of the group,” Konrad said with a haughty voice. “Like nowadays,” he added and Guntram laughed with all his heart. ‘That's the moment to check the damages,’ he thought and asked with a light tone: “how was your day, kitten?”

Guntram gulped and decided to go for the truth. Konrad had the right to know before Ostermann would tell him. “Not very good, Konrad. I received some bad critics over my work in an important magazine. In short: I make exhibitions because I'm the lover of a Swiss banker and of a Russian collector. I'm terribly sorry that your name was hinted at. All of your friends must be laughing now,” Guntram confessed.

“Guntram, no one laughs at me. Most of the people I care about know you and I have never hidden my love for you. I'm only concerned that it might affect you.”

“It's not the first time I get critics like these. In fact, when I was in London from the teacher to the last pupil thought so, but I didn't care. I paint to the best of my abilities and can't do much more than that. Take it or leave it.”

“But you care a lot about Ostermann's opinion or mine.”

“Ostermann tells reasonable things and knows about it. He's generally right and I like working with him. Coco van Breda offered me to publish a book for children with her. Traditional stories. We have to speak with Ostermann still.”

Konrad didn't like the idea not a single bit. The van Bredas were new money and parvenus who had built their fortune on transport and discount supermarkets. Obviously, that woman wanted to use Guntram to come near him. “Guntram, you're not an illustrator; you're an artist. Focus on what is important like the babies, your art and your studies. As you have finished the second year, perhaps it would be good that you consider to change University, and finish your studies in Zurich for example. Think about it and tell me your decision in a few days.”

“But I want to make that book!”

“Guntram, do it and we will look for a better publisher. I have no objections to the project, only to the people involved. I will speak with Ostermann about this.”

* * *

February 16th
Munich

The writing of this particular article had been exhausting for Dudu, but after almost a month of hard work, she felt great about the results. "Stars and Stories" was going to sell many issues with this one. Her own editor was very excited with all the interviews and photos. 'Pity he's gay! He has such a nice face and big blue eyes!' Dudu thought for the hundredth time while looking Guntram's picture, taken from the Robertson's catalogue. The only picture she had gotten from Konrad von Lintorff was from an old charity party. 'He looks like a real executioner. Lord! Can this man smile at all?' About the other lover, the Russian, it had been impossible to get his name or picture. The boy had a scholarship in a foundation, but the owner was nowhere to be found. Stefania had refused to tell her the name because "poor man, he has enough with all this!" and Gertrud von Lintorff only told her that "he's very rich, almost like my cousin Konrad. Billionaire, he's into transport and oil. Lost his wife very recently. Look up in Fortune Magazine lists! At least she had confirmed the whole story and spoken very lengthy of this Guntram de Lisle, Vicomte de Marignac, a truly despicable little slug.

She had tried to speak with other people in her circles, but no one had said a word beyond, "Guntram? I believe he's Lintorff's ward. He paints fine. Tita bought several things from him and the Vatican too." Or a: "If I were you, I would leave him alone. He's very shy and Konrad never appears in this kind of magazines. He's very discreet with his private life and business. You will not even find him in a specialized magazine. He never gives interviews."

Once more she took a look at the text before submitting it to the editor.

* * *

February 27th
Munich

Since Marcel Theriault had troubles with his main financier, Alexander Weber checked personally all his magazines before they were distributed. It was the talk among the publishing industry. The man had loses for over seven millions euros and only because he had annoyed said banker with a stupid critic made by two old queens fighting with so much luck that they had dragged the banker's sweetheart's name to the mud. Poor Marcel was trying to get new financing, but most European banks had rejected his applications and those who accepted him demanded impossible to afford rates: twelve percent He had to close the magazine in an attempt to reduce his costs and sell the offices to pay the workers. If he was not able to refinance his debts with this banker, he was bankrupt. The name Konrad von Lintorff was one he would never forget and he had told all his editors that he didn't want a single line written about the man.

He took the copy of "Stars and Stories, Special Edition. New Baby at Brangelina's?" and looked distractedly the pages focused on Paris Hilton, the 'What Happened to?' section; several marriages; two divorces; recipes; diets for the upcoming summer, and his heart froze when he saw the two pages article about the same Konrad von Lintorff's boyfriend "Scandalous Past in Russia".

"Shit!" he cursed, and yelled his secretary to call "the idiot in charge of Stars and Stories. Get his fucking ass in here, right now! Stop the distribution of this shit too!"

'If this Lintorff has almost destroyed a forty-seven years company in less than a week for a stupid line, he will make sausages of me with only five years in business and four tabloids for the supermarket!"

The Chief Editor of "Stars and Stories" burst into his office totally upset that the printing and distribution had been stopped by the owner's direct orders. "Where's the integrity of this publishing house?" he yelled.

"Integrity? This is a business, idiot! Did you authorise this?"

"Of course, it will sell like crazy. Rich gays and clever little sluts. Old aristocracy on top. Everything is confirmed with interviews. Their lawyers can't touch us."

"I don't care if they fuck in the middle of the street. This is a well known banker. He invites presidents for dinner at his house."

"So? Our compromise is to the truth and to our public."

"Not if I'm broke in the process! This is not the fucking Washington Post or the Watergate! Eat by yourself all the fucking magazines if you have to, but stop it!"

"They have to go to the distribution channels in four hours!"

“No! Remove those fucking pages!”

“It's a 700.000 issues circulation! It goes to all Germany and Austria!”

“Stop it!”

“It will cost us a lot of money and our market share. If we are not in the stands tomorrow, we are good as dead!”

“Get the idiots from the design team to put extra hours and redesign anew without this article if you want to keep your job!”

“We can't do that! I don't think we have enough paper to make another edition!”

“Print what you can!”

“What about the advertisers?”

“We'll worry about them later! Now, go to work and fix this!”

* * *

“Who's on the phone, Friederich?”

“His name is Alexander Weber and Marcel Theriault gave him your private number. He says it's most urgent that he speaks with you.”

Konrad sighed and left the cognac on top of the side table while Guntram continued to draw, oblivious to the butler's presence, with a frown in his face as he focused on the details. 'I could organize a meeting with the whole FED and he wouldn't notice,' Konrad thought briefly.

“Friederich, tell him to make an appointment with Monika!”

“He says it's related to Russia, sire. It's about a publication; Stars and Stories.”

Very upset, Konrad rose from his comfortable sofa and went to take the call to his own private studio.

“Lintorff,” he growled already upset with whoever was on the other side.

“Good evening, sir. My name is Alexander Weber and I'm the CEO of Weber Publishing Inc. Perhaps you know our magazine “Stars and Stories”. We have published a story about your relationship with a young man, Guntram de Lisle and his previous lover, a Russian industrial,” a young voice said on the other side of the line.

“If you print one single word about this, my lawyers will take care of your company,” Konrad said with barely contained fury.

“I'm holding the distribution of the magazine till we can reach a settlement that could satisfy us both. The article is well documented.”

“Very well, we'll see each other in Courts.”

“There's no need to become upset with us. Imagine the scandal. You and a twenty-three year old, who happens to be the former little slut of another rich man? Don't bankers rely on their good names? Let's speak and I'm sure we can reach a solution.”

“I have nothing to hide and this is privacy invasion. I'm not a public figure.”

“We even have pictures,” Weber taunted Konrad, convinced that the man was playing hard.

“Very well, how much do you want?” Konrad asked, thinking that the man couldn't be so idiotic as to give a number.

“Look, I know you had already troubles with Theriault and I don't want the same mess here. I only want that you help me to cover the costs of withdrawing this edition.”

“No.”

“Mine is a very small company. We sell our products in Supermarkets. I can't afford the luxury of losing the entire run of a journal. We printed 700,000 copies and by sheer luck I found this rubbish before it was distributed. I don't want troubles with you, but I can't carry on my shoulders the whole weight of fixing this inconvenience. Publishing is not a flourishing business as finance, sir.”

“I'm listening Mr. Weber.”

“I sell each one of the copies for sixty-nine cents and we live mostly from our advertisers. If I stop the circulation, I'll get them on my neck for breaking the contract.”

“If your business can't survive a small inconvenience, then your business plan is very wrong.”

“I need a minimum of €600,000 to cover costs and keep the advertisers happy, sir.”

'At least he's honest with the numbers.' “What do you suggest, Mr. Weber?”

“If you could lend me the money so I can cover the costs and print another issue. I could pay you back in

let's say, three years.”

“How old are you Mr. Weber?” ‘Hopeless idiot or very inexperienced’.

“What? I'm twenty-six.”

“I understand. All right,” Konrad chuckled. “Obviously you have no idea with whom you're speaking and it's refreshing in some way. Most people would have asked much more from me.”

“I'm not blackmailing you! I'm only looking for a way out of this mess!”

“You have the manners of a rascal,” Lintorff laughed. “I will buy all the copies you have at forty cents. You can tell your advertisers that you sold them all and I'll give you a credit for €350,000 at one percent for a year. You have to destroy all the copies tonight and tomorrow someone will contact you on my name. I want all the material you might have on me. Is this satisfactory for you?”

“Very much, sir. Thank you.”

“Good-bye, we will in contact with you. One more thing.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Fire all the people who misled you so blatantly. I also started with twenty-two and my first lesson was keeping all my underlings in line with an iron fist. People mistakes young age with softness.”

“Yes, sir,” Alexander answered, feeling like a dunce in front of the school teacher.

“Good-bye, if we are pleased with your work, we might consider you for further deals in the future.”

Konrad hung the phone before the other could say anything. ‘Ferdinand has to solve this tomorrow. He's back from Frankfurt and behaving very well since he was almost expelled by the board. Perhaps the separation from Gertrud might have been beneficial for him. And the Colombian girl was too much to have around. He was distracted all the time, like a teenager.’

“Hello, Ferdinand.”

“Hello, Konrad. Something wrong?” Ferdinand asked.

“It's contained. A sleazy tabloid wanted to publish some lies about me and Guntram. I have reached an agreement with the owner. We buy all the magazines for €280,000 and give him a loan for €350,000 more at one percent for a year. I want that you send someone to arrange the details and check the company thoroughly. The name is Alexander Weber and the magazine is “Stars and Stories”.

“Which magazine and he only wants that?”

“Give all the material he gives you to Goran. I'm sick of these attacks on Guntram. Sooner or later, one of them will affect him and this I will not consent this.”

“Twice in a month? This looks very suspicious.”

“Someone is behind and we have to find out who was it. I will not let that anyone hurts Guntram to attack me. He's out of all this.”

“Konrad, since he became your Consort, he's in, whether you like it or not.”

* * *

Guntram lifted his gaze from the drawing and noticed his love entering in the room looking very worried. “Is everything all right, Konrad?”

The Duke preferred to ignore the question and focus on the sketch pad and the images of a group of bears dressed like humans. “That's quite a change in your style. Is this for this book?”

“Not really, I dropped the idea as you're so against it. Ostermann gave me a lecture too on not dealing without his presence and much less taking commissions that he has not approved before. These are sketches for watercolours for Klaus and Karl's bedroom. I still think they should have something on their walls and if you don't like Mickey Mouse, I thought perhaps traditional stories would be fine. We are not going to hang a Monet or a Degas!”

“That would be very nice of you. Who are those bears?”

“Goldilocks. The official trespasser.”

“Well, there's a moral in the original version; the bears cast her out because they couldn't eat her as she was an ugly, bony old woman, worthy of being sent to a working house,” Konrad intoned very seriously.

“That's not possible! They returned the little girl to her house and became friends!”

“Read the original English story. Those are three male bears living together, but in different sizes.”

“I'm not so sure if this is a good idea.”

“Do you know that the original Red Riding Hood was the wolf's dinner, according to Perrault? Good advise for women; don't trust strangers and wolves with a silver tongue are the most dangerous of them all.”

“Are you really all right, Konrad?” Guntram asked when he heard the sullen tones in his voice.

“Yes, now I am. Everything is fine, my love. Should we make a list of stories?” Konrad said, recovering once more his inner peace while he held his kitten closer and heard his soft voice speaking about the unborn babies. 'He's more excited about their coming than I. I only hope those little rascals agree to share him with me.'

Chapter 28

March 2nd, 2006

"You're very early today," Guntram was very surprised that Konrad was at 5 p.m. at home, standing in his own studio, kissing him on the neck and checking what he was doing. "Playing the ant or inspection visit?"

"Both, of course," he answered and continued his kissing for a few moments more. "Besides, I couldn't get those two in the bank without losing all my credentials there."

"What have you been doing?" the boy asked with a mixture of puzzlement and fun. Konrad certainly looked as if he had been naughty.

"I saw them in Frankfurt this noon when I was leaving the meeting, and thought that maybe they could fit in here. I'm glad I have a jet of my own. Any airline would have forced me to buy a ticket for them."

"What did you bring home this time? We said nothing more till the rooms are finished. The furniture should arrive in three weeks and they're painting it. That woman has still to choose the fabrics. Wait, there are no toys stores in front of the European Central Bank."

"Around the corner then. I'm not a GPS," Konrad protested.

"You went for it, you mean."

"I might have taken a detour on my way to the Airport. I need a bigger car, coming to think," Konrad pondered, hoping that this new topic would distract Guntram.

"How big is it?"

"Natural size."

"And it is a..."

"Comes from an old German company. Everything manufactured in Germany in the old tradition. I was surprised by their quality. We have the whole family now; the mama, the papa and two children. I think if we buy animals they should be in the form of families."

"What?"

"*Wildschwein mit Frischlingen*. I don't know the words in English. I think the men had finally got them in one of the rooms near the nursery."

"So that was the noise I been hearing for the past hour?"

"You can't get them without a fight. It's a well known fact of life."

Guntram sighed, trying to do his best to look serious, but it was impossible with Konrad. "You're going to spoil the children!" he whined before cleaning his hands with a rug, decided to see what was there. He left his studio, next to the nursery and walked toward the babies' playroom that was interconnected with the bedroom, bathroom and studio for when they were much older. There was also a small room for the night nurse.

Friederich was in the corridor and caught him by the arm. "Not in the rooms, they're just painted and wet. The hunting pavilion is in the nanny's bedroom," he said very sarcastically, opening the door to the medium size room.

Inside was a big wild boar, one big sow and three small piglets, in natural size and very sturdy. "You can ride those things!" Guntram said very shocked.

"It was designed and built to hold a thirty kilos child. If they're heavier, they don't care so much about plush animals," Konrad explained gently.

"As his Excellency can testify," Friederich said from the entrance. "If I remember correctly we had one of them."

"Now that you mention, I remember so. What happened to it?"

"The Duke and Dr. von Kleist used it as target for your arrows when you were ten years old."

"I don't remember that part. Perhaps Ferdinand knows something about it." Konrad kept his sternest face and poise, while Guntram looked at him astonished. "Tea in the winter garden, it's warm enough today." Friederich smirked and left the room, leaving a still shocked Guntram behind.

"Where are we going to put those two? Should they not be exactly the same animal?"

"No, Klaus and Karl should learn to share their things. It will be good if they do."

"How big is this? Do I want to know how much they costed?"

"About 125 cm and you don't want to know because I don't want to tell."

"And the shop just had a family standing there?"

"Not really, they had it for me," Konrad confessed finally.

"I see. How long?"

"One month to manufacture it. It's a painstakingly long process. Quality has always a good price. Don't you like them?"

"They're fantastic, but this is too much. They're babies. They will sleep the whole day when they come!"

"Not forever. Sooner than you think, you'll get two young Lintorffs jumping on top of you or using your dog as horse. Better they have these ones. They should play with the pigs and leave you for me."

"You're impossible! Worst than children!" Guntram smiled and kissed Konrad. "You can't be jealous of your own babies!"

"Our babies, kitten and I know that the minute they cross the door, I'm out from your life!"

"No, you can't be out of my life because you have to support those two pigs and their family too," Guntram joked and hugged the much larger man. "Do you have any idea how much they can eat?"

"If it's too much, then we have something for next Christmas. Albert plans to return with all his children once more."

"Konrad, you know I love you,"

"I know," he answered strangely embarrassed and took the youth's head with his hands to kiss him possessively. "You're mine and I would never let you go away," He intoned the words looking into the soft blue eyes and Guntram smiled warmly. "Now, show me what this woman has been doing," the man broke the spell.

"It's a very nice beige and she has taken several of my drawings for framing. She liked them and wants to buy some more for her other clients, but I told her no."

"Good, they are for our children, not for others."

* * *

After a late walk around the forest, they returned to the library where Konrad decided to look at his laptop and Guntram carried on with his reading: "The First three years of a Baby", losing his courage more and more with each page he read.

Friederich entered the library and whispered something unto Konrad's ear.

"Send the Prince and Adolf in," Konrad said and rose from his desk to receive his visitors, but against many years of education and self restraint, both men almost ran over Friederich in their mad entrance to the room.

"Good afternoon, *mein Fürst*, Adolf," Konrad said, frowning just a bit because he had already realised that there was something very wrong as this was not a social call. Guntram left the book and stood, slightly bowing his head to the old man, but both Löwensteins didn't pay attention to him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, *Hochmeister*, but this is a most urgent matter," Adolf said gravely.

"Please, do sit down, gentlemen," Konrad said indicating them the sofas where Guntram was gathering his book and things to leave as the magical word told him that those were "Order's business" and he didn't want to be a part of them.

"If you would excuse me, Sire," Guntram told to the old Löwenstein, looking more ashen than normal.

"Father, this also concerns the Consort," Adolf stopped the boy by the arm, much to his surprise. "This is all your fault. Your boyfriend kidnapped my little Claudia!"

"Konrad was with me the whole afternoon!" Guntram protested energetically.

"The Russian!" Adolf roared, unable to restrain himself any longer. "Six of them stopped my wife's car on the sixty-two near Forch when she was taking the girls to their classes. They took Claudia away!"

"Constantin wouldn't do something so stupid!" Guntram said, unable to believe it. "Why? He has no need to!"

"Be quiet, Löwenstein! Konrad shouted. "Leave Guntram out of this!"

"Out of this? This is all his fault! Go back to Russia!"

"Enough, Adolf!" the Prince ordered his son very sternly. "We need to speak with the *Hochmeister*, not with a young boy. Our family has already enough troubles."

"Guntram, go to your room," Konrad said, but the young man looked at him in disbelief. "Very well, stay but be quiet."

"Yes, sir," Guntram whispered, already feeling very sick and in need to sit.

"What was your wife doing so far away the country club?" Konrad asked.

"I don't know!" Adolf roared. "Six Russians shot against her car and forced her to stop aside."

"On the 62? It's impossible to do something like this there! It's a highway!"

"On a small road near it! By Forch! They took the girls out of the car and the oldest hit my wife several times and told her that Repin wants a friendly talk with Guntram. You should return the boy to him!"

"Why only one girl?" Konrad said very coldly. "Knowing them, they would have taken the two."

"He came up with the crazy story that "he would be delighted to put a bullet in the head of the little slut who tried to poison Guntram! Repin is crazy!"

"What??" Guntram croaked, but no one paid attention to him as Konrad and Adolf were arguing more heatedly than before.

The old prince sat utterly defeated next to Guntram, but didn't say a thing to him. He only looked the bitter argument rising and raising more in volume and intensity. The discussion continued in German and increasing its volume. Guntram felt very tired and utterly disappointed at the two men; Konrad and Constantin. Like two children who didn't care about anything beyond their desires. One had taken a little girl as hostage and the other didn't mind if the child was hurt in the process. He took a pill from his box and slid it back to his jacket, a gesture that Gustav zu Löwenstein didn't miss.

"*Mein Fürst*, may I use your phone, please? I don't want my number to be registered. It's a long distance call," Guntram whispered to the old man as the other two men were on the phase of shouting with each other.

"Certainly, my child," The old man extended his mobile phone to the young man and he took it, without minding any longer the heated argument.

Guntram remembered by heart Massaiev's and Constantin's private numbers. Probably the later had been changed many times over the last year, but if Constantin was after him, Massaiev should not be far away. He dialled and nervously smiled to the old prince, looking at him astonished. "Hello, Mikhail Petrovich. May I speak with him?"

"This is a surprise, Guntram. I was not expecting your call. How are you?" the man said, almost dashing to get his boss, shouting enraged on the phone with Oblomov.

"Fine, thank you. It's very important that I speak with Mr. Repin. Could you get him for me, please?"

"One second please," and he entered in the room without knocking or anything. He stopped dead on his tracks when he saw the semi automatic weapon pointed at him. He took a deep breath and only said: "It's Guntram, Mr. Repin." and offered the phone to his boss, who tore it off from his hands. Massaiev left the room without waiting to be asked.

"Hello, my angel."

Guntram felt his heart rush at full speed when he heard the well known voice, but he gathered some courage; 'if you show weakness now, all is lost,' "Good afternoon, Constantin. I understand that you have something that belongs to the Order and I would be very grateful to you if you return it before nightfall."

All the Germans in the room were speechless and stopped their heated argument, but Guntram ignored them as he focused on Constantin's reaction.

"Indeed I have something, but I want something in return and you know perfectly well what it's. I've paid my debts and want all my guarantees back."

"Constantin this is the most stupid thing you have done in your entire life, my friend," Guntram used a calm voice, doing his best to conceal the fear in his stomach. "If you don't return what you took this afternoon, you will open the hunting season on your own children! Sofia, Constantin, Vladimir and Vania deserve much better than this! Lintorff will not negotiate with you and cares nothing about this matter!"

"Come by yourself to pick up what I have."

"I will meet you, if that's what you desire so much, but the girl should be tonight at her doorstep, unharmed and before her bedtime."

"Guntram, it doesn't work this way. I have the package and you should be nice to me. I set the conditions," Constantin said with barely contained fury.

"It's you who wants to speak with me, not I. It's under my terms or nothing," Guntram said coldly. 'If he wants to play Godfather, then we will.' "You have moved the game to a level that I don't like and there are no rules any longer for either side."

Adolf looked at Guntram in terror when he heard the words he had pronounced and the old Löwenstein had to grab the table to avoid falling. Konrad was shocked that his kitten could be so cold and calculating. 'Exactly as

his grandfather, I misjudged him all the time.'

"So Constantin, it's your turn to make a decision. The girl and we meet in a neutral point on March 6th at 11 a.m. If not, start to pray when Pavicevic and his people go after your own children," Guntram used an even and soft voice, without quivering or faltering. Adolf felt like dying in this particular moment.

"You really don't mean it, Guntram. I know you."

"No, you don't know me. Any kidnapped person is as good as dead; therefore you have nothing to negotiate with me. That's a lesson I learned thanks to your wife."

"Where?"

"In Vienna," Guntram said as it was in neutral grounds for everybody. "I will inform Massaiev of the meeting point half an hour in advance."

"Good, I like Sacher cake," Constantin retorted and hung up, already thinking how to punish his angel for his rude behaviour. 'That's Lintorff's doing; he totally ruined my angel! He was a sweet and polite child; a butterfly to keep in a glasshouse, away from everything that could stain it. Once its wings loose their powder, they can't fly any more.'

Guntram had to close his eyes for a moment to release the tension. His ruse had played off and he hoped that Claudia would be returned home soon. He knew Constantin; he had honour despite Konrad's opinion. He would go to Vienna and speak, once more with him and this time he hoped his former lover would see reason.

"Are you insane or just stupid?" Konrad roared the minute Guntram returned the phone to the prince while Adolf looked at him expectantly.

"Claudia should be home by nightfall, Adolf. Repin will send her back. We must hope that he fulfils his part of the deal," Guntram said, deciding to ignore Konrad's upcoming rant. He already had a headache and didn't need a fight on top of everything.

"I have no words to thank you, Guntram," Adolf stammered.

"You have nothing to thank me. Your daughter should have never been involved in this. I'm sorry that my former lover has caused such pain to you and your wife. I'm confident to solve this matter very soon."

"I can't believe you can be so stupid, Guntram!" Konrad yelled louder than before as he was furious beyond measure. Not even Roger and his adventures could enrage him so much like Guntram had just done. He stormed out of the room before he would loose all composure and do something he might regret later.

"What did you offer Repin, my child?" the prince asked.

"I will meet him on March 6th in Vienna. I can choose the place, but he mentioned something about Sacher cakes. Is there a hotel of that name?"

"Yes, in front of the Opera house," Adolf said. "Guntram you can't go! He's a criminal! He could kill you!"

"Let's see first if your daughter is safely returned. I will go as I've given him my word. We have to stop this nonsense. What if he goes next against our children after they're born?"

"Guntram, he will not stop after a talk. He has shown this today with my granddaughter's attack," the old Löwenstein said. "You should leave the Griffin to fix this. You have our gratitude and support."

"Thank you, but we must try once more with diplomacy. There should be a way to reach an agreement."

"Does your health allow you to take such a risk?" the prince asked.

"I would feel worse if I don't do all what's in my hands for Claudia. Will you call me when you have any news?"

"Certainly, Guntram."

"Go with your wife, Adolf, she needs you," Guntram smiled and the man could only embrace him and pat his back strongly, before leaving the dinning room.

"Guntram, We will always indebted to you. You had no reason to be so generous to us. If my grandchild is back, reconsider your promise to this criminal. We will protect you with everything we have."

"*Mein Fürst*, we have to stop this. Already two men died in Rome because of me. The man who saved my life last December was beaten and seriously hurt. Today, it was your grandchild. What's going to be next?"

"Good night, my friend. You're an excellent Consort. It will be an honour to have you in the Council when your health allows it."

"I don't want to be in the Council. I only want to look after the children, stay with Konrad and paint. Nothing else."

* * *

After seeing the old aristocrat to the front door, Guntram knew that he had to face the other tiger; the one brooding in his studio or plotting something horrible against Repin, his assets or partners. 'This spiral of hatred and violence is leading us nowhere.' He climbed up the stairs very slowly, needing to support himself with the walls. He felt exhausted when he reached the first floor and had to sit in one of the chairs in the distributor for a few moments. He couldn't believe that Constantin had been so bold, no idiot as to defy a simple basic rule among gangsters: never the families. Not only the Order would have gone after his head, but his own people because that was too much. Which guarantees could you have from someone who kills your children? 'This has to stop, for Constantin's own sake, this has to stop.'

He looked dejectedly at his old bedroom's door and remembered how terrified he had been on his first day. Konrad was not the person he had thought and he had fallen in love of him; he had saved his life and was going to share his babies with him. 'How can Constantin think that I want to return to him? I love Konrad as I never loved him. I realise it now.' He took a deep breath before going to face Konrad, 'in his *Hochmeister* persona' because I've defied him in front of two Council members. He's going to be very upset with me.'

Guntram entered in their quarters and softly knocked the studio's door. "Please, Konrad, let me in."

"Go away."

'Great, he's crossed like a baby.' "Please, my love, let me explain myself to you. I don't know if this will work out at all, but we needed to try it."

"Guntram, leave now! I have work to do!"

'At some point you will have to leave this place.' "As you wish, Konrad. I'm going to bed. I feel very tired." 'No, I feel like shit but I can't tell it.'

Guntram crossed the living room and entered the large bedroom to change into his nightclothes although it was no more than 9 p.m. He showered to release the tension and the soreness in his neck muscles, but the hot water didn't help much as he was becoming more and more concerned as had received no call from Adolf yet. He redressed with his pyjamas and slid under the covers, trying to read a book, but the words were meaningless. His mobile beeped and the SMS only said: "Everything is fine. Thank you. A." Guntram felt the relief wash him over and jumped out of the bed to share the good news with Konrad. Once more he knocked the door, but he only got a "get out!"

Very late in the night, a still furious Konrad stormed in the bedroom with long strides, only looking for his nightclothes under his pillow. Without looking at Guntram's side, he took them and turned away to leave the room once more.

Guntram jumped and caught him by the left arm with a "wait!" but Konrad turned around and pushed him away from him with force, making him land on the pillows. "Konrad!" Guntram protested, but the man was out of himself and crossed his face with a slap.

"How dare you to intervene in a matter of the Council? Who gave you the right to correct my policies in front of them? You're seriously mistaken if you think I'm going to allow this insubordination! No one, not even you, comes between me and the Order! All of you are the same!" He roared and slapped Guntram for the second time.

"I did what was necessary to get Claudia out!"

"You're nothing more than my consort! You live with me and keep me company, but whatever happens in the Order is none of your concern!"

"Repin had a small girl at his mercy! If he wants to talk, we will! What was your big plan? Deny me and let him kill Claudia so you have an excuse to kill his children?"

"We do not negotiate with these people! It's zu Löwenstein's fault! His stupid wife had an affair with the man who sold her to Repin! That happens if you fuck with your tennis trainer! He should have controlled her much better, but he was busy with his own mistress!"

"I don't understand you. The children have to pay for the sins of the parents?" Guntram yelled, out of himself. "You hit me! I will not tolerate this once more! I don't give a damn about your policies if you endanger an innocent person! Are you also a gangster like Repin?"

Once more Konrad was ready to slap Guntram, but this time his arm was stopped in mid air and before he knew, the boy bit him with all his force, making him howl in indignation more than pain. Konrad moved away from the bed as he pressed the left hand on his wrist to alleviate the pain and avoid the contusion. Guntram took a deep breath in an effort to calm himself down, but he couldn't and he fell back on the pillow raggedly breathing. Konrad was in no time at his side holding him, all his fury transformed into worry because he realised his deeds. He hugged Guntram against his heart and rocked him mumbling words of comfort and asking for his forgiveness, till he heard the youth's breathing return to its normal pace and felt his hands caressing his hair to sooth him.

"Should I call Antonov?"

No, it's all right. I feel fine. How's your wrist?"

"I'll survive it, don't worry. I've had worse."

"I'm sorry. I never meant to disobey you or ridicule you in front of the others. I didn't understand a word of what you were speaking and I could only think in Claudia. I needed to try it. Please, don't go away now. I'm afraid."

"Guntram, meeting with Repin is simply stupid. You can't afford the luxury of a fight with him; not even some shouting. What if he tries something like in Rome?"

"You're right, but we have to stop this before it consumes us. What if he goes against the babies? For him, they're the perfect target," his voice was desperate. "There should be a way to make him understand!"

"Guntram, I know him since many years. He's determined to have you back. Nothing you say or do will change his mind. We are at war and this is just the beginning. This is why you should have not interfered. None of the Löwensteins were expecting that I would give Repin what he wanted. They expected retaliation."

"I will be careful and you can come with me. We will choose the meeting place in Vienna."

"Kitten, this is crazy, I can't let you do it!" Konrad hugged Guntram once more. "I can't lose you now!"

"Let's try it for a last time, please Konrad. This is also no life for me!" Guntram kissed Konrad on the cheek and buried against his chest. "If you come with me, I will be braver."

"Of course, I'll be with you! This is nonsense!"

"Let's try this time my way and then, I will let you do what you think best, please."

"Next, you will want to be on the Council."

"No, never. That's a Dinosaurs' gathering!" Guntram said before he could refrain his mouth. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean you're one!"

"No, I just party with them," Konrad smirked but held the youth close to him, feeling how he was relaxing. "Kitten?"

"Yes, Konrad."

"Don't you ever get in the middle again. This is my first and only warning," he said very seriously and Guntram nodded, knowing he had gone through the flames and escaped unscathed by very little.

* * *

March 5th, 2006

They had almost not spoken in the plane to Vienna, only sat together, Konrad holding Guntram's hand while the boy only looked through the window to the darkness, hypnotized by the position lights.

The car had been waiting for them and took them to the hotel in front of Ringstrasse. During the trip, Konrad had tried to distract Guntram by showing some of the buildings, but he had almost not reacted to his comments. Inside the large suite, Guntram had refused to dine and after many, many blandishments Konrad was able to convince him to nibble half of a chocolate cake.

"Guntram, you don't have to do this. I'll manage Repin in my way," Konrad told him for the tenth time once they were in bed and his kitten had curled in his arms, looking exhausted and afraid. "You're almost on the brink of a collapse."

"We have to."

"No, we don't. He's not a civilized man. He will not sit to hear what you have to say and then, look for a joint solution. He will hurt you if he can't get you! Please, Guntram, let me do it in my own way. I know how to treat this scum."

"This is the last time I try. We have to stop this madness. I worry about the babies when they're here. What if he attacks them now?"

"The carrier is well protected and she will be well provided after the birth, don't worry about her, kitten."

"Tell me you love me," Guntram whispered.

"Guntram, you're my life. I love you and I need you. Without you I could never have had my children. I can't do it alone. Drop this and let me deal with Repin. You can't risk being sick because of him. Klaus and Karl need you too. What if Repin hurts you?"

"Constantin will not hurt me. He could have done it in Rome, but he didn't. He frightened me, but didn't touch a single hair from me. His men were sometimes brutal to me, but he always was very careful with me. He took

care of me when I was sick. He's not such a bad man, Konrad."

"Guntram, you don't know half of what I know," Konrad said dejectedly.

"Maybe that's why he let me know his true self."

"My love, this is a huge mistake."

"Perhaps, but we are here now. Let's be together tonight, please."

* * *

March 6th

Guntram did his best to hide that he was taking one of his white pills when he was left alone with Milan in the suite. "Are you OK, Guntram? You don't have to keep your word to this scum," the Serb said concerned because the youth looked very ashen and tired and they had not even started.

"I'm fine, Milan, let's just finish this, shall we?"

"All right, the Duke awaits for you in the established room. Repin will come in ten minutes. Remember we are next to you all the time, and back you. If he comes near you or tells something nasty, we enter."

Both men took the elevator to the sixth floor and entered in the large suite where Konrad and Goran were standing already. None of them spoke as they all sat at the table, too focused in their own private hells.

Milan opened the door to let Constantin enter and he was alone. "I said a private meeting, Guntram," he said, ignoring the other two men already looking like lions ready to jump.

"I'm here to oversee your behaviour, Repin. Guntram's health is frail at the moment," Konrad retorted defiantly only willing to get an excuse to launch himself against his adversary.

"My next move will not be so courteous as before."

"Nothing would please me more than a reason to unleash war upon you, Russian," Konrad growled, but Guntram only placed his hand over his arm to calm him.

"Please, my Duke. Leave us alone. I'm certain Mr. Repin does not plan to harm me in any way."

"Of course, Guntram. I only want to speak with you freely," Constantin intoned seriously.

"Please, Konrad. Leave us alone," Guntram whispered.

"If I see that you touch him or come near him, I'll kill you myself," Konrad said in Russian and left the room.

Constantin waited for the Serb, still very reluctant to leave the youth alone in the same room with Repin, to close the door before sitting in front of his angel. Guntram looked very nervous, sad and sick, with his eyes glued to the polished table and his right hand absently drawing imaginary lines over the furniture. Carefully, Constantin took the hand and stopped the movement and caressed gently the small hand, hearing the boy gasp in shock.

"It's just me, Guntram. No need to be so nervous. I only want to speak with you. One last time."

"Constantin, I swear I never wanted to hurt you. It just happened. I fell in love with Konrad in the summer and I still don't know how. I was very unhappy with you and he gave me the opportunity to start again. I would have hated you in the end and this way I still look at you with deep affection. You showed me the way and without you, I would have been very frustrated and never explored Art. I will always be very grateful to you and no one, not even Konrad could change this. It's just that I can't live with you any more. I don't love you, just appreciate you. This has to stop, my friend, before we hurt each other more."

"Guntram, nothing is as you say or how Lintorff has made you believe."

"He wants to share his children with me. The first thing I told you when I met you was that I wanted children. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I do. Children of your own and I was never opposed to it. You can have them if you want with me. A wife would be hard for me to accept, but I would finally do it. Lintorff is offering HIS children to you, not yours. They will never be blood of your blood. It's just a loan, like the many he does per day."

"No! Konrad loves me!"

"Does he really love you or someone else?"

"He loves me, Constantin. I'm sure of it and I love him back."

"Has he always been forthcoming to you?"

"Yes, but he had nothing to do with my family's death."

"I wouldn't be so certain, Guntram. Is this room clean?"

"I don't know, I suppose."

Constantin sighed and mumbled a: "Of course not," before he took a simple white envelope from his coat. "Don't say a word while you look at the pictures, Guntram," he whispered as he set it over the table and the boy took it with shaky hands. "Lintorff never loved you by yourself but for another person who passed away on December 14th of 2005, in Madrid. He was cremated in January because no one claimed his body and his ashes were scattered in the general cinerary as a homeless person. There's not even a plate to remember him. The person who died along with him was luckier. His family claimed the body and Trevor Jones is back in the United States."

"Who was he?"

"Look at the pictures."

Guntram took out several colour photos where was a very young Konrad with a man looking very similar to him. In several of them, they were holding each other and in one, sharing a kiss. 'This person looks very much to my uncle Roger.' He turned them around and read the dates ranging from 1982 to 1988, most of them taken in Paris or Rome. He left the photos aside, already sickened and feeling very afraid. 'It's just a coincidence, Konrad told me he loved someone who looked very similar to me.'

"Read the letters if you want. Your family gave them to me. All belong to Lintorff."

On the brink of tears, he took one of the neatly folded papers and opened it, doing his best to calm himself down and fight the nausea, but it was useless. He had to read the header several times to understand the words.

Paris, July 15th 1985

My adored Roger,

I was forced to leave you this morning as I have to be in Tokyo tonight the latest. You're so beautiful when you sleep that I can't stop looking at you making me forget how cruel you are to me. If you were just a little more kind to me and didn't fight me all the time, we could be so happy together. Understand that we both have a position and obligations to fulfill. I can't grant your desires. I love you with all my heart and I wish you were truly my kitten, but you're not. You demand from me what I can't give. Alas, I love you and you're like a drug that will finally destroy me. If you would be just less demanding and selfish, I would let you be my Consort, but we never change our natures; a seat for your father should be sufficient for your family. Don't be mad at me and punish me for my decision. I will always love you.

Konrad

"That's the first name he called me; kitten," Guntram whispered slowly and almost inaudibly. "Where is my uncle?"

"I've told you. In Tres Cantos, Madrid. He and Trevor Jones, from the Independent Times, were executed in the tunnel that crosses the mountains. Car accident. The other journalist, Linda Harris, she tried to contact you last Christmas, was shot in London four weeks ago. They discovered her among the guest list in that party when someone almost poisoned you and accused her of doing it."

"This is not true!"

"No, Guntram. Your uncle and Lintorff were lovers for seven years. Roger rose against him along with your whole family and lost. Most of them are dead now. Only his wife and daughter had been spared, but live in horrible need."

Guntram rose from the table and gathered all the papers automatically, without removing his eyes from Constantin's dark ones. "Come home with me, angel. He deceived and used you. I will let you have a baby, if you want one so badly. Come with me and meet your own family."

"No," Guntram answered with a raspy voice, looking desperately for the door. His head felt heavy and the room seemed to rock him like a boat, but it didn't prevent him from reaching the door. He jerked it open and saw Konrad standing there with Goran at his side.

"Are you all right, little brother?" Goran asked feeling the deep anguish and terror that poured out of the boy toward the Duke.

Guntram only looked Konrad in the eyes and threw the papers at his feet. "You're a disgusting creep!" He howled, hurt like a child with such deep pain colouring his voice, one like Konrad would never forget in his all life. "You loved my uncle and fucked me out of spite!"

"No, it was never like this!" Konrad shouted outraged. "I love you like I never loved him!"

The cry of pain was like the howl of a dying animal and Guntram would have collapsed on the ground had not Constantin held him from the waist, steadying him. "Come home now, angel."

"No," Guntram whispered and pushed him away to move to a corner of the room. "I hate you, Lintorff!"

"This is all your fault!" Konrad shouted and jumped on the Russian, ready to kill him once and for all, without caring that Goran had tried to stop him because the place and the audience were not the appropriate.

While the three men were fighting like ferocious beasts, Guntram only looked at them, incredulous at what was transpiring. Still breathing raggedly, he removed the seal from his left hand and left it on the table and opened the corridor door, locked from the inside. He was almost crushed by Heindrik and the Russians waiting outside in their mad run to reach their leaders. No one cared about him any longer as the fight was what all in their minds.

Guntram walked down the corridors like a zombie and took the elevator down. He didn't know what to do, but he needed to leave the place and everything behind. Milan stopped him in the middle of the lobby and asked what had happened, but he only said: "they're fighting upstairs with all the Russians. This is too much for me," Milan just pushed him aside and dashed to the suite.

Alone in the middle of the luxurious place, surrounded by gigantic ferns, marbles, carpets and chandeliers, Guntram never felt so alone in his life or displaced. His only wish was to leave the place and escape from this madness and that his dreams and life had been crushed in an instant.

He walked toward the door and the doorman opened it for him, bowing his head, surprised that the guest had noticed him and briefly and sadly cracked a smile at him. The man looked how the young man descended the stairs toward the street and stopped in the middle of it, looking around, disoriented and lost till a grey Opel Corsa parked brutally in front of him in the reserved space for passengers and a man opened the window door from the car and only shouted "Guntram, jump in!"

The boy's back went rigid but he went to the car and entered in the backside when the door opened by itself.

* * *

Milan burst the door opened and saw the men fighting like crazy. 'The last thing we need is a scandal and the Austrian police asking questions! Shit!' 'I'll regret this all my life!' he thought before pulling his weapon and screwing the silencer to stop his Duke from strangling Repin or Goran and Heindrik beating some Russians. He fired against one of the small table lamps, breaking the porcelain in hundreds of pieces that fell all over the fighters.

All of them stopped and looked at him with ferocious murder in their eyes. He put his gun down and sneered. "Gentlemen, none of us want the cops and much less the press! It's bad for the business!"

"Mihailovic is right," Goran said and released one Russian, making a great effort to control himself, 'I almost had him' "Please, my Duke, there will be another chance." He took his knife out of his pocket, but rose and went to one of the corners. Heindrik and Oskar were not so willing to leave their prey, but the Russians loosened their holds on them and moved away as one sharp look from Goran was enough to convince them.

The last one to release his hold was Konrad and he got a strong final punch from Constantin before he moved aside.

"Great," Milan mumbled nervously, while both leaders were still looking exchanging murderous looks. "Gentlemen, this is not the place. We can finish this discreetly somewhere else."

"You're a piece of shit, Repin. I'll take my time to finish you," Konrad swore.

"You're a pervert that ruined my angel. You killed him."

"Not I, it was you, tattletale! Scandalmonger! You don't even follow the most basic rule!"

"Incestuous bastard! I'm going to take him back to where he belongs. He hates you now."

"Yes, he hates me. That's a hundred times better than only being friends. Guntram feels something for me while for you he feels nothing at all! He would have never loved a filthy rat that can't keep his mouth shut!"

"You will never have him! He's mine and you stole him!"

"I stole nothing! He's not yours but mine!" Konrad roared, ready to resume the fight, but Goran restrained him before he could launch himself against Constantin once more.

"STOP! Where is Guntram?" Goran roared.

"He's down, in the lobby," Milan said, realising his mistake. "Shit! I left him alone!"

"He must be with Massaiev on his way to the airport," Constantin gloated much to Konrad's horror.

* * *

"What are you doing here?" Guntram asked, still not believing that from all people in the world the driver was none than his lawyer and tutor, Luciano Martínez Estrada while Nicholas Lefèbre was sitting next to him.

"Living off your relatives. They paid two weeks of holidays in Paris for me and my wife. Carla sends greetings and a new sweater. It's in the trunk," Chano answered, smiling broadly over the rear view mirror. "You don't look very well, Guti."

"Do you need to take your pills, Guntram?" Nicholas asked with real concern. "Jerôme will kill me if something happens to you."

"What the hell are you doing here?" The boy shouted, without caring about the lawyer.

"Saving your ass, it seems," Chano shrugged, focusing again in the driving because he had changed lanes without warning and another car had blown the horn, against all traffic regulations. "How can you be so dumb as to date two mobsters? Didn't I teach you better? I should spank your bottom for not telling me that you were going to London with a gangster! What the fuck were you thinking?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"Someone told us, Guntram. You know him very well. We needed Repin to get you out of the Order," Nicholas said softly and offering a bottle of water to Guntram, who rejected it with the head. "Chano will drive us to the train station and you will leave for Munich with this person. It's the only way to get rid of Repin and Lintorff at the same time."

"I'm going nowhere with a stranger!" Guntram shouted and took another pill swallowing it dry.

"He's no stranger to you. We are here. Follow me and don't make a sound or raise any suspicions. I have your new papers with me," Nicholas said as Chano parked in the second level of the Central Train Station garage. The lawyer got out of the car and went around opening the door for the shocked boy, while Chano did the same and opened the trunk to get a paper bag from "La Martina- Buenos Aires".

"Clara knitted it for you, Guntram. Be a good boy and don't get into troubles any more. I love you like a son," the large man said and hugged the inert boy standing next to the grey car. "Bye, Nico, almost like in the old times."

"Return the car in Linz and take the train from there," Nicholas said in French and Guntram was tempted to tell him that Chano couldn't speak a word, but his lawyer answered in perfect French that he had much more experience than him in operations.

"Remember who taught you all the tricks."

"Remember who saved your ass from that terrorism and kidnapping charges," Nicholas smiled. "Thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it, my pleasure. Give my regards to Jerôme," Chano said hurriedly and went inside the car once more to drive it away.

Guntram was gaping at Nicholas, unable to process the last words or what had just perspired. "Come, little one, I'll take you to your father," Nicholas said, gently pulling from the pale youth. "You two have a train to catch and I a plane back to Paris."

* * *

Michel Lacroix had never been so nervous in his life. He didn't know what could be the outcome of the meeting or how Guntram could react. 'I can't leave him with Lintorff after he killed Roger and those two journalists. He's too deranged to be left to his own devices. He could kill Guntram.'

He paced once more in the deserted third level of the parking lot and his nose wrinkled at the penetrating smell of the car fuel, oil and wet concrete, assaulting his senses in the cold noon. 'Please God, Nicholas and Luciano should have gotten him first.'

The elevator door opened and his heart almost stopped to see his child, almost dragged by Nicholas, only dressed with a jacket and tie despite the cold weather. He automatically removed his own coat to give it to him while he advanced toward the men.

Guntram looked at the medium size man walking toward them with a confident stride, exactly as he

remembered him when he was a small child and his father would come to the school or the park to pick him up. The man was not as tall as he remembered and the face had aged and hair had turned grey when before was black as ebony, but the eyes were as green and piercing as before. He stopped in the middle of the parking lot, unable to believe his eyes.

"Viens ici, ma gosse," Michel repeated the words he was always telling his son each time he visited him in Buenos Aires. *"Tu as bien grandi!"*

"J'ai été sage," Guntram let the words flow automatically before he realised that it was what he was always telling to get a present from his father. He raised his hands to touch the ghost in front of him and the man let him roam all over his face, checking the bones structure so similar to his.

"Comme d'habitude, mon petit prince."

"You can't be him!" Guntram almost cried. "I saw your tombstone!"

"I received your letter my son. We must go before they come. If someone from the Order sees me, I'm as good as dead," Michel said softly and embraced his frightened son for a brief moment. "We have to dodge the Russians too. They must be like crazy looking for you, too."

"Papa?" Guntram asked once more very disoriented while Michel was almost forcing him inside his coat.

"We'll speak later. Get my coat; it's very cold for you," He shushed his child. "We're going to Munich by train and from there to Frankfurt."

"You're dead!"

"Not yet, and I don't want to start now. I'll explain everything to you, but we must flee before they come. I'm hoping they follow Chano if they took the license plate."

"Or me to the airport, if they are clever enough, but those Siberian monkeys around the corner were very nervous. The fanatics were too busy checking on the Russians," Lefèbre smirked. "We'll see each other in five days, Michel."

"In Brussels, Nicholas."

"Shout with the Russian. He's an idiot. Lost Guntram in less than thirty minutes," Lefèbre snorted.

"Thank you, my friend," Michel said.

"Take good care of him now. Good-bye, Guntram, be good to your father, he missed you horribly all these years," Lefèbre removed his own coat and gave it to Michel. "I have the car and a flight later today. You have to cross half Germany and it's snowing."

"Thank you again, Come Guntram we must hurry."

* * *

Goran ran the stairs down toward the lobby, almost knocking down a small table standing in the hall, but Guntram was nowhere to be seen, with the corner of his eye, he saw Repin and his men go to the exit and leave the hotel while a large Mercedes stopped and one of the goons opened the door for the gangster. The Serb took his phone out and ordered his men to follow the Russian.

"If he has Guntram, he's dead, we have to get him back. Shit! How could he do something so stupid!"

He went to the door and the doorman opened the door for him and the idea landed on his brain.

"Excuse me, did you see a young man, blond, blue eyes with a tweed brown jacket and light blue tie? He should have been here no more than fifteen minutes ago. Did you see with whom he walked away?"

With no one, sir. He was alone. He took a car; a grey Opel Corsa. He knew the driver," the doorman answered.

"Grey Corsa? What the hell? Who drives such thing?" Goran looked at the man puzzled. "Are you sure about the car's model?"

"Certainly, sir. It parked in front of us. Rented. Had a tag from "Cheapo—Rent a Car". We don't have many of those stopping here."

"This would be the first time I hear the Russians drive such things. Opel Corsa?"

* * *

"Opel Corsa?" Milan asked astonished as all the men looked at Goran as if he were mad. "This will be

impossible to track! There are hundred of these things!"

"He's not with the Russians," Konrad let a sigh of infinite relief escape.

"But with whom? The doorman said Guntram knew the man. It was a rented car," Goran retorted.

"Rented?" Konrad asked shocked. "Who runs away in a rented Opel Corsa?"

"Someone crazier than the Russians," Heindrik muttered. "I'll check the hotel's security cameras, my Griffin."

"Milan, go to the airport with two men. Check it thoroughly," Goran ordered. "I'll check the train station and the bus station with your team Holgersen."

Konrad needed to sit in the couch the minute the men dashed out of the room, without waiting for his permission. His gaze wandered across the partly trashed room and saw over the table his family's seal. Discarded. He rose and took it, briefly looking at it, before he slid it into his breast pocket. He took the papers and pictures scattered all over the floor. 'I have to see what this animal has told him. I have to recover my kitten before he reaches to him.'

Chapter 29

On the limit of his forces, Guntram collapsed in the train's small compartment and needed to rest his head against the window, looking at his father, still unable to believe that he was there and not in Père Lachaise along with his mother.

"Are you all right?" Michel asked for the second time and Guntram only nodded. "We will be in Munich in an hour and we will have to hurry to catch the train to Frankfurt. I have the tickets with me. Take yours in case we have to split at the station.

"Why?" Guntram spoke for the first time since they had left Vienna

"Just precaution. I'm not expecting them to have followed us. You only go to the train and travel to Frankfurt. If I don't join you in the train, I want you to go to this address. It's a small hotel. Spend the night there and in the morning go to this bank and get everything that it's inside of the safe box. It's money and several documents. Give them to Nicholas Lefèbre in Brussels and leave Europe. Go to the United States. I have friends who can help you there. They're against the Order and will hide you from them or the Russian."

"Why would you be away?"

"I'm not going away, I'm just being cautious. By now, Repin must be looking for you like crazy and Lintorff has realised you're not with him and doing the same. The Order has many resources to check official databases. I'm sure they're already checking all the records of airline companies or your bank account's movements."

"Is my uncle really dead, father?" Guntram asked very weakly.

"Yes, car accident. I found it out when the journalists he was working with, told his wife. She told me two weeks ago and I knew that I had to remove from there."

"Why did he do it?"

"I don't know. I guess your uncle tried to speak with you and Lintorff panicked and killed him. He was after Roger since 1989. He never respected the agreement of letting him and his family go in exchange of you. The car he was in had a flat tire and crashed against the tunnel walls at one hundred forty km per hour. There were no survivors. The journalist's family told her and she wrote me a letter to the PO Box you know. You sent me a letter this December.

"Are you Michel Lacroix?"

"Since 1989. The other name does not exist any longer. You will have to call me like this because this is how most people know me nowadays. Only Nicholas and Luciano know Jérôme de Lisle.

"Did you send Jacques to me?"

"Yes, Repin suspects it. My law firm takes care of many of his companies taxes."

"Do you have a law firm?"

"Yes, along with Nicholas. We know each other since a long time. We even take care of some of the members' tax declarations and three of Lintorff's companies. Nicholas takes care of the public relations."

"Do you work for Konrad too?" Guntram asked horrified.

"You would be surprised how many things a corporate lawyer knows. More than a wife, a confessor or a mistress. People don't care who you are as long as you save them money on their taxes and fix what they screw up in their greed. No one, but Lintorff remembers Jérôme de Lisle."

"I understand, father," Guntram whispered and dedicated all his attention to the passing landscape.

In the afternoon the train arrived to Munich and Michel asked his son to follow him from a distance. Guntram did exactly as his father had told and was surprised that he was buying a set of tickets in the machine and paying for them with cash.

"The train leaves in forty-five minutes. We can eat something, if you want. You don't look very well, my son."

"I feel very tired," Guntram confessed.

"Once we are in the train, you can sleep till we get to Frankfurt. Let's have a coffee and we go."

They sat at a small café, full with people rushing to finish their coffees or just killing time and Guntram still felt as if he were walking on clouds. He was oscillating from a sense of déjà vu to unreality. Without asking, Michael ordered very fast in German some apple cake and hot chocolate for his son.

"Do you speak German?" Guntram asked puzzled.

"Your grandmother was German. I spoke German before French. With your uncle Roger I was still speaking German, but Pascal always preferred French. I was never too close to him although the age difference was smaller. I liked more Roger," Michel told softly and stopped the minute the waiter returned with the order.

Guntram just looked at the steaming cup and the sense of déjà vu assaulted him once more. The scene was exactly as when he was a child and his father was taking him to a café near their flat to have a chocolate and a piece of cake. As a child he had loved it because it was one of the rare occasions he was leaving the large flat for something else than going to the large square, passing the French Embassy and overlooked the Decorative Arts Museum, or school. The memories were so strong that he had to close the eyes for a second. "You remembered," he whispered.

"I'm not going to buy you a strawberry ice cream, Guntram," Michel said seriously and smiled because Guntram was always willing to get one, even in the middle of the winter or if he had a strong cough. "I never forgot you and I missed you each day of my life. I only wanted the best for you and to have the opportunity to recover you one day. I wanted you away from this world and I wanted that you would be an ordinary man, working and getting a normal life, something I never had."

Guntram started to eat the cake and remained silent once more. "Your grandfather, the Vicomte, had a large fortune. Imagine, I never was in a bus or in a train till I turned eighteen and went to the University! I needed a dictionary to understand my friends at the Sorbonne. "*Vous parlez comme Molière*," told me one of the girls. I had no idea what was "*un mec*" or "*le flic*" I was a complete outsider. I didn't want you to suffer this too. I had to learn everything from zero. I lived all my childhood and adolescence among velvets and silks."

"Why did you leave me? I only wanted to be with you!"

"I also, but I was forced to do it to save our lives. I will tell all what you want to know when we're at home, not here."

"Where's home?"

"Aschaffenburg. My mother was born there. I bought a property several years ago and refurbished anew."

"Can you do it?"

"Our firm has top customers. We make good money. Over the years I have rebuilt part of what Lintorff destroyed in 1989 and I always kept all what I inherited from my mother away from the Order. Hurry up Guntram or we might miss the train."

Obedient as always, as his years in school, with Constantin and later with Konrad had taught him that it was the wisest thing to do, the youth finished his cup of hot chocolate and the cake while his father left a €20 note over the table. "Are you not cold, father? I think I can wear the jersey and return your coat."

"No, it's all right. Let's go."

They walked at a fast pace and had to run the last fifty metres to catch the train just before the engines started. They sat on the comfortable first class and Guntram almost fell immediately asleep on his father's shoulder for the whole trip, concerning Michel because his boy was almost drained from the day.

He looked at his sleeping son, taking every detail in. Guntram had certainly grown and he looked much more to him than before, when he was a child. The contours of his face were his and he had only inherited from his mother the soft blue eyes and hair colour. The gestures were exactly as he remembered when Guntram was a small child, curling on top of him to prevent his father from going away, once more his fingers tangled with his jacket's lapel, using the eyelets as an anchor.

'Lintorff must have already started a manhunt for Guntram or a war with Repin. They're going to kill each other and that would be the best that could ever happen to this world. It's exactly as my father said, you fight fire with fire.'

'How could Guntram love any of them? Both are murderers and criminals! Lintorff almost kidnapped him and pressed till he got his Roger back, in a soft and sweet version, exactly as he always wanted. How could he always tell that he loved my brother with all his soul and then, he killed him as soon as he got Guntram? He's the demon disguised as the noble lion. A Griffin! It's an insult to those noble creatures. I should have seen it! He accepted my offer so fast! I should have seen that he was really considering to make my child his! I suffered all these years to keep my boy safe and yet this monster found a way to get him and bend him into his perfect doll, what he always wanted from Roger.'

'This time, I will take you far away and give you a real family of your own.'

* * *

"Where is Guntram?" Repin growled the minute he entered in his jet and saw it empty.

"We lost him. When Massaiev was going to take him, a car appeared out of nowhere and he just ran inside. He knew the man. We tried to follow it, but we lost it in the train station. We searched it thoroughly, but didn't find him," one of his lieutenants said. "Mr. Massaiev is with some other men looking for him."

"Is he back with Lintorff?"

"No, sir. It was no one from the Order. We don't know who they might be."

"Search the airport!" Repin shouted, doing his best to control the murderous rage he felt and his men just ran away from the plane to carry on his orders.

Once more, his angel had slipped through his fingers after rejecting him for a second time. 'Once I catch you, Guntram, I will cut those wings of yours forever. That fucking German has completely ruined you! It took me months and years to make you perfect!'

'If he doesn't run to Lintorff, I can get him first. I only have to look for the father and I will find my little lamb once more. Lacroix started this game and he must be the key to finish it.'

He took his mobile out and dialed his number.

* * *

A loud ringing woke up Guntram and Michel only made a gesture with his hand, so he would keep quiet. "Do you have him?" Michel asked without preambles and Guntram looked at him surprised.

"He evaded my men, Mr. Lacroix."

"I can't believe your incompetence, Mr. Repin! He's just a sick boy! How could you loose him?" Michel exploded to the Russian and Guntram almost jumped out of the seat

"There was another car waiting for him! Where are you Mr. Lacroix?"

"I'm on a train! Going to the meeting point! Didn't you show him the photos?"

"Of course I did, but Guntram started to yell with Lintorff and he attacked me. I assume he went away when we were fighting."

"This is impossible! You have no idea of where he could be? What if Lintorff hurts him now? He knows about his family's death! What if Lintorff thinks that he might go to the police? Guntram must know a lot about his deals! He was living with him!"

"Do you have any idea of where he could be?"

"You lost him and want to blame it on me? Look for him and you'd better find him soon or I will take matters into my hands, sir!"

"Do not dare to..."

"To what? Find the boy or you will be begging Lintorff to put a bullet in your head!" Michael said in a voice that Guntram had never heard in his father and gasped when he hung up on Constantin.

"Father! That was Repin!"

"So?"

"He killed men for less!"

"He should do better his job and no one would shout with him. Imagine, losing a twenty-three year old brat in a five stars hotel! How dumb can you be?"

'He's crazy!' Guntram thought. "Father, he's a murderer."

"Will not be the first I meet. Try to rest some more. We will be in Frankfurt very soon and then it's one hour more driving."

* * *

"We found nothing, my Duke," Goran admitted that same night. "We are still looking for the car but nothing so far."

"Thank you Goran, continue with the search," Konrad answered in the darkness of the suite he had shared with Guntram. The soft noise of a closing door, told him that the Serb had left.

'He took nothing with him. No money, no papers, no clothes, not even his coat. Who could have taken

him? Obviously, he's not with Repin because they're after him too.'

Aschaffenburg

The black Audi parked in front of a large turn of the century villa partially hidden behind a tall covered with ivy brick wall and iron gate. Guntram descended from the car and wondered why his father was leaving it on the street.

"Where are we?"

"Home. It's walking distance from the *Residenz*, the Bishop's Castle. You can see the river from your bedroom window, Guntram. I'll show you the city tomorrow. It's small, but nice. Let's go inside. It's chilly out here."

Guntram winced when he heard the gate squeaking lightly, afraid that the neighbours would be alerted and looking through their windows in the deserted street.

"Guntram, everyone here knows me. Don't worry. Besides this is a residential area. Germans go early to bed. On the other side is only a road for pedestrians and bicycles along the Mainz and a four metres wall separating us from it." Michel explained while he looked for the keys in his pocket. He entered the house and quickly dialled the security code while his son looked with big eyes every detail in the foyer, moved that its style was very similar to his old house.

The place was elegant and comfortable at the same time, decorated with good heavy furniture and carpets, some paintings, all in a very classical taste in Biedermeier style. The living room had large windows, covered with light muslin and brocade curtains overlooking the garden. "Come with me to the kitchen. Fairuza must have left something prepared for you."

Guntram followed his father through the large corridor that crossed the house and ended in the kitchen, modernly decorated and arranged with a wooden floor and white furniture. Still very cold, he removed the coat and left it over the marble counter, going to the radiator to get some warm.

"Tabouleh with eggplants casserole or chicken?" Michel asked after a brief inspection of the refrigerator.

"I beg you pardon?"

"That's what my housekeeper left. I would suggest the chicken. She puts too much pepper in the tabouleh."

"Do you have a housekeeper here?"

"I can't cook. Never could or ever will. Be glad if I can switch on the microwave. Her name is Fairuza. Good woman. She's with me since seven years ago and accepted to stay with you, when I'm away."

"When you're away?" Guntram gasped and felt dizzy again.

"Just for a few days. I have to continue with my normal life so I don't raise any suspicions. We will go away soon. Everything is ready. Come sit at the table. I'll try to get your dinner ready." Michel said, getting some plastic containers from the refrigerator and placing one inside the microwave and switching it on.

"Wait! You have to open it first or it will explode inside!" Guntram warned him. 'He can't really cook!'

"Ah, it's true. I never remember that part." Michel shrugged and did as he was told. "One of my reasons for making you work since young age. You should learn how to fend by yourself. Luciano told me that he always felt useless around you. You always knew what to do and were never asking for advice. He told me several times that you were wise beyond your years and that made me very proud. Come, sit down and eat," Michael said and took a dish from the wooden cupboard and served the warm baked chicken leg with potatoes. He only served part of the tabouleh and sat next to his son watching him eat in complete silence.

'He obeys every command', he sighed. "Are you all right? Did you take your pills?"

"Yes, father," the boy answered and got out his pills box from his jacket to take his night dose with some water. His son looked like a robot, nothing like the vibrant boy he remembered, jumping to his neck and searching his pockets for candies. The inquisitive child that always asked him about his travels, the planes he had been into or the people he had met, was not any longer there. The young man in love, full of life and happiness he remembered from that café in Paris was also gone. In front of him, there was only a sick man, doing his best to overcome the situation and the shock. 'Lord, who hurt you so much? Lintorff, Repin or I?'

"I never wanted to leave you behind and much less give you to Lintorff. It was just a ruse to win time over. I used his own weapons and precious rules against him. I knew we were doomed to fail the minute I found out he was meeting with the *Komturen*—those are the Mafia boss who rule a territory—almost once per month. He was on a first name basis with them and cared much more about their opinion than any industry tycoon. Those miserable

persons admired Lintorff because he was exactly as them, or what they imagine was the summum of the Mafia virtues; rich, merciless toward his enemies, educated (most of these people have huge complex about their lack of education and do their best so their children look exactly as young aristocrats), good with weapons, great for business and with more connections than you could imagine, Lintorff heard them, catered their whims and played the “democratic” man. The Italian Mafiosi were absolutely mad about him. It was their chance to become respectable and the Order's old fashioned and strict code reminded them to the *Omertà*. Pretty soon the French, the Dutch and the Germans gangsters followed him, exactly as their ancestors had followed the previous Griffins. All of them saw that their dirty money could be cleaned and make profit at the same time. That money helped the other respectable members to become much richer than before and none of them ever complained. He even devised something very clever to ease their consciences; the Lintorff Foundation; a part of the legal winnings will go there and be used for charity, all within the Catholic Church rule and some to the Protestants. The Italian, the most powerful of them all, simply loved it and some of their wives were received in the Vatican. Exactly as in Martin Luther's Germany. Many times I wondered when the Bishops would start to sign Papal golden bulls for their sins. Exactly as when the Teuton Order was around: they could do whatever they wanted in the Baltic and Russian territories, rule them as they pleased in exchange for a third of their profits, well taxes, to support the Crusades and later the Vatican. Those German were clever enough as to mix with the local elites and establish a relative lax system, as long as they were paying taxes. Lintorff learned well from his ancestors and based his power on the *Komturen* and their “soldiers”, using the others as channels for that incredible wealth.”

“We were never friends or anything like that. We just tolerated each other. I didn't like at all what he was doing with my brother and they way they were behaving: selfish as two small children, careless to everyone or everything around them. Once I told him to read Gramsci, an Italian philosopher from the left, who finished in jail for opposing Mussolini, but he wrote that the source of power was not in the money but in the symbols that we normally use. This man nearly rewrote *The Prince* and Lintorff took it very seriously. Can you imagine? The poor Gramsci wanted to destroy capitalism and one of its main enforcers was learning from him. Lintorff only has one belief; gain power. For what? I don't know. He never told me or Roger. Guntram, eat before it gets cold.”

“What happened in 1989?” Guntram managed to ask, digesting all the things his father had told him. Without blinking he also obeyed his father and started to cut the chicken in very small pieces.

“It was a cataclysm for all of us. Not only the Wall and Communism fell. We lost all chances to get rid of him or better say, get rid of the Order. They're now more powerful than ever and Lintorff is very secure in his position. He's still young and I assume that he plans to stay for another twenty-five years,” Lacroix said dejectedly. “I don't think we could throw him out with a plot any longer. Not even Repin could get rid of him, although he thinks so.”

“Why did you give me to him? Because you did, didn't you?” Guntram looked miserably at his now smashed potatoes, unable to look his eyes with his father's.

“Yes and no. It was a miscalculation from my part. A terrible one and I'm still sorry for it. You have every right to hate me. I nearly ruined your life with my ruse.”

“I don't hate you papa. I was so sad when I heard that you were dead. This was horrible for me! I prayed every night that it was a stupid mistake and that one day you would come back, but you never did!”

“Leaving you behind was the hardest thing for me. I wanted to protect you and assure a future for you. I didn't want to drag you to a manhunt for me. If I failed, I didn't want that they would kill you or throw you into a hospice where you would have had no chances at all! I didn't have many choices and I took the one I considered to be the best for your future.”

“I loved you and you didn't let me say good-bye to you!” Guntram cried desperately.

“I just couldn't do it. The minute you would have looked at me once more, I would have failed and dragged you with me through the mud. Chano did his best to protect you.”

“Why?”

“It's a long story and I suppose I could start it in 1968. I was born in the midst of a wealthy and very traditional family. Our roots can be traced with certainty to the XV century and many consider that we could even reach the IX century and related to a Merovingian king, according to the family legend. You should complain to him because of your name. I needed to reassure my father because he was furious I was marrying your mother. I went to a Jesuit boarding school, near Poitiers, where we had our lands and finished my schooling in Geneva. I had a normal childhood although my father was very stern with us. We were supposed to call him Monsieur le Vicomte and there was no familiarity at all in our talks with him. Our mother, Sigrid zu Guttenberg Sachsen was from a very old family too, but they were more bohemians and she was very nice to us. Unfortunately, she passed away from cancer when I

was fifteen years old. Since then, I was in charge of Roger, five years my younger because Pascal was in the University at that time. I can't complain at all about my childhood. When I finished my high school in Geneva, I was sent to the University. I was accepted at Paris I, Sorbonne, and I was to become a good lawyer, and perhaps a diplomat or a public servant. All my life, I've been considered as the "intelligent" one and could serve the Order much better in a political position. My father was the third in charge of the Chapter in France. Pascal, on the other hand, was the "clever" and very good for business and would go to our bank, the Cr dit Auvergne. Roger, was still a mystery because he was young, and not very bright, but people loved him just at first sight.

"I arrived to Paris in 1966 and the city changed my view of the world. From the nice, small, provincial Poitiers, I landed on the middle of the existentialism with Camus and Sartre, the Vietnam war, the revolutions in Latin America and Cuba, Mao's Cultural Revolution, The Beatles and Bob Dylan. It was a shock. For my family, the war in Algeria was fine and acceptable. I heard Althusser and I almost joined to the Marxist-Leninist parties, but I knew first hand how things really were in the Soviet Union, so I dropped it. We believed in the elite's role to create the Mass Media and lead the people like sheep, exactly as under the Totalitarian states, but this time with a happy and careless message; get a new car and be happy. Enjoy all what you can. Of course I participated in May 68, fought several times against the CRS and got their sticks on the head many times, but De Gaulle, clever fox, gave a rise to the workers, visited the general in charge of the French troops in Germany—and everyone believed he was going to use the Army against the people; that quieted most of the protests—and he called for elections in forty days. Just as it had started, it finished. Everybody went home after forty days of strikes and demonstrations. All plans to change the world were dismissed, better say, thrown to the trash. I realised that everything had been just the tantrum of some "*enfants g t s*", brats playing the revolution, without real convictions behind them. People continued to live in *bidonvilles* or slums, the biggest was in Nanterre at that time, and no one cared at all."

"I thought a lot during the winter of '69. During the revolt I met Nicholas Lef bre. He was also disappointed with the end of the revolution and we decided to continue to help and using what we had learned from the system to beat it or at least help some people not to be overrun by it. We worked pro bono for many years in a Non Governmental Organization, legally assisting people about to be evicted, immigrants, people who had no money to pay a lawyer. In the meantime, well, after I graduated in 1971, my father put me to work in the bank at their legal offices and I specialized in tax law. My family's dream of making a politician or a diplomat out of me was destroyed after three or four times sleeping in prison. I learned about the Order and helped many of our customers to make a better tax declaration. I felt like shit. I hated it, but this allowed me to keep good links to the enemy's side. I still believed in changing the world.

"In 1974 I met your mother and I fell in love with her. I married her and my family nearly killed me mostly because I had rejected Sybille von Lippe, a very rich widow, a few years older than me, who wanted to marry me. I didn't love her and I told her so. I had to take more hours in the bank and work harder to pay for a flat for my wife. C cile was also sick and I didn't want her to be working and overexerting herself. I would have kissed the floor she walked on. I still love your mother, Guntram and she was the best woman a man could have desired. Contrary to what you think, we looked for you. We wanted a baby and we didn't care about the consequences. We knew that a pregnancy could be fatal for her and finally it was, but we, especially she, needed to have a baby. Your mother was very happy when she was expecting you."

"As you know, in mid-1979, Lintorff came to power. He was young, only twenty-two years old, and no one in the Order expected him to survive a year, but he did and made profit. At some point he met your uncle, a trader in Paris, nothing else, and became obsessed with him. Roger was twenty-seven years old, just married with a baby, Marie Hel ne. My family only discovered the affair in mid-1983. My father wanted to finish it because it was a shame that his youngest child was in bed with another man, and could ruin his marriage with a rich German heiress. Roger would have obeyed my father, but Lintorff interfered and offered a position in the Council for my father, money and support for Pascal's career. In a way, we all sold Roger to him. My brother never loved him, but he liked the way Lintorff was crawling to him every time he saw him. It was a powerful feeling to have a young, good looking man, rich like the devil, as Lintorff to become your lap dog. At that time, all the mothers of Europe were throwing their daughters at his feet, but he was not looking at them. Lintorff only lived for Roger. Their clandestine relationship lasted for many years, meeting at the Ritz in Paris, every time they could. Sometimes it was violent for both of them because they were fighting permanently."

"Fighting? Impossible! Konrad was always so tender to me!"

"Fighting to the point of Lintorff breaking his arm once. He apologised and paid many things in return for Roger's family. No, Roger loved to drive him mad and over the years he learned how to play with him. It was

unexplainable. Lintorff could bend anyone to his will, but Roger could have made him come crawling from Le Bourget just for a kiss.”

“By 1985 my father and other people believed firmly that Roger was the key to get rid of Lintorff, who was gaining more and more power. They convinced my brother to participate and I joined them mostly because I saw it as an opportunity to end with the Order once and for all. I hated the concept of sixty or seventy rich men, meeting once per year or twice at most, ruling four hundred million lives and a full continent. They could do whatever they liked with people; choosing their popular leaders, the opposition, how much they would get from the Social Security, what they could eat and what not. I was confident that a full war would destroy the Order and people would have a chance to decide by themselves.”

“By 1986 we started to boycott everything, and I began to study Lintorff. I realised where his real power resided and that he really had a leadership vision whereas our supporters had nothing. They were only thinking to get more and more money out, while Lintorff was truly convinced on a social-democracy, in a Bismark style, of course, and many times he was taking unnecessary risks to save people's jobs or fight against pollution. I don't deny that if he ever saw an opportunity to make money, out of Europe, he would refuse it. He was a strange mixture of a heartless and ruthless businessman with an old knight, with some bursts of mysticism, I find no other way to describe him, willing to do or sacrifice anything for the people, or better say his subjects, that he considered were under “his protection”. He admired deeply Lorenz von Stein and the *Sozialstaat* and *Soziale Rechtsstaat* ideals, and like all monarchists believed that God had given him that position to carry on his word... and poor you if you weren't on his side! Crazy crusader or not, Lintorff was much better than the others only thinking on themselves.”

“I tried to stop everything, but no one heard me. So by 1987, I decided to prepare myself in case we would fail. I didn't want you to be a part of this and I sent you to live in Argentina on a permanent basis. Your lawyer, Luciano Martínez Estrada was a good friend of Nicholas and I. We had met him in 1978 when he had miraculously escaped his country accused of terrorism. He was deeply involved in the *Guerrilla*, in *Montoneros* and had been in one or two bombings. He was the one who was “processing” the money obtained from the kidnappings of many wealthy businessmen. I defended him and saved his life. We became friends because we shared the same beliefs and strategies. He returned to his country in 1985 and became my figurehead so I could get the money I had made during my years working in the banks. By 1988, I had everything out and your trustee fund was organised. Nicholas came up with the idea of the cancer to give more reality to the story.”

“In 1988, Lintorff was finished, but I gave him a chance because he had truly no idea of what was going on. I gave some documents to Ferdinand von Kleist and he, could put two and two together.”

“But you betrayed your family!”

“Yes, I know. I tried to stop it several times but they didn't listen to me. If I spoke it was because I knew that Lintorff alone, would have never gone against us. He would have expelled us from the Order and taken part of our money. I had hidden more than thirty million dollars, more than enough for them to live their lives happy and well provided!”

“Lintorff confronted my father, Pascal and me. He ordered us to resign from everything and disappear from his view. Some malicious rumours provoked a panic in our bank and in less of a week, we were broken, but with some effort, we could had fixed the situation. Nothing else. Exactly as I expected.”

“What happened then?”

“My father and the others didn't want to stop. They leaked some documents about our procedures and deals to the press... And paid a group of mercenaries to attack him. Lintorff was the only survivor. The *Summus Marescalus*, Hermann von Lintorff and Gustav Löwenstein retaliated on my father and several other top members. The only mercy they showed us was shooting the children in the head while they were asleep. The only servant who could escape the massacre, told me that they tortured my brother and his wife to death and forced my father to watch it. All of them were hung and beheaded. A traitors' punishment. The house was set on fire.”

“I could escape because I was in Brussels with Nicholas at the time. I knew that Roger had taken his wife and daughter and fled to South Africa. I never saw him again. The women were exiled and we were condemned to death as well as our families.”

“Why didn't you take me with you?”

“I couldn't. I wanted to give you a life, not to become a fugitive or worst, be killed in a horrible way. Lintorff has been looking for Roger for the past fifteen years. He wanted his revenge on him and he got it last December. My brother was killed in a car accident, along with the journalist he was working with. I'm not completely sure, but I think it was Lintorff's doing.”

"I went to Lintorff after I had everything prepared. I decided to play along with his rules; that was the only way to reassure a wounded animal, Guntram. When I offered you to him, I never thought that he would take it seriously. Who waits fifteen years to get a lover from a child looking exactly as the one who put you through Hell? What makes you think that this child would love you? You look like your uncle, but nothing else. You two are different! You were all what Lintorff wanted to find in Roger: someone sweet, innocent, selfless who would love him by himself, not because of his money or power."

"He told me those exact words." Guntram whispered and drank some water to calm himself.

"I signed the papers naming him your legal tutor, but those papers were not valid! I never told him where you were and I kept myself away from you so they could not link you to me. It only took him two seconds to agree to my proposition, you, after you turned eighteen and only if you wanted, for your pardon, the chance to be readmitted and pardon for my brother. Perhaps he thought that a young boy, without a meddling family, could be the solution for what he needed. I don't know. I only wanted to win time for you."

"Nicholas knew the case of a man, seriously ill, called Michel Lacroix. He was around my age, had a wife and five children. He was terminal and worried about the family he was leaving behind. We offered to take care of his family in exchange for his body and identity. It was one of the most horrible trades in my life. I paid five million dollars cash to him and he agreed to do it. We faked the papers and placed them in the hospital, feigning my illness, we bribed a doctor too. When the time Lintorff had granted me to put my affairs in order finished, Michel came to us. He was on the last stages. He told us that he was weighing forty-five kilos and he had been a construction worker. That night he drank so much to gather the courage to do it, that I thought to drop everything. He fell by the window after asking us to lead him there. Nicholas identified him as me."

"I went to Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and worked as volunteer in the poorest areas till 1994 when I decided to return to Europe. With Nicholas we bought over the law firm he was working for and I started to work again, not in the courtrooms of course, but in the offices. I became a *Notaire*, Notary. Ironical, the man whose life is a lie, certifies that the others don't lie."

"Why did you sell me to Konrad? Why did you take me away from him? I was so happy with him! I wanted to have his children with me! It was my chance to have the family I lost!"

"Guntram, I didn't know that, my child. I only knew that your uncle had been murdered by the man who had killed all of us! By the one who forced us to split! By the same who would kill me if he sees me! You can't be in that place! All of them are murderers, of a worst kind than Repin! I thought Lintorff was using you as his whore just to quench his thirst for Roger and to weaken Repin!"

"You took me away from him to punish him for all what he had done to us. Don't lie to me father," the boy said with an unnatural certainty.

"No! I never wanted you to be with Repin in the first place! Chano would have never let you go to London if he would have known of your intentions. Once you were there, it was impossible to come near you. It was a miracle that Nicholas was called to be your lawyer. Do you remember when he took you to a café? The man sitting next to your table was me and you clearly said that you loved Repin and were happy with him. I thought that maybe it was all right to leave you there because he was sending you to a good school, you were going to have an exhibition and he treated you with respect. Only a few months ago I found out that Repin's wife had attacked you. One day all the Russians went crazy and you were in a hospital, almost dead and Repin took you to St. Petersburg. We knew nothing and the next news we had was that you were in Zurich, living with Lintorff, as his hostage. It was impossible to come near you! We tried it several times but you had his goons all the time with you. I was desperate to get you out and I spoke with Repin, risking my life."

"I left him in June 2005. I tried to commit suicide to escape him. In December 2004, after his wife ordered me to be tortured, raped and stabbed. I went crazy with pain and I went with Konrad just to escape Constantin. I didn't care if he would have killed me. I realised that I was Constantin's plaything and I hated it. I was an artwork for him; not a person, no matter how many nice words he was telling me or the fine things he was buying for me. Konrad saved my life and my sanity. And I loved him for that! I agreed to be his Consort. He gave me his ring, father."

"Oh God, do you mean the seal...?" Michel paled when he heard the news. That thwarted all plans he might have had: Lintorff had fulfilled his oath to honour his son if he was good to him. To turn him into his Consort. Guntram was now the key to the Order's future, a councillor with more power than any other and the one who raised the next Griffin. In theory he was able to nullify any policy from the *Hochmeister*.

The Consort directed the Lintorff Foundation and all its money; a twenty percent of all the profits made

by the associates. Guntram could be as powerful as Lintorff. But Guntram had no idea of what it meant to be in such position.

“Yes, the Griffin's seal. He named me his Consort, in front of the whole Order! I was never his whore! I was his lover but you and Constantin killed that! How could I look at him ever again if he was fucking with my own uncle? How am I going to look at myself in the mirror? He never ordered our family to be killed! Those were the others! Our family used him! He wanted to give me his children!”

“Guntram, it's not that way my child! I love you and only wanted to protect you! What kind of man takes a lover, just because he shares the blood of his former one? It's almost Levitical!”

“I loved him with all my soul till you destroyed it! You couldn't destroy the Order, and now go against the *Hochmeister*? Is that your revenge? To take his love away?”

“No, I want to take you with me far away from here, to somewhere we could recover the lost time! As father and son!”

“I would have loved to hear those words when I was sixteen, not now that I'm twenty-three and a man! I'm not a child any more! I ceased to be one at seven!” The young man shouted enraged, rising from his chair.

“Guntram, stop now, this is not good for you!”

“I only wanted to spend the years I have left with him! I'm perfectly aware that I'm a walking corpse! I have an hypertrophic cardiomyopathy and two heart attacks before thirty. My death probability is of thirty percent and increases each year! I won't turn forty no matter how careful I am! I'm hooked to medications for the rest of my life, a pacemaker in the next years and finally a transplant, if they get a donor. Konrad knew it and loved me in spite of all that! Unconditionally! He didn't care if he had to wait for several days before he could touch me again! He didn't care to eat without salt or stay at home if I felt bad! He never lost his temper with me when I'm bound to depression or lose track of time painting!”

“Guntram, I swear I didn't know you loved him, but you'll get over it!”

“I'm not going to just forget him! Why did he lie to me?”

“My son, it's understandable what you're suffering. It's called Stockholm Syndrome. You were his hostage for a year and now you are in shock after seeing me again. Try to rest a bit and tomorrow we will speak again.”

“Rest? Rest? Sure, father!” Guntram smirked. “I'm not seven years old any longer! You can't send me to bed!”

“Guntram, don't get so worked up. It can't be good for you,” Lacroix said without raising his voice. “Go to your room and try to sleep. Take your pills and tomorrow you will see a doctor.”

“I was fine till you decided to storm back into my life! Being my father doesn't give you the right to ruin it!” Guntram shouted furious with him, more than what he was with Konrad.

“I'm not ruining it, you are not thinking clearly. That man you say you love, kept you hostage for a full year, in golden cage of course, had sex with your uncle, killed your cousins who were twelve, nine and seven years old, tortured and finally killed your uncle Pascal and grandfather! Three months ago, he killed your uncle Roger. He forced me to abandon you as the only way to save your life. Think on all this before you shout like a hysterical woman! I expected much more from you!”

“I refuse to be your pawn! I will not be a part of your personal vendetta against Konrad! I forgave him and loved him!”

“All right, take the first train back to Zurich or do you prefer a plane? Jump back into the bed of the man who fucked with your own uncle for seven years.”

“I can't return to Konrad and you know it well. You sullied our relationship. I will never let him touch me again! I'm disgusted beyond myself!”

“So what do you want to do? Go with the Russian? He will be delighted to have you back. In fact, his people were waiting for you around the corner.”

“I...” Guntram started to pant, feeling more and more dizzy and nauseous. He knew the symptoms and took his pills out the jacket and swallowed one. “Can I have a glass of water, please?”

“Yes, of course. Sit down,” Michel was looking very concerned and went to the refrigerator to refill the glass. When he returned, Guntram was still panting and very pale, ashen and looked extremely tired, haggard and defeated. He drank the water slowly and tried to stand up but the dizziness threw him back to the chair. Michel sat next to him and embraced his child and petted his head lovingly, exactly as he used to do when he was a child. Guntram, only broke into tears, clutching his father dear for his life.

"Don't worry, *mon petit*, I'm here and everything will be fine again. We will go away again, this time together and let them kill each other! As you say, it's not our war! You should rest now and we will speak tomorrow again."

Michel helped Guntram to stand up and nearly had to drag him the stairs up to his bedroom. He remained there till his son dressed in some pyjamas, went to bed and fell into a restless sleep.

* * *

"Good morning, Maurice. Your father awaits you for breakfast. You have to hurry. The doctor is at 11 a.m." A woman in her late fifties shook Guntram gently up. He sat in the bed looking at her, feeling his soul leave his body as yesterday's crazy run had not been a nightmare. She was dressed with normal clothes, informal and a scarf around her head.

"Is she a Muslim and is that a *niqab*? Why did she call me Maurice?"

"My name is Fairuza, I'm Mr. Lacroix housekeeper in Brussels. You look exactly as the pictures he has from you. I'm glad you decided to come back to live with him. He's a very lonesome man and is always speaking about you. It's a pity you're so sick. I like that painting of yours, the one he bought last December; the pond with the frogs and toads. They look magical," she said at full speed in French.

"My name is Guntram. Is that a *niqab*?"

"I thought you preferred to be called by your first name, not the second. It's quite bizarre. I'll call you Guntram, if you like. Do you take toasts or pancakes?"

"Pancakes," Guntram answered quickly before she would realise that those were totally forbidden to him. 'Once won't kill me.'

"Hurry up. I have to make your room and go to the supermarket, and this is called *shayla*," she ordered him and left the room, closing the door behind her. Grudgingly and feeling very weak—as if I had run a marathon, well, in a way I was. We had to run to catch the train from Munich to here', he redressed himself in his old clothes. 'Why does everybody think that I can't pack? It's always the same story. 'Get in the plane, be quiet'. I'm sick of all this.'

He took the stairs down and directed his footsteps toward the kitchen where the woman, Fairuza was cooking and boiling water. "Your father is in the garden, Go there. Now!" She said, opening the back door and showing him to an open gallery with a garden with old trees. At the end of the gallery, his father was sitting in front of a table, reading some papers.

"Good morning, Maurice. Are you feeling better?"

"Did you change my name too?" Guntram asked in disbelief.

"Maurice Lacroix, as says your new passport, still a French citizen. Your mother liked it very much and we considered it."

"My name is Guntram Philippe Alphonse de Lisle. I want to have that name on my gravestone."

"It's impossible and you know the reasons. The minute you say it, you'll get Repin or Lintorff breathing on your neck. We can go to another place and start again, this time in peace."

"In peace? Repin will turn every stone around till he finds us! You betrayed him! You're as good as a dead man walking! Well, you are one!"

"I know but it's for the best. I'm terribly sorry that your life was so hard but I had no choice. Would you have preferred your cousin's fate? She lives with her mother in a semi slum neighbourhood, works as a waitress in a low class bar and her mother cleans houses. Now and then, she gets money out of the tourists! She can hardly write!"

"I was a waiter too!"

"The place is the Brazilian Hooters, Guntram! Stop being childish! Lord, how dumb can you be? First you lived with a mobster and then with a murderer, who had no problems in kidnapping you! What is wrong with you, boy? A little bit of pink and sugar in the sentences and you buy anything?" his father roared for the first time in his life and Guntram was speechless.

"I don't expect that you understand me, papa. Why should you? You left my life when I was seven and returned when I was twenty-three. I'm not the same person and perhaps I'm dumb. I loved Constantin and Konrad in different ways. Konrad was the person who saved me from Hell and I'm grateful to him. He also lied and destroyed me in a much worse way than Constantin, but of all the people that were in my life, you were the most destructive."

"What do you want to do then?" Michel was on the limit of his patience with his son.

"I don't know. I want to start again, this time with none of you around," Guntram said tiredly.

"Please, my child don't go away. Give me a chance to be your father again. I know I don't have any rights to ask you this, but I always had a greater good in mind."

Guntram remained in silence, looking at the empty dish, feeling the sorrow wash him over. "Please," he heard his father once more, "you don't know how hard it was to face each day, praying that you were happy and safe; no parent is ever ready to lose a child. I already lost your mother, don't you go away too."

"I said dreadful things to you, too," Guntram whispered, ashamed of his outburst and sitting once more back in his place.

"You have every reason to hate me. I turned your life upside down, not once but twice. I was worried that you had not exploded before." Michel sighed, knowing that his son was letting his fury go.

"Don't do that again, or at least give me a warning," Guntram said, smiling weakly.

"I promise I won't do that again," Michel pulled his son against his chest and hugged him, glad to feel his arms returning his embrace.

* * *

March 15th

Zurich

Konrad was on the edge of his nerves. Nothing about Guntram since he had left the hotel. The only thing they could find out was that the grey Opel Corsa was rented that morning in Vienna by a man called Johannes Wüerst, German, in a small car rental agency, paid cash and returned the vehicle that same evening in Linz. None of his men had been able to recognise him and according to the doorman, Guntram knew him well and was only shocked to see him, but he was not the man of the photo from the agency.

'If it would have been one of the Russians, he would have run away. Furious as he was with me, he hated Repin more. He refused his help there. Must be someone from his past, someone he trusted very much. Guntram is terrified of anyone.' The pictures taken from the hotel's security camera were also useless.

Goran's men had checked all the airports and a certain Guntram de Lisle had taken a night flight from Frankfurt to Buenos Aires. It was impossible as he had Guntram's passport in his safe box, where his kitten had left it that same morning. The security recordings from the boarding gate didn't show Guntram at all, only a young boy looking similar, but not him. The ticket had been bought on internet and paid with Paypal, using a Spanish account in a small bank, opened just a week before Guntram went missing, also using a false name and address.

'Who planned this? Not Guntram, I'm sure. Is someone in tandem with Repin; someone who knew the whole story, had the proofs and used Repin as the messenger. Who? Roger died in December and he never had the resources or the patience to do this. Must be someone very close to me. Perhaps Georg or Albert, after all his son has lost his chance to become Griffin thanks to Guntram. No, not Albert, he never wanted the responsibility. Each lead we had was a dead end. Who?'

He took out of his drawer the photo taken last Christmas of Guntram and he. Konrad was almost sure that Friederich had taken it during the holidays when they were unaware. Once more he got lost in the image of him sitting and holding his lover in the garden. His kitten was smiling happy and shyly as always, and he looked like another man, proud and glad to be alive. 'I can't lose him. I just can't. I need him more than anyone else in this world.'

A frantic knocking at his door forced him to throw the portrait back in its drawer and bark a "come in!" to the one who had dared to interrupt him at this late hour.

"Big shit and real big shit, Konrad!" Ferdinand shouted from the door advancing and sitting in front of him. "Someone in the Finance Ministry told me that the German Government got a serious offer from a group of hackers to sell a database with no less than 2,300 of our clients evading taxes! They calculate that it could be bring around €2.8 billion in evaded taxes! They're selling it for two hundred million euros!"

"The German government does not deal with criminals, Ferdinand," Konrad said keeping his face blank.

"Did you hear me? Those are our clients! We're dead if this is filtered! The government wants to pay them to get it!"

"The list is true or false? I hardly doubt that we could have such leak."

"Michael's people swear it didn't come from us!"

"Offer these hackers three hundred millions. If they refuse, then it's false. If they agree, pay and solve the problem. Discreetly."

"Including our ones?"

"If they can't keep some hackers away from us, they're useless."

"All right."

"Good night, Ferdinand."

"Go home, Konrad, I can solve this with Goran. Don't worry. Perhaps it's only blackmail."

"I'm certain of that. Someone is pitting the German government against us. They want to force a close examination of our methodologies. Find out who is behind those hackers. I'm sure this is related with Guntram's disappearance. It's someone who knows us very well."

"We can't be certain of that! Do you really think that the lad is a traitor? No way, Konrad!"

"Not him! I think someone is using him as a diversion and this is no coincidence at all. If we find the one who did this with the list, then we will find Guntram."

"This is very far fetched, Konrad."

"I think not. Our new enemy is very patient and knows us very well. Let's fix this situation before it escalates."

"Of course. Go home, you need some rest." 'You're starting to see plots everywhere,' Ferdinand thought but decided to be quiet.

"Yes, you're right. I'll go home and think over this. This has nothing to do with Repin and I'm convinced that this person used him to get to me; to hit me where it was most painful."

"Guntram left you because of Roger. No one but you is responsible for that. You should have left the boy alone in St. Petersburg. You played with fire and got burnt. Don't come crying now. I'm more concerned about the boy's health than with your crying. I only hope that his heart can endure the news. Go home now."

"Good night, Ferdinand."

* * *

March 22nd 2006

Aschaffenburg.

The week had been absolutely madness at the firm. Nicholas was overwhelmed by two cases and he had to help him. Michel had shouted long in Paris with Repin for losing his child to some strangers and probably members of the Order. The Russian was furious and desperate at the same time, biting the hook he had left dangling in front of his eyes. He had travelled to Buenos Aires to look for Guntram.

Lintorff on the other hand had been cleverer and didn't believe the story of the false Guntram going back to Argentina. He had no idea where to look for but he was still focusing his efforts in Europe and around Vienna. The charade with the hackers had only kept him busy for a week and he had easily evaded the authorities, offering them, sotto voce, information about some of his clients, just to prove how transparent he was. 'Exactly as always, sacrifice one pawn to keep the tower or the knight. He's getting better and better.' He had had to remove the young hackers from Europe before Lintorff would have found and killed them. 'If he can take apart a six months plan in a week, then my chances to finish him are dimmer than I originally estimated. The American journalists have no chance at all against him and I, have nothing really big against him. I thought that losing Guntram would weaken and distract him, but his senses are sharper than before. The bastard even used my ruse to eliminate some of his internal competition! I'm afraid that now he's more alert than before.'

But his main source of concern was his son himself. Although the boy had truly forgiven him and did his best to look fine when his father was around, he could feel the deep sorrow pouring out of his boy; exactly as when he had lost his wife. His health was deteriorating with each passing day, refusing to eat, forgetting to take his pills, always nervous and afraid that the Russians would come after his father... and heartbroken because Konrad von Lintorff had lied to him.

Guntram was almost catatonic the whole day, according to Fairuza, not speaking with anyone or only sitting in the garden to look at the trees and sometimes he would draw something that was immediately destroyed.

'I can't lose him again. Perhaps it's time to forget about the Order and Lintorff. Revenge means nothing if I ruin my child's life or kill him in the process. I'm just a man fighting against three hundred years of oppression and the worst part is that no one gives a shit. Ease, self indulgence and passivity are this world's driving forces. I have to take Guntram away so he forgets that monster. How could he fall in love with him?' Michel thought dejectedly as he

went to kiss his son hello and get one of his forced and sad smiles.

March 25th
Aschaffenburg.

"Papa, may I sleep with you tonight? I don't feel well," Guntram's voice woke Michel up in the middle of the night.

"Come here and lay down," he answered, doing his best to hide his concern. This was the first time that his child had complained about something and he had looked truly sick since the afternoon, refusing to dine or watch TV with him. He had fallen deeply asleep several times during the day.

"I can't lie down, I can't breath well. I feel suffocated."

"Do you have any kind of pain in the chest? Did you take your pills?"

"No, no pain at all and I took my pills. Just let me stay with you," Guntram pleaded. "It's nothing like I've felt before."

Michel jumped out of the bed and got dressed while Guntram sat in his bed, panting and coughing. "I'm driving you to the hospital now. Can you dress by yourself or do you need help?"

"Just let me sleep."

Michel swore in French and knew that it was worse than he had previously estimated.

* * *

Michel sat in the empty waiting room for a long time. Four hours passed by before a young doctor came out of the ER room to brief him. "Is he all right?"

"I'm afraid your son's condition is serious, Mr. Lacroix. He suffered a pulmonary oedema and we had to drain out the liquid by puncturing his lungs. It's a relatively common complication with patients with heart failure. He will remain in the ICU for a day or two and then, we will move him for a day to a normal room. We need to be certain that he's stable and his lungs and heart responding well to the treatment. You may see him tomorrow at nine."

"Will he be fine?"

"His reaction so far has been adequate, sir. His cardiologist will speak with you tomorrow. Excuse me now, please."

"Thank you doctor," Michel answered automatically.

* * *

Buenos Aires was not the same without his angel. Before it had been a source of joy to visit it, expecting to see him and get a smile or a kiss from him. It was empty now. Zakharov had done his best to look for Guntram, but nothing so far.

Lacroix had no idea also and although he had given him many names from Guntram's past in Argentina, nothing had come up. The lawyer was clean. His entire security team was still in Brussels or in Geneva, fulfilling their duties and the man had not changed a single thing in his schedule. Working in Brussels from Mondays to Thursdays and taking a flight in the night to Frankfurt where he had a flat for the weekend. He had never security around him and if he had something to do with Guntram's disappearance he would have not been so crazy as to be running in the open.

Lacroix was almost driving him mad with his constant calls and reproaches for losing Guntram in Vienna.

* * *

The small meeting room in the hospital awoke many ghosts in Michel, 'they still use creosote to clean hospitals,' he thought, wrinkling his nose at the piercing partly faded smell. 'Exactly as when Cécile was for the last time in a hospital.' He closed his eyes dismissing the painful memory.

"Mr. Lacroix? I'm Dr. Siebenmorgen, I'm the cardiologist in charge of Maurice's case."

"Good morning, doctor," he answered, shaking's the man's hand.

"I've spoken with doctor Rammstein about your son's case. He's progressing well and we are confident to

release him in four days time, but his general prognosis is not encouraging. His lungs accumulated fluids because his heart is not pumping well enough, meaning that his condition is deteriorating at a fast pace. This kind of heart patients, especially one with such a negative history and young age can be easily placed on the top of the transplants lists, but you must be aware that the risk of dying during such surgeries is over fifty percent.”

“Does he need a heart transplant?”

“Not yet but soon. Of course there are other therapeutic and surgery measures we can take to delay it, but you must understand that this is something you must face, with some luck, in a few years. It's also a surgery that needs a lot of mental preparation for the patient.”

“I understand, doctor,” Michel whispered. “May I see him now?”

“In the afternoon. He's still under sedation. He needs to rest as much as possible and be in a stress free environment, but his own doctor will inform you.”

“Thank you, doctor,” he said totally defeated.

* * *

“Hi, are you Konrad?” The young nurse asked Michel, before letting him in the ICU room.

“My name is Michel Lacroix. I'm Maurice Lacroix's father,” he barked with a barely contained fury at hearing his enemy's name. Obviously his son had asked for him.

“Sorry, my mistake. Patients tell the most funny things when they come out of the anaesthesia. He said many times Konrad and I assumed it was your name. Yes, here it's fine, I should have checked beforehand,” she excused herself while rummaging the papers attached to her clipboard. “Maurice is awoken now and responding well. Come in, you can see him now.”

“Thank you,” the man walked along the corridor of beds, only separated by some curtains, to his son's bed.

“Hello,” Guntram smiled weakly as his father took his hand. “That was for not being there when I had measles. You look horrible.”

“I was not handsome to start with, so everything is fine,” Michael joked, squeezing lightly his son's hand, enormously relieved. “Your mother was blind, I guess.”

“Please, don't say that. Everyone says I take my features from you.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better: I can breath on my own. The needle was very big. I'm glad I'm done with my vaccinations. I will never look at them the same.”

“The doctor says you can leave tomorrow the ICU and after two more days, you can return home.”

“I'm glad. They starve you here.”

“It will not improve any sooner, my son. Fairuza sends her regards.”

“Thank you,” Guntram answered, wondering why his mind was back to Konrad. 'He's a bloody snake! He fucked with your own uncle! Forget about him!'

“I will let you rest and see you tomorrow at eight.”

* * *

Konrad was so nervous that night and he didn't know why. The usual glass of cognac had done nothing to sooth his nerves. Once more he turned around in his side of the bed, hearing the snores of the 'bloody beast' hidden in Guntram's closet, defending her place with all teeth. 'Never judge an enemy for his size. I'll ask her vet to sedate her and take her away.'

'I wish I could be in her place. I can't shake off the feeling that there's something very wrong with Guntram!'

Chapter 30

May 4th, 2006
Zurich

Crossing into the enemy's territory was something he was familiar with. He had been doing it since he was twenty years old. After so many years, he was still marvelled how confident people felt at their own "lairs" that they never checked anything. The brother of the most wanted man for the Order was standing in front of the Lintorff Privatbank in Börsenstrasse under the scornful look of the frontispiece caryatids, and the three apes guarding the gate had not even taken a look at him. 'Lintorff still has the same holes he had in his security as in 1989'.

He crossed the street and one of the big apes cut him off. "Michel Lacroix. I have a date with Mr. Davenport at the Legal Office," were his magical words and the huge man moved aside. 'Lintorff could spend some more and feed them with herring, perhaps their brains could develop a little.'

For appearances sake, he went to the reception girl, an extremely good looking and elegant blonde woman and repeated the story. She smiled kindly and spoke over the phone.

"Someone will be here to take you to Mr. Davenport's office."

"Thank you."

Another secretary, in her mid-fifties this time, led him to the 4th floor where you could read all the lawyers names written in golden letters. 'Still the idiot of Merenghetti is here. Only good for dealing with Italian Mafia heads. No idea of corporate law.'

"*Notaire* Lacroix, thank you very much for coming. Mr. Lefèvre has spoken so highly of you."

"I thank you the time you take to see me. Our client, Mr. Rochefoucault wants to marry again and I've noticed some irregularities in his properties' listings. I was hoping you could enlighten me..."

* * *

"Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Davenport."

"It's been a pleasure and I should thank you. Speaking with you has been most educational. Have you never considered to write a contractual law treaty?"

"No, where would be all of us if magicians tell people where is the rabbit hidden?"

"You're right, we need to look after our own interests," the lawyer chuckled.

"That's the idea behind a guild." Lacroix smiled, while the other man pushed the elevator's button. Once inside he pushed the number five button and he took a deep calming breath. Now was the dangerous part. To catch a slippery eel with more teeth than a moraine and temperamental as a rabid shark.

The young secretary looked in awe at the medium size man, elegantly dressed with his overcoat casually but elegantly hanging over his shoulders, 'French, no doubt'.

"Can you please tell the Duke that Jérôme de Lisle is here to see him?" he repeated and the girl opened her mouth.

"Do you have an appointment, sir?" she whispered, thinking hard how the man could be here and why Clara had told her nothing. 'De Lisle as the Duke's boyfriend? The same that stood him up in Vienna?'

"Be a dear and run to his secretary and tell her I'm here. Or better, go and get von Kleist or Pavicevic, the young one." Lacroix explained her kindly and slowly as the girl was obviously in shock.

The tall and proud figure of Ferdinand, followed by two of his aides, came out of one of the doors and Lacroix simply said. "Ferdinand, my boy. Be useful and tell Konrad that I'm here."

Ferdinand von Kleist lifted his gaze from the papers he was reading to yell with the impudent who had dared to address him in such impertinent way and his heart froze the second he saw that man. The snake's brother: Jérôme. He could only gape at him, without believing that he was standing there. 'He's dead! Guntram was convinced of that! I saw the police reports and the grave was occupied!'

"I see you recognise me. It's good to know I haven't changed so much. Now, move. My patience has a limit."

"Should I call security?" the secretary asked in a hopeful voice.

"No! We go to the meeting room." Ferdinand recovered his poise. "Tell Monika to call the Duke."

Ferdinand made a gesture to Lacroix to follow him to the meeting room, ignoring the protests of a secretary that there was a meeting scheduled in twenty minutes with a "go to the bar!" and shutting the door closed.

"Sit down!" Ferdinand barked as Lacroix removed his coat. "The rebel looks now exactly as the old Vicomte. Shit!"

"Coffee would be nice, Ferdinand."

"Annette! Coffee!" he barked to the poor secretary, still standing at the door frame, before he closed the door once more on her face. "Jerôme, from whatever grave you come from, I swear to return you there."

"My name is Michel Lacroix now. For over fifteen years, Ferdinand."

"Of all the snakes you were the worst!"

"If you stand where you are now, it's because I told you what to do, boy. So be nice to your benefactor," Michel fulminated the man with his green eyes. "Lap dogs have no teeth, so keep them to yourself."

Ferdinand snorted "You're dead. All what you had was in Geneva."

"Do you mean those fake documents you found in that safe box? Don't worry, the original and the newest are somewhere else. But I'm not here to discuss such things with you. It's all in the past. I'm here about my child."

"I should have known you were in tandem with that slime! If you gave him to Repin, I'll kill you myself!" Ferdinand howled, increasing Michel's disgust at the German.

The lawyer cast a look around, focusing on a painting hanging from the wooden panelled walls, and noticed that the receptionist's dress matched the strong colours of the semi abstract paint, 'a Franz Marc without a doubt. This is the most modern style that Lintorff can stand. Does he think every morning: 'let's visit the XXI century now'?"

"Please, Ferdinand, let's do not be melodramatic. It's so vulgar. Guntram is fine with me," Lacroix finally sighed tiredly, finding once more his calm demeanour, and Ferdinand couldn't help to exhale slowly his own tension. "I would have never given my boy to a vicious mobster like Repin. I admit I played him a little to recover him from your people, but for some unexplainable reason, Guntram misses your master."

"We have been looking for him all over Europe! Where's he?"

"In Europe, of course. Nothing like hiding something in plain sight. Now, go and get Konrad if he wants his Consort back."

The door burst open and a very pale Konrad von Lintorff entered the room, taking a good look at the man sitting there. He was twenty years older, his hair grey and his face more wrinkled, but he still kept those intelligent eyes, the air of someone who knew himself superior, and a dark aura of seriousness and deep sorrow around him. Nevertheless there was something different in him; he looked deeply satisfied about something.

"De Lisle, I see you're well recovered." His voice was very stern.

"Indeed Lintorff, but the name is Michel Lacroix."

"I admit that you have more courage than any other man I've known," Konrad said, taking the head of the table, his back well straight, without touching the back of the chair. "Leave us please, Ferdinand. I don't want interruptions."

Furious with his friend for sending him away, the man left the room, back to Goran's office.

"So, what do you want this time?" Konrad spoke very seriously.

"I have something you're looking in the wrong places."

"Don't you get tired of prostituting your own son?" The voice was soft but full of contempt and scorn.

Lacroix chuckled softly not offended at all. "You still have the same Manichean outlook on things. I'm not whoring my son; in fact, I would have never come to you if I had a choice, alas, I don't."

"Where's Guntram? Did you sell him to Repin like you sold him to me?"

"Never! I only bought time for him in 1989! Before you would have killed him!"

"I gave you my word to treat him well!"

"Are we going to waste our time with lamentations and reproaches?"

"How is he?"

"He's in relatively good health," Lacroix answered and noticed the tension running through the Duke's back. "He's happy living with me and the best son a man could desire."

"Why are you here?"

"You tell me."

"I refuse to make any more deals with you. Your word means nothing! Leave my office and start to run because I'll unleash a hell over your head."

"Guntram will not survive it. His heart is not strong enough as to run all over the world. If I leave him behind, Repin will get him in less than two days and his affections will kill him in a month."

"I could reach him first."

"You? You have been trying to get my brother for sixteen years and he had no money at all! In the unlikely case you would find Guntram, he would hate you for taking his father away once more. Not a very good idea, if you still want your Consort back."

"I don't want him back," Konrad said flippantly.

"All right, good day, sir," Lacroix rose from his chair, but Konrad grabbed him from the wrist with a vicious grip. The older man only sneered. "By the force you're applying over my wrist, I understand that you're willing to negotiate."

"I want Guntram back. He's my Consort. He's mine, not yours. You relinquished him years ago. To me."

"He's my son and at the moment, Guntram prefers my company over yours, Lintorff," Michel huffed to show his scorn for Konrad. "To be honest, I would have preferred a hundred times a Russian mobster over you. Alas this man was detrimental for my son's life and career. For some unexplainable reason, he fell in love with you and still loves you even if he wants to skin you alive for lying about Roger."

"I never lied to him! I told him he reminded me of my greatest love! I said he looked exactly like his uncle!"

"Half truths are full lies, Lintorff. My son never lied to you and believed each one of your words. You're not better than Repin, trying to destroy his soul, his health and career just to bend him to his will. You're more subtle than him and more generous, but you also want to control him."

"No, I don't want to control him; I only fear he's hurt. He's very frail and not because of his heart condition. You used to call him your "*petit prince*" and it's more true than anything. He's completely innocent to the world and wants to believe in it. I want to protect him from harm. I don't care if he hates me now, I want him back with me to keep him safe from danger."

"Perhaps you do love him."

"He's my life and my soul. Without him, there's nothing left," Konrad confessed and looked at his enemy in the eyes, but Michel didn't look away.

"I loved my wife like that. She was the only reason I didn't become what you are now."

"What do you want this time to return him?"

"I will not return him like a package! He's a person and deserves some respect from all of you!"

"I'll give you..."

"Money? I don't want money. I want some guarantees for my son."

"He's the Griffin's consort! He carries our seal! What more do you want from me? I was honourable to him since I saw him. I never pressed him to do a single thing! He was very happy with me till you burst into our lives!"

"I was protecting my child from a deranged man and a murderer!"

"You gave him to me!"

"How could I believe that you would fall in love of him just because he looked like my brother? I only sold you a dream and you believed in it!"

"I was attracted to him since I saw him in St. Petersburg. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him after a week of knowing him. I did my best to help him to overcome the ordeal he suffered under Repin and I will do anything for him. I beg you Jérôme, give him back to me. You can't take care of him as he deserves."

"I could if you would let me."

"How?"

"A full pardon for me and my brother's family. Cease all hostilities and let us live. We will not interfere with your activities or disclose any information about the Order."

"Never!"

"Then I'll take Guntram with me. I will not let him behind once more."

"I can't go against the whole Order. It would be a very bad example."

"Call off your hounds. I will continue to live as Michel Lacroix, but I demand to continue in contact with my son."

"Do I have to ask you twice per month over dinner? Should I let you play with my children too?" Konrad smirked, the blood in his veins starting to boil while his brain supplied a variety of punishments for the man blackmailing him as if it were the simplest thing to do.

"Nothing so dramatic, Lintorff. I want to see Guntram twice per month, as you say. Here in Zurich or in Brussels; let me write with him or phone him."

Long silence. "I could live with this, but all your letters and conversations would be monitored. You're a dangerous snake and I don't want that Guntram falls into one of your schemes."

"You can do it as a proof of my good will. My child has nothing to do with your world. Swear that he will never be part of the council!"

"Yes, of course." It couldn't be so easy, could it? "Do you swear that Guntram will return to me?"

"Return to you? That might take some effort from me. Fixing your lies and deceptions will not be easy. He's convinced you used him and committed incest with him. If he comes back, how could he be sure that you will not attack me? No, he's not stupid."

"What else?"

"A seat in the council for me. The one you took from us. I understand there was a sudden resignation of one of your councillors last March because of some troubles with his tax declarations."

"Never! You? No."

"You have to prove your good will."

"I? Who played dead for sixteen years?" Lacroix didn't go along with the taunt and kept silent. Konrad knew that there should be some way of convincing the man to give his son back and keep him away from the most sensitive areas of his power. "If you swear that Guntram will return to me on his own volition and resume his duties as Consort, I could give you something similar in exchange."

"Define the part of resume his duties as Consort."

"To look after my children once they're born; to live under the same roof as I; to respect me and obey me as he used to do; to grant me his company and support as in the past; to be my companion."

"You can't demand such things from Guntram. He's free to choose if he loves you again or not."

"I only want the opportunity to prove him that my love for him was always true and pure."

"If you touch one single hair of him without his consent, what you found in that safe box in Geneva will be nothing compared to what you'll face," Lacroix said very seriously. "If he wants to leave you, you will step aside."

"You have my word. Do I have yours?"

"What could be so important as a council seat?"

"The Lintorff Foundation's presidency. Of course, you will give a minimum of eighty percent of its resources every year to our mother, the Church, but you can do what you want with the rest, within reason of course. Last year its budget was near twelve billion dollars. It receives eighteen percent of the hedge funds and our members profits."

"Very little if we consider your real profits." Michael complained, but Konrad said nothing bearing a blank expression in his face. "You will return to Guntram what he lost because of your attack on our family. At today's prices, his share would be around three hundred millions euros."

"No."

"The amount should be deposited in numbered account in Switzerland within the next sixty days. I will provide you with the details. I want that my son has something to back him up if the Russian or your associates put a bullet in your head. It's not much to ask from you."

"I want then something from you. All the material you have over us and your oath of loyalty. No more games like the hacker's party you organized last March. It's the least I demand from the President of my charity foundation. I'll give Guntram one hundred fifty million euros. If you want more resources for the Foundation, convince the other members to be more generous. Do your own work!"

"All right. The Presidency, the full pardon for my brother's family and two hundred twenty-five million euros for Guntram in exchange for convincing my son to return to you and giving you all the information I have. You'd be surprised to know how many don't love you at home. The hornets' nest is quite stirred at the moment."

"I refuse to have you hovering around me in Zurich, driving Guntram mad and undermining my relationship with him. You take the Foundation along with you to Brussels. You can visit him only for a day, twice per month and you will not take him out of the castle or from the meeting point we will choose."

"It seems we are divorcing each other, my Duke." Lacroix sneered and Konrad looked at him

venomously. "For Guntram's sake we will have to find a way to cooperate with each other. A cold war among us is also detrimental for his health."

"I will never accept you into my family, not even for Guntram. It was a great day when I heard about your death."

"It was a pity that bullet didn't reach your head."

"If you move one inch from your duties at the Foundation or if one single cent is missing or misused, I will go against you with everything I have."

"I swear you will come to hell with me," Lacroix growled.

"I'll make Guntram pay for you."

"You couldn't do it."

"I'm a father now, exactly as you are. I'll do whatever it takes to secure my position to defend my children."

"Very well, we understand each other. I will bring Guntram to you after the money is deposited and the children are in Zurich. Perhaps they will work their charms on him better than you, and I can see why. What really hurt him was losing the opportunity to look after them; more than your lies and deceptions. He was truly in love with the idea of having children."

"My sons will be born on May 15th and they will arrive to Switzerland beginning of June. I can't wait for so long to see him. I need to be sure that he's in good hands. Your word has not much value for me."

"Yours neither, my Duke. I don't want to have your men storming into my house one night looking for Guntram and giving him the fright of his life."

"Before I do anything, I want to see him and talk with him." Konrad rose from the table as he had enough of the man.

"All right, you can visit us in three weeks time. After your children are born," Lacroix conceded, as he knew that Lintorff was on the limit of his endurance for challenges. "You can visit us in our house in Aschaffenburg. It's in front of the river, near the *Residenz*. There's a small children's park in front of the walk that runs along the Mainz, the first one after you descend the steps from the castle toward the river, before Willigisbrücke. Come by after lunch and bring a photo of the babies. They will do much more for your cause than you. In fact, if I were you, I would be quiet and only show the photos."

"Are you staying in Aschaffenburg?" Konrad asked incredulous, on the brink of a heart attack.

"It's a very nice city and Guntram needed to see the other part of his inheritance. My mother was born there."

"There's nothing there! It's open to any attack from Repin!"

"No, it's not. It's perfectly safe. I'm more concerned about you than about the Russian."

"You betrayed him!"

"Starting to be concerned about your father-in-law, my Duke?" Michel smirked. "How touching! If it eases your fears, send some of your Krajina hounds to protect him but it's totally unnecessary. There's a team of my own working there."

Konrad's blood nearly exploded at the disrespectful tone, words and attitude the man had. "Had it not been for..."

"Good day to you, sir. We'll see each other in three weeks. I wish you all the best in the birth," Michel said regally. 'Exactly as the old creep,' Konrad thought rising from his chair and standing in front of his old adversary. "I expect to hear from you soon, sir,"

"Send the conditions to Ferdinand. He will see to it."

"Agreed." Michel offered his hand to Konrad but he didn't shake it, still looking outraged. "As I said earlier, the best would be if we reach an understanding between us." Reluctantly, Konrad shook the proffered hand, sealing their pact. "Good, I'll start to work on Guntram."

"I will send my people over. He should be under protection."

"All right, thank you," Lacroix walked to the door, not expecting that Konrad would also accompany him and opened it for him. That Ferdinand was almost falling on top of them, was not a surprise for neither of them and both smirked at the same time while Ferdinand blushed like a child. Goran Pavicevic was clever enough as to stay a few metres away from the door.

"One more thing, Mr. Lacroix," Konrad said the name clear and loudly so his men would understand that he had accepted to go with Guntram's father's scheme.

"Yes, my Griffin?" Lacroix asked, slightly bowing his head in an almost submission gesture.

"Why did you say that Repin affected his career in addition to his life?"

"Do you remember that exhibition in January? In Berlin? The collective one, where he got that dreadful, bordering on slanders critic?" All the men's faces adopted a murderous look when they heard his words. "The Griffin should fire his people better after ten years of services. Your Italian..." Michel chose the word very carefully, "girlfriend paid that man, I don't remember his name, three million euros for it."

"Stefania never had so much money!" Ferdinand protested.

"She hasn't, but Repin has plenty. He didn't want Guntram to become famous or well known after it. If so, he would have lost the boy forever. Had it not been for Roger's accident, I would have never let Repin to tell the truth to Guntram. I took him away to keep him away from people like all of you, but he wants to return to you. I don't support his decision, but I accept it. We cannot chose with whom we fall in love; only pray that he or she is a good person. Good day to you all."

The three men looked at each other; dumbfounded and baffled while Lacroix went away, without looking behind for once.

"That would have explained it. I liked his things and the others were not so bad. Better than what we have to suffer at Ostermann's auction each year," Ferdinand said softly.

"I'll nail Repin to a wall. Like the worm he's," Goran said even softer.

"He still loves me, despite all," Konrad said almost inaudibly. "Come with me gentlemen, we have much to discuss." He returned to his normal overbearing persona.

* * *

It had been a huge risk but it had been worthy. Lintorff was obviously still in love with his child, really in love with him; not besotted as he had been with Roger. 'Nothing turns out how we plan it, but Guntram will be happy with him the years he has left. He deserves to have a family and peace. His mother died at thirty-one and was not so sick as he was.'

Lacroix finished writing the envelope in the VIP room and closed the lid before giving it to the young girl at the desk office for posting it. Ferdinand should start to work with this.

* * *

"Where's Guntram, my Duke?" Goran fired the question, not even sitting in his chair, his eyes fixed on the boy's picture over the large polished desk.

"He lives with his father, Michel Lacroix, in Germany."

"What? Of all places?" Ferdinand shouted.

"Aschaffenburg. Goran send one of your teams with Milan or Ratko as leader. He goes every morning to a park near the *Residenz*. Find out everything you can, but do nothing. Lacroix does not want us near till three weeks. He has accepted the surveillance, but your men should not frighten Guntram. He's health is frail in the moment."

"It will be done as you wish, Sire."

"Since when Jérôme de Lisle sets conditions to us?" Ferdinand barked but Konrad ignored him as he was still speaking with Goran.

"If a Russian shows his nose five hundred metres from where Guntram is, eliminate him. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sire. Ratko is my best man for such things."

"Regarding the other issue, the Art critic, do nothing. We need proofs of Lacroix's words."

"Why do you call him like that?" Ferdinand roared. "We should have eliminated him by ourselves!"

"Be quiet Ferdinand."

"Don't you dare to shut me up!"

"Do you want to lose my only link to Guntram? Should I kill this man and then tell him; sorry, I killed your father this time for real? Never! If I want my consort back, I have to negotiate with him. From now on you will also call him Michel Lacroix as I don't want any of our associates asking questions about him. Officially, he saved us whether we like it or not! I have granted him a full pardon. He's the person who will take over the Presidency of the Lintorff Foundation in six months. We need someone with broad experience in tax law."

"Are you exchanging Elisabetta von Lintorff for this snake?" Ferdinand shouted and Goran looked more

sombre than ever.

"Do you prefer him sitting in the Council? Knowing him like we do now, he would be in your place in two years."

"You can't fire Elisabetta!"

"We'll find something else for her and she has told me several times she gets headaches with all the legal and money issues. Lacroix will do a better job and I prefer to keep him busy than plotting against us. Pray that I find nothing against me from your wife in the document's he's going to give me."

"What?"

"As a proof of good will, Ferdinand. I want that you make a transfer for one hundred thirty-five million euros from my own money to an account number he will give you. Before you yell again, the money is for Guntram. Make sure that he has no access to that money, only Guntram. Once I give you the order, complete that amount up to two hundred twenty-five millions."

"You're crazy. Utterly crazy."

"I agree with the Duke, Ferdinand," Goran said after considering for a while. "The lad needs some cash if something were to happen to his Excellency. He has the children to support now, because he's still their Guardian of Estate and legal Tutor, right?"

"As it was decided."

"Then, I would suggest that you increase the sum over the years, my Duke. If you're satisfied with his performance and behaviour as Consort, that is."

"It's a good idea. I'll take it into consideration," Konrad said and returned his attention to a full brooding Ferdinand. "Is everything clear, my friend?"

"I'm the only one with some sense in this room!" He smirked but then the idea landed in his brain. "If I have to suffer this "Michel Lacroix" again, I also want your support in a project of mine."

"I hear you, Ferdinand."

"I want to divorce and to marry Cecilia Riganti. I'm also tired of running to hotels Konrad. We are too old, exactly as you said and she's a decent woman to be treated like this. I had enough of Gertrud. I coped with her for 25 years."

"This is unexpected. You married by the Church!"

"I'll go to the Rota, if I have to. I will not be the first one to tell that was not understanding his vows. I was only twenty years old when I married!"

"Do you swear that this would be your grounds for your annulment request?"

"Yes, of course. I will say nothing about Marie Amélie not being my daughter or remove her from my will. Her brothers like her."

"What about my cousin?"

"She has more money than I! May I remind you that we married under a separation of property regime? We have a contract and in case of divorce I don't get a single penny from her although I expanded her capital several times! I have paid for everything over the past twenty-five years! Even for her bastard... and quite expensive she was!" Ferdinand roared at the injustice.

"She's a woman! She depends on you to protect her! You're her husband and swore before God to protect her!"

"Protect her? Even you say that she's a cunning snake! Of all the money I've made over the years, she took half of it!"

"That's true. If I remember correctly our calculations about how much your wife and children were costing you, the result was that from every franc you were making, you only got thirty cents for yourself," Goran supported an astonished Ferdinand.

"I insist that you provide for your wife. She spent twenty-five years of her life at your side! Remember her actual position! Her accounts are frozen! If you stop to support her, she will have nothing!" Konrad barked.

"Fine! I'll give her a house and pay for its maintenance! It's more than I should do according to my lawyers! Really Konrad this is too much! I was married to Lady Macbeth and I have to support her? I didn't want to marry her! Your uncle almost forced me! Did you ever take a look at my prenuptial agreement? I only stayed for the boys!"

"Not enough," Konrad replied unmoved by his friend's fury.

"All right, 10.000 dollars in addition for the supermarket. That's final Konrad."

"Please! That's what I was giving to Stefania!"

"It's half of my salary here. Give me a rise and I'll pay her more!"

"Should I remind you how much was your bonus or your representation expenses?"

"Not included in the salary: windfall. Ten thousand."

"I can't believe you're denying your own wife your support. She's the mother of your boys!"

"Karl Otto is twenty-five and in Harvard and I pay for that! Johannes is twenty-three and in Chemistry Faculty! Old enough to fend for themselves. Guntram was on his own when he was eighteen!"

"And he thought that the best idea was to move in with Repin!"

"You have a point there. They can move with me and Cecilia. I'm going to live with her and introduce her as my fiancée. Are we finished?"

"I will not forget this offence, Ferdinand."

"Then, do your own dirty work! I refuse to! Live you with her! It's YOUR fucking cousin. She was not even pregnant when I married her! All was a deception from your cousin Georg! She married me to get your uncle's money so his second wife wouldn't get it all! I left my career in the Army for her! I was an idiot to believe that one night's fuck would be enough to impregnate her!" Ferdinand stood up and left the room, furious and determined to call his lawyers and finish everything once and for all.

* * *

It was very late when Michel Lacroix descended from the train at Aschaffenburg. He took his car from the parking lot and drove home, hoping that everything was fine for Guntram. His son had not liked at all that he was going away for the day, even he believed that he was only going to Brussels to visit some of his customers. He truly hated to lie to his child, but telling him the truth of his business would only drive him nervous. He passed by the huge castle, lightened in the night in an eerie way and turned left to the small street where he had his house, bought some five years ago before it was put down because he liked its old style and the view over the river.

He opened the door with great care as he didn't want to wake up Guntram.

"Papa! You're back!" A very happy Guntram shouted from the stairs

"You should be in bed, my son," Lacroix smiled while he mildly scolded his boy.

"I was waiting for you. Did you have dinner? Fairuza left something for you. I can warm it."

"Yes, thank you. I had something in the plane, but nothing that could be compared to her cooking."

"I agree with you, she cooks great! I'll do it in a minute," Guntram smiled and disappeared toward the kitchen to set the table and serve the food. He took from the refrigerator the prepared dish, removed the plastic film and put it inside the microwave without giving much thought to his actions. Living with his father had been awkward at the beginning but now he was getting more and more comfortable around him and starting to dull the pain of Konrad's betrayal. He was sad all the time, although he did his best to conceal it from his father, thinking and remembering his lover's face, expressions and the void left by his absent body in his bed. 'How could he do it? How could I not see it? He told it in my face several times! I loved him more than anything and he lied to me! There's nothing more to do. I won't return and he will not have me back because I didn't fulfil my promise to be there for his babies.'

Guntram took the chicken out of the microwave and set it on the kitchen's table, waiting for his father. A few minutes later, he came with different trousers and a plaid shirt. "Tomorrow, I'm staying with you. I have to be in Paris in five days to help Nicholas with a case. Big mess, exactly what I love," Michel smirked.

"I worry every time you go there. What if Repin goes against you? He knows where you live! Where you work! What if he goes against Lefèvre?"

"Guntram, you should stop worrying yourself so much. It's harmful for you. Everything was a calculated risk and it wouldn't be the first time we do something crazy together. I met him when the fool was trying to set a Molotov cocktail with a piece of paper!"

"That's sounds more like suicide!" Guntram laughed.

"And he even argued with me when I took the bottle away!" Michel also laughed at the memory of those crazy days in May 68. "We slept that night at the police station. My father was furious with me the next morning. He almost sent me back to Poitiers in chains! Imagine, one of the cops asked me if I preferred to stay with them! After all, I had showed them how to save money in their tax declarations."

"The grandfather had a very strong character," Guntram chuckled not surprised that his father had a good

relationship with the policemen. 'Probably he convinced them to join the revolution by paying less taxes to finance De Gaulle's police state.'

"Very hard man; stern to no end. Well, he had three boys to keep under his rule. Pascal was always starting the ruckus, Roger immediately following him and I saving their asses. Literally. Therefore my father sent me to Law school!" Michel said, enjoying the laughter of his son. "Really Guntram, don't worry about Repin. He's looking for you in Venezuela or Colombia."

"Why would he do that?"

"I paid a French student, looking very similar to you to use a fake passport with your name and take a flight to Buenos Aires that same night. When he arrived to Buenos Aires, he used his own passport and entered the country under his name. He must be travelling around Argentina. I'm offended with Repin because he lost my son from what was supposed to be the simplest thing in the world. After all, you have no experience at all in such matters! None of the Russians lurking the hotel knew Chano and he drove you to the Airport."

"Papa, Constantin is a very clever man and he's ruthless!"

"Guntram, I know who he's because I work for him since 1995. Last year, his companies paid my firm over fifty million Euros for our services. If something were to happen to me or to Nicholas, a dossier with vital information about him would fall in the wrong hands. You know what you have to do if this happens. Go to Frankfurt and take from the safe box all the papers in there and leave the country or return to Lintorff. He will help you."

"I don't want to lose you again!"

"You won't. I'm here to stay this time, my son."

"Lintorff would kill you if he finds out about you! He killed Uncle Roger and that journalist!"

"I know and that was my reason to let Repin show you the photos. I never wanted to cause you such a pain, but I needed you out of there! I'm starting to believe that I made a horrible mistake. Perhaps it was a real car accident. Everything seems to be in order with the police investigation."

"How could it be a mistake? He's a murderer! He killed all our family and fucked me all what he wanted just because I look like my uncle! Do you have any idea how dirty I feel? He told me he had not ordered the murders and I believed him! I pitied him and even comforted him because he felt bad and sad because of Uncle Roger!"

"Roger and Lintorff's relationship was not easy. It was a minefield built by both sides. They loved to fight just to fix it in the bedroom. Most of the time Roger was playing with his feelings or his jealousies, insecurities and Lintorff always answered in a violent way, when in fact he was like a poor puppy following him everywhere. He was obsessed with my brother and forgave him many things that I would have never accepted, not even from your mother. In a way we used him to achieve our goals, Guntram. I remember one night I was working late, I think it was 1986 or 1987, when Lintorff came to the bank in Paris looking for Roger. He had worked non stop for over 64 hours, depriving himself of sleep, flying directly from Shanghai, just to be on time for Roger's birthday as he had promised he would. Roger had left with a secretary, a hot looking girl. He asked me if I knew where he was because he was not at home of course, his wife was working in the hospital, and I didn't know what to tell him. I felt bad for him. Really Guntram, I felt bad because there I saw how he really was: just a man desperate to be loved by someone. He would have gone to Hell for my brother."

"He was always very generous and careful with me; tender to an incredible point. Never giving me flowers or saying romantic things, but in his own way, he was checking that I was taking my medications, that I was not cold or that no one was rude to me. When we started to date, he was always thinking in me before him and I loved him for that because he made me feel respected. Sometimes I believe that he loved me so much that he was hurting himself with his devotion."

"Do you still love him?"

"I'll get over it. I got over Constantin. I long for a new start, papa."

"You didn't answer my question. Do you love him?"

"I guess so, but it's over. I will not return with him! He's a bad person and he is dangerous for you!"

"Forget about me, son. I'm old enough as to take care of myself. Since you're with me, your health deteriorates day by day. You sleep bad, are permanently nervous, sad and afraid. Perhaps, I'm not what you need."

"NO! I want to stay with you!"

"I also do, but you're twenty-three years old and almost had your life organized. Lintorff took you as his Consort and offered to share his children with you. It's an important position in the Order. In his eyes, he married you the best as he could!"

"Are you his lawyer now?"

"Old habits die hard. One of my first clients and the most problematic," Michel laughed. "All I want to say is that you have to carefully think about your future. Think on yourself only, not in me, the family or any other person. I will support any decision you make."

"I must be a big disappointment for you, father. I have not finished school, achieved nothing as painter, favourite whore of a Russian mobster and former substitute whore of a German mobster. Let's do not mention that I can't even run after the bus and take more drugs than a junkie. Ah, I'm gay too." Guntram spoke very slowly and his father only looked at him for a long time.

"Your life didn't turn out as I expected, that's true. I hoped that you would study a career, get a job, a wife, children perhaps and that would be all. Nothing more. You would have died when you were more than 70, probably loved by all the people who knew you but forgotten two days after. Graveyards are full with nice people, Guntram. But no, you decided to move to London to study Art History with great success, had an exhibition in one of the best galleries there with excellent critics and everything sold out, before you were twenty-two years old. Survived what would have killed most people and accepted your illness with more courage than many men I know. You returned to school and did your best to finish all what you could and continued to paint, this time under the tutelage of one of the most renowned art commissars in Europe, have one portrait at the Cardinal's gallery in the Vatican, next to the great artists at twenty-three and sold two other works for the Vatican collections. Finally you were in a collective exhibition and got one bad review over five goods, and your pieces were sold, because of the scandal it was. Not what I expected from you at all."

"Father, I..."

"Let me finish, Guntram. It's my turn to speak," Michel said very crossed and Guntram looked down ashamed. "Your choice of boyfriends leaves a lot to be desired, especially regarding your first one, but I can't really blame you if you were only 18 when you met him and the second wanted to marry you and endangered his position as *Hochmeister* of one of the most terrifying secret societies known to mankind. The man wanted to give you his children too. Almost all high society in Zurich respects and likes you. Tita von Olsztyn was almost strangling that critic with her Louis Vuitton's leather purse. Ah, I forgot to mention that she has two of your paintings in her collections, next to a Picasso or a Miró. It's really not what I expected from my child in my wildest dreams."

"Father..."

"I thought you were going to be a grey little man like most of us, but you outshone us all. When your time comes, Guntram, you could look Death in the face and tell her, 'I go now, but how I lived my life!'" I never thought that my son could be so much and achieve so much only with his talent and courage. I'm proud of you as I'm ashamed of myself for not being with you when you needed me most."

"But I'm..."

"What are you? An artist? I'm glad that you have talent. Gay? I will not treat you differently for that! I'm heterosexual and does it make a difference for you? Perhaps one day you'll give me grandchildren or not; that's in God's hands. Didn't finish school? Well, stop whining and finish it! Or paint something good! No one asked the great artists for their credentials! You are sick? Well, it's genetic. Hit me and then, take your medications, boy."

"I never thought you accepted me," Guntram mumbled, ashamed that he had thought that his father barely tolerated him and despised him for his sexual condition. 'Honestly, I never knew or considered it till I met Constantin or Konrad. I guess I couldn't like any other man or woman after him.'

"Of course I love you, you robbed my heart the minute you opened your eyes and looked at me. Now, go to bed, it's very late and you have to start to work again. Don't let your fear of two men rule the rest of your life."

"You're right, papa, but I only fear one. The other, I don't know what to think about him," Guntram said dejectedly and kissed his father good night.

"Good night. Don't forget your pills and don't stay up late reading," Michel caressed his son's cheek as if he were still a child, chuckling at his son's frustrated groan at being treated like a toddler.

Chapter 31

May 29th
Aschaffenburg

“Hello, Guntram,” Konrad said timidly, surprised at his own embarrassment and shyness. He couldn't get his eyes away from the small form sitting in that faded wooden bench, his hands, before diligently drawing, had frozen in mid air at hearing his voice. He was not like that!

Guntram raised his eyes from the paper on the brink of a panic attack and glanced at his father, sitting next to him, reading some papers for a case he was preparing. He wanted to tell him to run, but he saw immediately Goran's frame some thirty metres away and a mountain in a dark suit other forty metres away. On the road over the elevated area of the park was parked a huge Mercedes limo. He elbowed his father with clear desperation, but the man only said “wait, I have to finish this page.”

Konrad approached Guntram, realising that that the youth's face had turned ashen at seeing him.

“Good afternoon, my Griffin,” Lacroix was unaffected to see Lintorff standing there while he gathered his papers and placed them back in his leather portfolio. “Guntram, where are your manners? You should say at least hello and congratulate his Grace for the coming of his children. I hope everything went satisfactory, Sire.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lacroix. The children are in good health, but still in New York,” Konrad answered in a polite voice and Guntram fell totally abashed. How did Konrad know his father's new identity? Had Constantin betrayed him as punishment? If Goran was here, then the outcome could not be good. The noise of his heart beat was deafening and he felt the urge to throw up his lunch.

“Mr. Lacroix, may I speak with your son?” Konrad asked, understanding that exactly as the man had predicted, Guntram was on his side and he needed his support if he wanted him back.

“Of course, my Griffin. Guntram, when you're finished here, ask your consort to come for coffee at home,” Lacroix rose from his side of the bench, doing his best to ignore Guntram's look of total panic and his ragged breathing and walked toward the exit and through the sharp road that led to the private back entrance of his house.

“May I sit?” Konrad asked to the silent Guntram, his eyes still fixed on him, 'like a frightened kitten.' “There are no hard feelings between your father and me. We have settled our differences and we are in peace. No harm will fall upon him. This I swear on my children's heads. Please, let me speak with you.”

Guntram could only nod and move to the farthest end of the bench, fixing his blue eyes on the water.

Konrad had thought many times over about his words during his overnight flight from New York, but the four different speeches he had prepared died in his brain the moment he saw Guntram obviously afraid of him. 'Once more, Jérôme, I mean Michel Lacroix, is right. Silence is better.' He fished his smartphone from the depths of his breast pocket and switched it on, looking for his children's photos folder, opened it and offered to Guntram.

“The babies arrived on the 16th. They're just perfect. Do you want to take a look?”

Hesitantly, Guntram took the device and only saw a big blurry white and pink spot; the next photo was not better and the third also.

“I can't see a thing,” he said very timidly.

“My hand was shaking too much to get a clear shot. The next pictures are better. The nurses took them.” Konrad took the phone back, looking visibly embarrassed at his clumsiness, but Guntram softly smiled when he was certain that the man was not looking at him. Some twelve photos later, Konrad found the perfect images. “Here you are.”

Guntram was speechless when he saw the first of the very wrinkled and partly red babies. His eyes were furiously closed against the light and he had a mop of dark brown hair and his mouth and chin looked exactly as his father's. “That's Klaus Maria, the eldest by fifteen minutes. The next should be Karl Maria,” Konrad used a very gentle voice and carefully invaded Guntram's space to change the photo from another baby with a blonder hair, sleeping totally oblivious to the world. “Yes, that's him. A *Siebenschläfer*, excuse me, dormouse. He's very peaceful compared to his brother. Klaus is very temperamental and has zero patience when it comes to his bottle. If you try to fool him with a dummy, he becomes more enraged.”

Guntram laughed nervously and continued to look at the photos, feeling that something was breaking inside him.

"Karl has already the nurses dangling from his little fist. Both women drool over him while Klaus has scared them away in less than ten days."

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, your Grace. They're beautiful babies. You should be proud of them," Guntram said and returned the smartphone to Konrad, not willing to look more because he knew he was one step from throwing everything through the window and follow again that man who had destroyed everything in his past, but wanted to give him a future.

"Come home with us, please," Konrad begged and took Guntram's hand.

"I..."

"Please, we all need you."

"Yes."

"I swear to do all in my hands to compensate you for the pain I caused you. I never wanted to lie to you, but I didn't have the courage to tell it and then, everything entangled more and more... What did you say?" He stopped the words flowing out of his mouth without sense, order or method.

"Start by hearing me better," Guntram smiled nervously. "I said yes. I will come home with you and the babies."

"I never loved anyone as much I love you. Never, I swear. You changed my life and I can't live without you. These months you were away, I was nearly crazy. I feared that Repin could have killed you or that you would have done something very stupid..."

"Shhh, hearts attacks are my field of expertise, Konrad," Guntram joked, moved by the other man's nervous breakdown. "I also love you, but don't you ever lie to me again."

"No, I will not."

"Do you have something more to tell me?"

"I have reached an agreement with your father. He should convince you to return to me and I will name him President of the Lintorff Foundation in six months, but he and the whole institution should move to Brussels, Paris or China because I don't want him near you or in my house," Konrad confessed, expecting to hear Guntram explode. "I also deposited some money for you in an account he settled in Basel. He can't touch that money. Only you."

"I will speak with my father tonight," Guntram mumbled, slightly crossed at Michel for organising his life without asking his opinion. 'He's getting too comfortable in his role as father'.

"Guntram, no. I don't want him in Zurich. He can visit you or phone you, but never staying under the same roof as I. We never liked each other and we will never do. Also I swore to him, never let you participate in the council or grant any power to you. He also will give me the information he has over us."

"If he does it, how could he protect himself? Constantin will kill him the minute he finds out that he helped me to escape his people in Vienna. I'm concerned about the people who work with him."

"If he's the president of my foundation, he will be well protected. Goran will see to it. In a way, had it not been for him, you'd probably be in St. Petersburg or six feet under, so for that I'm grateful to him."

"I can't lose him again, Konrad."

"I swear I'll do my best to protect him as long as he doesn't rise against me."

"My father in the Foundation? Was that not your aunt Elisabetta's new job?"

"Ferdinand's problem. He has to break the news to her. I hope he survives it," Konrad said nervously, hoping that his friend would come out of the mess relatively unscathed. 'If he wants my support for his divorce, he should earn it.'

"Poor woman! She likes her position! Perhaps if I speak with him, my father would accept the vice presidency."

"No, let him where I place him. He should be busy enough there. Perhaps Elisabetta would like to take care of the Public Relations. Do you want to say hello to Goran? I think he missed you."

"Yes, of course. Where's he?" Guntram asked, his gaze looking for the missing man, but as usual he had vanished into thin air, after seeing that his Duke was on the right path.

"And you have to get that dog out of my room! The animal has taken over your closet and we can't get it out! She bites everyone who comes near your clothes! She even tried to bite me! And she snores so loudly that I had to move to your former bedroom. I was really considering a final solution for her!"

"You wouldn't dare!" Guntram protested.

"No, I wouldn't. Having the monster around gave me hopes that you would return for her and I could tell

myself that you were only away for holidays,” Konrad confessed nervously. “Please, come home and get rid of her.”

“No way, she stays, Konrad.”

“All right, but out of our bedroom,” Konrad said and noticed how Guntram's body went rigid. “If you want, of course. I'll force you to do nothing with me. I understand you need time to accept me again.”

“I'm returning because of your babies. I still love you, but I will have to trust you again. This is not so simple for me.”

“Would you take our seal again?” Konrad asked, getting a small box from his jacket's pocket. “It's only for a few years, until Klaus marries.”

“It will be my pleasure to give it back then,” Guntram said and extended his right hand to Konrad who quickly slid the ring in before his lover would reconsider it.

“My father says I should invite you for tea, but it's too early. Do you want to go for a walk?”

“Sure, he needs more time to put the cyanide in the coffee. Your father hates me.”

“No, he told me he wanted to shoot you down,” Guntram smiled and offered his hand to Konrad so he would stand up.

“Good to know, I'll carry a kevlar vest when he's around.”

“He's the best father I could wish.”

“Yes, father; not father in law. There is a whole world difference, *Maus*.”

* * *

Sitting in the medium size garden in front of one his most cunning adversaries and pretend that everything ran smoothly was a test for Konrad already frayed nerves. The house was adequate for his consort; an old five bedrooms villa in a good area, with a garden well protected with a high wall and some old trees. Acceptable furniture and nothing vulgar. Not what he would have expected from “Jerôme, le Rouge”, as his elder brother used to call him when he was not around: 'all the young idealists are now thinking on their pensions schemes.' The “maid” (as if a bossy middle aged foreigner woman could be called like that) had dared to complain that Guntram had left all his brushes in the water and not removed his watercolours from the kitchen table. “Do it once more, and you'll find your things in the trash can. It's my kitchen!” When Konrad was going to give her a piece of his mind, Guntram only smiled and gave her a hug with a “don't be mad at me Fairuza, please.”

“Is that your boyfriend? He's too old for you! Drop him and I will look for something much better when we're back in Brussels,” she said in French, “Germans are all the same, no blood in their veins. Let me look among my people.”

“I like him just as he is. Boring and all,” Guntram whispered in her ear. “Is my father home?”

“He's working, don't disturb him. You can take the antiquity to the garden or the living room. Mr. Lacroix forbids you to take him to your bedroom!”

'So much for love of sixty-eight!' Konrad thought, starting to be irked with the man's audacity. 'I named Guntram my consort! What else does he want?'

“I think we should do as she tells, Konrad. My father can shout very impressively. I heard him on the phone several times,” Guntram lifted an eyebrow and smiled. “I think, he's becoming more and more like my grandfather,” he whispered.

“Yes, I bet a hundred Euros that he will allow me to drink a cup of coffee and kick me out at seven.” Konrad smiled, partly appeased.

“Curfew time it's at 7:30, Konrad.”

“Good to know.”

They sat in the garden in front of the table under the trees, Konrad telling Guntram about the birth of his children and how he had nearly collapsed when he had seen them, both asleep in their cots at the nursery.

“And the mother?”

“She's not the real mother, only a surrogate one. I thanked her and parted my way. She has other children and psychologists recommend that we don't have much contact. The lawyers took care of everything. She will be very well provided, don't worry Guntram.”

“What if she wants the children back?”

“She can't have them back; they are not hers. They're mine and yours too. I was planning to bring them to Switzerland on the 5th and perhaps you could meet me in Zurich,” Konrad suggested, and took the small hand

between his. "The drawings you made for them are framed and hung in the nursery. They look very well."

A strong cough made Konrad almost jump to the attack, letting Guntram's hand go. Eating his own fury at the interruption, because his kitten was slowly accepting his touches once again, he looked at the older man.

"This is my house and that is my child. I will appreciate if you refrain from inappropriate contacts with him till he's under your care, Duke," Lacroix barked in German in a voice that would have made Friederich or the old Duke envious. "Guntram, go and tell Fairuza to serve coffee in the garden," he said in French and his son quickly obeyed him.

"For a second I thought I've heard the Vicomte," Konrad smirked.

"My father was a stern but down to earth man. He knew very well how to deal with people like you. You should show some respect to my son. He's still young and in his father's house," Lacroix glared at him.

"Mr. Lacroix, rest assure that I hold your son in my highest esteem. He's my Consort and has accepted my family's seal again," Konrad protested.

"I was expecting much better from you, sir. Did you ask for his father's permission to offer it? To tell him to come with you? Circumstances have changed in the past months. I will not allow you to treat him as one of your flings. I'm not a lenient man. Guntram is my only child and the only reason I kept myself away from him was because of you. If I have accepted to go away once more, is because he loves you and I will do anything for his happiness, but learn from now onwards that you will treat him with respect and keep your hands to yourself, sir, till I grant my permission."

For once in his life, getting such a speech, the same he would have pronounced if he would have a vulture around one of his sons, felt like a stab in the back. In normal circumstances he would have destroyed the man daring to utter such words, but this was the father of his love and he would have to endure him. "I will respect your wishes, sir."

"I know you perfectly well, Lintorff. Don't try any of your tricks with him."

"I wonder if I could take your son back to Zurich on June the 5th? This is the day my children arrive from America."

"I will take Guntram to Zurich on the 7th. You might need a day to settle down," Lacroix growled on the limit of his tolerance toward the man.

Fairuza set loudly the tea tray and huffed at seeing the blond man still sitting with his long time employer and set the table mumbling in Arab. Guntram came after her and left the pastries on the table, without looking at the two men glaring at each other. 'I'll be glad if I can prevent them to tear themselves into pieces in an hour.'

* * *

The men had decided to keep their conversation polite and on neutral grounds like Economics and how Michel envisioned his future "rule" of the Foundation. Konrad had listened to him and had only made a face when he had listed two projects for women in Sudan because of the large Muslim majority in the country. Guntram was overwhelmed by the easiness his father seemed to know the inner workings of the Foundation, the people inside the Order, its politics and the different tax system within the European Union and the United States.

Guntram didn't like at all when both men decided to speak about his future and career.

"I'm concerned about my son's education, my Griffin. He has stopped to attend school, although he has recovered some of the lost time. Perhaps he should return to London to finish his studies."

"I believe Guntram should decide that. I would prefer that he attends the University in Zurich or changes school in England to Oxford. I think, I would be able to move to England for a year or two," Konrad opined without checking with the boy at all.

"Both are excellent choices but the best would be Zurich or Basel. Guntram can learn some German before the next term and restart there. I believe his Art teacher was also there."

"Ostermann is one of the main figures there. I think the director there studied under him. I like their scientific approach much more than London's University one."

"It would be for the best. Guntram," Michel interfered before the young man could express his opinion, already looking outraged at both men. "Zurich is near your home and you can attend school in the mornings and be with the children in the afternoon. My Duke, I must insist that my son continues with his studies and relates with people his own age. He's not your property nor your sons' nanny."

"Yes, I understand and share your concerns. He will start next September in Zurich. Ostermann assured me that his studies in London are recognised by the University. I'll ask Monika to find a suitable teacher for him. He must learn German."

"Absolutely, he's partly German from his mother's and my side."

"I don't want to study German!" Guntram exploded at the two men deciding the rest of his life without bothering to ask his opinion.

"Nonsense," Michel and Konrad answered in unison almost automatically. Guntram gaped at them. He noticed that Konrad and Michel look at each other, irked that their reaction had been the same, but Konrad briefly nodded before backing away and leaning against his chair, ready to enjoy the show. If Lacroix wanted to play "father" he should convince Guntram of the benefits of studying in Zurich, learning German and be a nice and obedient son. Perhaps he could also get a lesson or two for the future.

"Guntram, the best would be that you study in Zurich. I will not stress the security reasons for my decision because I believe you understand the risks associated with you leaving every week for London. Of course, his Excellency could travel to visit you to London, but this is abusing his kindness. You told me several times that you preferred Ostermann's style and I also think he's better for you. Studying with him is a unique opportunity for your career and you should not waste it. If you're going to be the children's legal tutor, you should at least speak the language, especially if you want to live in Zurich. Finally, your mother was partly German as I'm."

"You can't decide my life!"

"As long as you live under my roof and my protection, I decide over your life, child. Once you follow your," Michel huffed before saying the abhorred word, "...Consort, you both together will decide what the best course of action is. Till that moment, you remain under my care."

"I don't want to study in Zurich!"

"All right, go back to London. In case of need you can always ask for a cup of sugar to Repin. He lives only three hundred metres from... what was the name of your street, my Duke?"

"Melbury Road."

"Ah, that must two hundred metres then," Michel corrected himself.

"All right father, I see your point!"

"Good. I will establish a trustee fund for Guntram's education in your bank, Duke. All his expenses must come from there."

"Mr. Lacroix, I assure you that it will be a pleasure to look after your son."

"I prefer that he does not feel indebted to you any longer. It's bad for any kind of relationship if one of the partners is in clear disadvantage in front of the other. We cannot overcome the age difference but we can sooth other aspects."

"Guntram is my consort! I swore to look after him!"

"Guntram is my son. His education and welfare are my sole concern."

"As you wish, but I will take care of his medical expenses and support him in my house."

"I must insist that he looks for a position as long as his health allows it. Guntram told me he had an offer to illustrate some books and I think he should accept it. Don't you think, son?"

"Yes, father," If Michel was on his side, he could take the offer Coco van Breda had made last January, the same that Konrad had forbidden him to accept just because she was "a lower member from our entourage". He could see how Konrad was fuming and glaring at his father.

"My son was educated to be an independent man, Sire," he clarified, getting ready for a dialectic battle with Lintorff.

"When did we reopen the negotiation? This man is meddling more and more!" "I will respect your wishes."

"Excellent. When does your plane leave?"

"Tomorrow night, at eleven," Konrad said.

"You can visit my son tomorrow, if you want."

"I was wondering if you could have lunch with me in Frankfurt, sir. At my house and allow Guntram to stay with me till my departure, if he wants so."

"It would become too late for him and I must fly to Paris the day after."

"I would be honoured if you accept to be my guests. My driver can take you in the morning to the airport. My Tutor has arrived to the city this afternoon, with Guntram's dog. He might see to him."

"No, he stays here."

"I insist as you will not be here to protect your son. My house in Frankfurt is perfectly safe for him. The minute Repin finds out that I was here, he will check what could be so interesting for me in Aschaffenburg."

"Do I have your word that Guntram will not be disturbed?"

"Of course. He may remain in that house till you deem necessary and my Tutor will oversee his stay in Frankfurt," Konrad was about to explode. This was much worse than he had envisioned ever. 'Twice per month? I should have say twice per year!'

"Very well, Griffin. It's getting late and you must return to Frankfurt. Guntram may see you to the door."

"Good-bye, sir," Konrad said, barely keeping his temper in check.

"In ten minutes back in the house, child," Michel said to his son and Konrad was on the brink of an explosion, only stopped by the shy and encouraging smile he got from Guntram.

Walking toward the door helped him to loose part of his fury and calm down before he would shout or fight with the man. 'So much for hippie love! All of them are the same, free love till it's your son or daughter. Hypocrites!'

"You must understand my father, Konrad. It's very difficult for him. Nothing is how he imagined for me. He thought I was going to be normal and marry, you know?"

"You're married to me! Should we go to the darned Town Hall in Frankfurt and register our union? If you want we marry in Spain or Holland! This has been the most humiliating moment in my whole life! At forty-seven years old I was treated like a horny teenager and sent home before I start to drool over you!" he roared, but kept his voice low. Guntram looked at him speechless. "I'm sorry, kitten. Your father drives me mad. Do you see why we can't be together under the same roof? I'll do my best to comply with his conditions, but he's always pushing the limits one centimetre more each time he sees me!"

"I also don't like when he bosses me around, but you must understand that he had to give up on me for many years. He only wants the best for me."

"I'm not sure if I could stand him."

"I will not leave him behind. Not even for you, Konrad. To be honest, I don't know if this is a good idea at all. That I love you doesn't mean we can live together," Guntram said seriously and Konrad felt his world collapse once more.

"We can live together if you forgive me. We did it before and it was the happiest time in my life. Please, *Maus*, come home. I'll fly to Australia just to be away when he visits you!"

"Nothing so extreme. Berlin, would be sufficient," Guntram chuckled and Konrad also laughed, still unconvinced, but glad that his love was lowering his defences. When the laughter stopped, Guntram said with a mischievous glint in his eyes, "do you know what the best part of a bossy father is?"

"When he goes away?"

"When children disobey the papa," Guntram whispered and kissed Konrad on the lips very fast, without giving him time to react and catch his kitten once more. "See you tomorrow, go before he comes and shoots you down."

"Probably he already has a good firing solution and is only waiting for you to move aside," Konrad grunted while Guntram opened the gate, moving aside to let him pass.

"That's right. See you tomorrow."

"At ten the car will be here. Go inside."

* * *

Massaiev was surprised when he read the report late at night. What on Earth was Lintorff doing in a sorry place like Aschaffenburg a day ago? Certainly not playing the tourist or visiting relatives! Why was Pavicevic coming along too?

Time to speak with Repin and pray that this will finally be a true lead because the whole month spent in Buenos Aires in March had been fruitless and frustrating to no end. The men had even looked inside that horrible slum, having to teach several lessons in their quest for the boy. Repin had given up by April mostly because Lintorff had the same results: Nothing at all. None of his friends had been contacted or had any idea about Guntram's whereabouts. During the first two weeks, they obtained some leads through a credit card under his name from different places all over Argentina, but then, nothing else came up. Total silence, as if Guntram had died.

'Probably, this is what happened. The boy was very sick and the stress must have killed him. Poor child! He didn't deserve such a miserable end. He had never hurt a soul, with the exception of boss' and it was more because of his stubbornness than Guntram's fault.'

He left his office and walked toward Constantin's studio to wait for him at its door, remembering that his employer might be with his children. 'Something good came out of this. Repin cares more about them; even about Vania, who was nothing but a stray dog till Guntram arrived. They got along almost immediately and he always asks about him, even if the others are forgetting him. Guntram was writing to him and his father read the letters even after they had broken up. The three books he made for the child are beautiful and Repin is right to keep them away from the child and only show them on special occasions. A true loss.'

"What is now, Massaiev?" Repin asked the man standing proudly in front of his door. The months of uncertainty had also taken his toll on him and he had passed from his murdering rage at the boy for rejecting him to a real concern for Guntram. Without money, medications, friends or support, he had not many chances to survive in Latin America. This and his character bound to depression, had led him to expect the worst outcome and now he only waited for the news about his death.

"I'm not sure about this Mr. Repin. It's puzzling to say the least."

"Speak up."

"Lintorff went yesterday to a small city in Bavaria, with Pavicevic. The place is called Aschaffenburg."

"What was he doing there?"

"We don't know. The men tried to follow him, but several Serbs almost killed them. They had to retreat before they shot them dead. Lintorff's men were more aggressive than usual."

"It couldn't be so easy," Constantin mumbled. "Find Lacroix immediately and bring him here."

* * *

May 30th, 2006

The woman was still buffing from running since the previous day. She had to pack everything for her employer, so useless as usual regarding the house chores, and his son, too nervous and happy to remember the most basic things. The lad had only piled up his papers in no order and stuffed them into a plastic bag and voilà! Moving done! Fairuza had yelled with him and his contribution had been... to place his shoes on top of the ironed shirts!

'All this is the antiquity's fault! Nothing good can come out of this! How can his own father let this man come near his son? Even if Maurice does not like girls, and that's a sin, he should get him someone of his age! He could be his father! Maurice should meet one of my nieces and he would change his mind.'

Still upset, she closed the boy's bag determined to stay with him as long as his father was in Paris. 'No way, I'm leaving Maurice-Guntram alone in that place in Frankfurt! That bloody Duke of his looked at me as if I were filth!'

She growled and glared at the tall man waiting at the door frame for the bags. "To the car with this and go to the kitchen for mine too. If something is missing you will not like what's going to happen to you!"

Mirko Bregovic just looked at her with infinite contempt, 'Those animals are good for nothing. It's disgusting to touch one of them' before he picked the item and went to the car.

* * *

The large Mercedes parked in front of an old house, similar to Guntram's father but of a much larger size in a narrow street forming a cul de sac near Kennedystrasse. Friederich Elsässer waited at the main entrance when the chauffeur hurried to open the car's door.

From it, descended Jérôme de Lisle, much older, but still looking the same, with the dismissive, aristocratic and proud air that had always characterised him. Although Friederich was aware of his coming since several weeks, he was not prepared to see the man returning from his grave, lordly and energetic as always. Only the broad smile from Guntram and that the boy hugged him with real affection, breaking all protocol rules, took him out of his lethargic state.

"Hello, Guntram," the old man greeted the boy and patted his cheek. "I was very concerned about you."

"Hello, Friederich. I was in Aschaffenburg at Mr. Lacroix's house," Guntram answered softly the lesson

he had learned from his father.

"I'm glad he looked after you while you were meditating. You always had a great ability to forgive, my child," Friederich said and noticed how Michel stiffened at hearing the way he was addressing Guntram. "Come inside, the Duke will arrive soon from his meetings."

The howl and mad race Mopsi made from the kitchen the moment she smelled or heard Guntram, almost marked the spotless floor and moved some of the small carpets. Guntram went to the ground level and caressed his dog, ruffling her ears as she loved so much. She was almost jumping on top of him to lick his face when Friederich noticed the woman dressed in dark clothes, standing next to Lacroix and wearing a scarf over her head.

His heart almost stopped at the view.

"This is Fairuza ben Ali. She's here to look after Guntram when I'm not here" Michel announced simply.

"I'm afraid I was not informed, sir," Friederich said very stiffly.

"Now you're. Show me his room and mine. I have to check everything is fine. Maurice, don't let that filthy animal touch your face! It's dirty and impure! How can you have such a thing??" she said and ran over the Austrian, still unable to believe that one of "those people" had set a foot inside the house. "Where is his lunch? I have to control it. His doctor left very strict recommendations!"

"Fairuza, this is Mopsi and she's very clean!" "There goes my *Schweinbraten*," Guntram resigned himself to his fate. She was going to stay with him and make him eat boiled chicken or fish.

"The hygiene is not the problem; the animal is. She has no purpose; doesn't protect the house or hunts!"

"The dog has a purpose, Fairuza," Michel intervened before Friederich would kick her out of the house. "She helps Guntram to release the stress, exactly as his doctor told him to do. Animals are good for it. You're right that he shouldn't let the animal jump on him."

"In that case," she conceded and looked at the old butler, but he chose to ignore her and lead Guntram and Michel to the living room as it was his duty, with Mopsy shaking her tail to the lawyer just because he smelled very similarly to her master and also knew well how to pet her properly.

One of the maids asked kindly Fairuza to follow her to the kitchen and service area. Mr. Elsässer will have to solve that problem later because in the moment he was busy with the Duke's boyfriend. 'He's so young! Almost like a child! Must be younger than Master Armin.'

Guntram sat in the sofa with his father at his side and the dog jumped to his lap as it was her habit, still sniffing the stranger. Friederich remained standing and looking to Michel, still in shock to see him. 'After all, he saved Konrad,' he repeated for the tenth time.

"Have you seen the babies already, Friederich?" Guntram asked.

"I have only seen pictures. I stayed all the time in Zurich, in case you would return. His Excellency was very worried about you. We all were."

"I stayed with my father, Friederich."

"Guntram!"

"I can't lie to Friederich, papa."

"Thank you, my child. Here is your mobile. Antonov brought it this morning. I believe there are new pictures made by the nurses," Friederich took out of his pocket a small phone and a visit cards box and extended both to Guntram who muttered a "thank you,"

"I must see to your domestic service, but I assure Mr. Lacroix, that I'm more than qualified to look after your son."

"I would prefer that Guntram sees a more cosmopolitan environment than the one he normally lives in." Michel only said. "Fairuza has been looking after him almost like a mother; a bossy one, that's," he clarified and Guntram chuckled, "but a very dedicated one. She has been with me for seven years and will return to Brussels once Guntram decides to return with the Griffin."

"Very well, sir," Friederich mumbled and left the room, leaving Guntram showing the pictures to his father till the lawyer had enough of the babies and asked his son to be quiet as he needed to work on a case.

* * *

The chauffeur was clever enough as to move aside before his Duke would have hit him with the door, while Hartick did his best to run to open the other door for Goran. Without waiting for him, Konrad climbed up the stairs from the entrance very fast in his haste to see Guntram.

"Is he here?" He asked Friederich, gloomier than ever standing at the front door.

"Mr. de Lisle is in the living room with Mr. Lacroix, Sire."

"Excellent," but Friederich continued to block the door. Konrad coughed, but the man still looked at him very crossed. "Something wrong, Friederich?"

"There's a Muslim in this house, Sire and she plans to stay. She says she takes care of the young sir. I have no place for one of their kind."

"Of course not!" Goran growled, ready to remove the woman from the house.

"One moment, please. Why is she here?" Konrad sighed, remembering her from yesterday and how much Guntram seemed to like her.

"Mr. Lacroix brought her. He says that she has been taking care of the young sir while he was living with him, almost like a mother." Friederich said and Goran nearly threw up.

"I'll get her out!" Goran said. "No Muslim will be near Guntram, my Griffin."

"No, the less I need now is Lacroix yelling that we are a bunch of fanatics and taking him away. Let her be, but rent a room for her in a hotel nearby. I will not have a Muslim sleeping under my roof," Konrad was again becoming enraged with the man. "That Guntram speaks with one of them, can be blamed on his deficient education but that Lacroix does it, is inexcusable! He's perfectly aware of the rules!" He stormed toward the living room and jerked its door open, truly furious with the man, once more doing what he pleased, now under his own roof.

"Hello, Konrad," Guntram smiled shyly from his place in the couch and rose to greet him and Konrad's fury vanished to really see his kitten, once more, waiting for him. He returned the smile, without caring about Lacroix's presence in the room.

"Did you have a nice trip?" Konrad only took Guntram's hands and briefly squeezed them, fighting his desire to kiss them when he saw Michel standing behind his son and glaring at him.

"Yes, thank you," Guntram blushed under the intense looks from Konrad and shouted happily "Goran!" when he saw the dark haired man standing at the entrance. Much to his father's horror, his own child went to hug the assassin, who returned the gesture with brotherly affection and lightly slapped Guntram on the head with a "next time you do something so stupid, little brother, you will not like your punishment. If you fight with the Griffin, come to me. The Russians were after you and still are."

"I know, Goran. I wasn't thinking at all. I just wanted to leave," Guntram muttered, very ashamed of his own idiocy. "I said no twice to Repin."

"Guntram, that will not stop him. He only understands one language. Now, introduce me to the person who protected you all this time," Goran said and released the boy.

"This is Michel Lacroix. The Godfather. You didn't meet him back in the 80's," Konrad said dismissively and Michel fulminated him with his glare. "Oops, I mean, Guntram's Godfather," he corrected himself with a smirk.

"How do you, Mr. Lacroix?" Goran said, extending his hand, after all, the man was no part of the team who had killed his father and the old bill had been settled in December by someone of his own blood.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Pavicevic," Michel shook the hand.

"I will be in charge of your security as you're the new President of the Lintorff Foundation."

"Not yet, in several months time."

"We must discuss your new residence and staff anyway. The sooner this will be settled the better for Guntram."

"I understand."

"It seems you have already brought your own domestic service for Guntram. Rest assured, sir, that Friederich can look after him perfectly well as he has done in the past. There's no need to leave your maid here. She can take a flight back to Brussels tomorrow," Konrad said.

"Fairuza stays till the 6th, my Griffin. She will oversee that Guntram takes all his medications and she has grown very attached to him."

"My own doctor will assess his condition tomorrow. It should be fine."

"This is worse than a divorce trial," Guntram thought. "Will they establish a visitation schedule now?"

"Guntram has his own doctor in Aschaffenburg."

"But he will live in Zurich. Far away from Bavaria. Dr. Wagemann will visit him tomorrow," Konrad slightly rose his voice, but the French didn't seem to be intimidated a bit and only rose an eyebrow challenging to continue.

"Well, the Duke finally met his match. Speak of hellish fathers in law!" Goran thought very amused. "Ten

to one, this man doesn't let the Duke touch one single hair of Guntram till he's in Zurich and fifty to one that he moves to the castle within two months, no matter what the Duke thinks. I should not worry to move people to Brussels.'

"Dr. Wagemann is an excellent physician, Michel," Guntram said, hoping to stop the upcoming confrontation and his father backed off only mumbling that it was all right to see him. "Thank you very much Konrad for bringing Mopsi here. I really missed her." He took the tall German to the other side of the living room with the dog coming with them. "Is Jean Jacques here too?"

* * *

Much to Konrad's secret joy, Goran was clever enough as to remove Lacroix from his presence with the excuse that he wanted to discuss some security issues. Both men went to the library, where the lawyer also announced that he was going to remain, working.

'Strange he's giving up so easily. Must have something nasty under his sleeve.' Konrad thought but decided to use the opportunity to spend some time with Guntram alone and perhaps improve his own value in front of the boy. He took out his mobile phone from his pocket and searched for the new babies' pictures. 'Again the bloody de Lisle is right, show photos and be quiet! Bloody lawyers!'

"Guntram, would you like to see new pictures? They're less red than before," Konrad asked taking the big sofa near the window with the excuse that the light was better there and Guntram should sit next to him and very close if he wanted to see them.

"That would be nice, thank you," Guntram answered and sat exactly where Konrad wanted, taking the phone from his hand and starting to look at them.

Konrad could feel how the boy was slowly becoming more receptive to him (not only to the children) and decided to make a move. 'Gosh, this is worst than when I was 16 and wanted some fun! What's next?' he briefly thought before he would put his arm around his kitten shoulders.

The door burst open and when Konrad was going to shout the impertinent who had dared to interrupt him in his own private library.

"Guntram! Time for your nap! Hurry up, boy!" Fairuza shouted from the door, glancing fiercely at the "antiquity" already trying something because he was almost on top of her child.

"Fairuza, it's really unnecessary!" Guntram complained in French without rising his voice, but crossed that he was once more "sent to bed" and in front of Konrad. He was not a baby!

"Your doctor said so. Go now or I tell your father!" Fairuza crossed her arms and looked defiantly at him. "Move now!"

"The young man has already expressed his desire to remain here," Konrad said in a very low tone in French. 'Learn bitch, I understand each word you say.'

"I take care of him. Not you. Guntram goes to bed now! You go somewhere else!" Fairuza was not a woman to be scared so easily off and much less by an infidel.

The minute Konrad was going to give her a piece of his mind and explain how his ancestors dealt with her "kind", Guntram interfered to avoid the clash. "Yes, Konrad. The doctor ordered it. My heart was not working very well during the past month and after that time in the hospital, I take it more seriously. If you would excuse me. I'll see you at tea time, if you're still here," He rose from the sofa and gave the phone back. "Your children are certainly cute."

"Thank you," Konrad answered mechanically, still engaged in his battle of looks with the woman. He could only witness how his planned afternoon with Guntram had just been cancelled. 'Bloody Lacroix! This is why he let me alone with Guntram!'

After Guntram followed the woman and closed the door behind him, leaving an enraged man behind, Konrad needed to count up to thirty before storming out of the living room in direction to the library. Without bothering to knock, he burst into the room to find Goran and Michel sitting in his desk. Of course, Lacroix had his place and Goran was taking notes. Konrad coughed loudly, expecting that the Lacroix would vacate the seat but the man only raised an eyebrow and remained where he was.

"Good you could finally join us, my Griffin," Michel said, slightly moving his head toward the empty place next to the Serb. "When was this photo taken?" He took the silver frame from the desk and showed it to the Duke. "It looks like Italy."

"It's San Capistrano, a family residence. That's the courtyard," Konrad mumbled, sitting and glaring to

the man.

'Two months? No way, one month before he's installed in the castle. I really should not bother to move people to Brussels. Perhaps send Mirko for appearances' sake. He always wanted to visit the place,' Goran thought after seeing the brief exchange.

"Ah, yes. Guntram told me when you were together there. He enjoyed it very much. Your Art collection, I mean. He spoke about it lengthy."

"Indeed," Konrad growled already furious with the man.

"Mr. Pavicevic and I have started to discuss about my security after Guntram moves back with you. I was telling about my own resources."

"I would be interested to hear this, if you don't mind, Mr. Lacroix."

"No, of course not. Honesty is crucial among... how would you describe this? Business partners, my Duke?"

"Guntram is my consort and the tutor of my children. He's part of my family now and has been accepted for most of them," Konrad said, feeling very miserable because...

"By transitive character we should be family too," Michel smirked and returned the picture to the table. "No, that would be too much for both of us. Business partners is fine. That Guntram likes you is a mystery beyond reason. It's a test for my faith."

"You were telling Pavicevic about your ventures."

"Certainly. I have a law firm with an old classmate, Nicholas Lefèvre. Perhaps you have heard about us; Wolfensohn and Partners. Nicholas and I bought it in 1994, and we have offices in Brussels, Paris and Geneva. The old Wolfensohn was getting too old and decided to sell. We employ over one hundred fifty people and specialise in corporate law. We have among our clients several banks and industries. Last year, our bill to Mr. Repin was over forty millions and from people associated to the Order another..."

"You costed me seventy-four million euros! You had absolutely nothing! Did you bribe the judge?" Konrad shouted, making Goran flinch as he was deeply engulfed in the talk with the lawyer, horrified at the thought of 'our associates as his clients too?'

"I'm flattered that you still remember the Banksy case," Michel answered simply. "As I was saying before the interruption, we also have some members of the Order among our..."

"Those were Jews! You have a Jew firm!" Konrad roared, hitting the table with his fist.

"Law has no religion, sir. Madame Banský only claimed a part of her legitimate inheritance. Her family deposited several valuable paintings in your vault before the war. Somehow you forgot to return them. It was my pleasure to work on her case pro bono. Personally, I left many of the other clients in the other lawyers' hands. This has nothing to do with religion but with justice."

"You had nothing but a few old photos! Not a single document proving her ownership of the paintings! Do you think I will open a safe box to the first who comes with a tearful story to me? You raided my own office for that case!"

"I did not! The police served a Court Order. Just adding a little pressure on you to negotiate. Your lawyers were very disagreeable to us and refused to talk. She was almost eighty years old and to go through the whole process could have lasted over ten years. The poor woman deserved to enjoy her money. As for documents, people don't pack when they're running for their lives. Don't complain so much. It was a good settlement for all of us. In 15 years, you can check what's inside of her safe box and sell it as it belongs to you know. The appraisals were over one hundred thirty-five million, if I remember correctly."

"You have broken one of our rules! You sided with the enemy! We have no contact with such people! You helped one of them against me!"

"I was no part of the Order and I choose my own clients. The poor woman was living in an old people house without her children's support. Now she's very happy with her money."

"And you too," Konrad said very irked.

"Of course, my Griffin. We shared: thirty-five percent, although she wanted to give me fifty percent and leave nothing for her children. She bought a very nice villa in Cannes. She invited me several times and I guess she will live up to her 90 years."

"De Lisle, this is..."

"Lacroix, if you please," Michel abruptly cut the Duke's tirade. "As I told you in our previous meeting, I have access to many of your brothers' new dirty laundry and some of yours too. Do not try my patience because if you

fight with me, those seventy-four millions, legitimately belonging to someone else, will be nothing compared to what I can do to your finances. We agreed for Guntram's sake to disarm, but I will not tolerate one single word out of place from you. You still owe me my entire family's lives."

"Your whole family were traitors!"

"Even my nieces? Even my son? Be careful with what you say, my Duke because this is only a truce for Guntram's sake. I have given you my word that I will not raise a finger against you any longer, but you still persist in your vendetta against us. Remember who looked for us first. At my age, I will not take orders from a spoiled brat like you."

"I'm very glad that your line finishes with you," Konrad felt the hatred he had for the man come once more to the surface.

"Perhaps it does, sir. Perhaps."

"I doubt Guntram is your son. He's nothing like you."

"Are you finished?" Michel said very dryly.

"Very well. What else do you have to say?"

"Wolfensohn and Partners has an excellent reputation. Even you trust us with your affairs, despite we are not part of the Order," Konrad only huffed at the taunt, still enraged. "I have my own security and I don't need yours at all. It would be very stupid from me to trust your men."

"The minute you cross that door, Repin will kill you."

"He's not that stupid. Killing me is his death sentence and he knows it. I can take care of myself. I will sign tomorrow the sale of my part of the law firm to some investors."

"How much do you own of it?"

"About sixty-nine percent, Nicholas has a fifteen percent and the rest is in the hands of the other partners. He will also sell and retire because he's tired of all. He will not accompany me to the Foundation."

"He will be one of Repin's first targets."

"Nicholas thinks differently and he will leave Europe. He prefers something sunnier. I will remain in Brussels."

"With all due respect, my Duke. To move the Foundation to Brussels will pose many problems for all of us," Goran said and Konrad fulminated him.

"I agree with you Mr. Pavicevic, but we can't stand each other," Michael said kindly.

"I'm not moving out of Zurich and you're not moving in with me," Konrad growled, looking at Goran fiercely.

"It's a large city. You stay in your corner and I'll stay in mine. Zollikon is a quiet place and I don't need much. I'm ten years older than you and frankly tired of planes."

"This is not what we agreed!"

"I will not set a foot in your property beyond the 7th, but I refuse to leave my son once more behind. He has not many years left and you're very mistaken if you think that I will miss them. I have agreed that our talks are monitored. What more do you want? Do you want to rob him his father once more?"

"If Mr. Lacroix moves to Zollikon, it would be much easier for us, Sire," Goran suggested. "This is our land; the Russians would never try anything there."

"And you can keep your own people working for me. Wouldn't you like to "control" me better? Guntram can visit me after school or in the weekends if you're away," Michel mocked partly Konrad.

"This is not what we agreed. When are you going to stop?"

"Now, right now. I move to Zürich, run your Foundation to the best of my abilities and see my son twice per month or how many times he wants. I will not forbid him to visit me. Your people can spy all what they want. I have no interest to get Guntram in the middle of your... entourage."

"You forgot the part where you give me all the material you have about us."

"Have you made the transfer for Guntram?"

"Part of the money is there."

"Complete it and you will get it. What I have on Mr. Repin's companies remains with me."

"The Order could use it and it would be a proof of your loyalty to us, especially after working for the other side."

"No, do your own dirty work."

"All right. Goran will take care of the details."

“There's no need. I'll use my own people.”

“Please, my people are better and the Russians respect them. They also look after Guntram,” Goran interfered. “My men respect him.”

“Keep all your men for him, Mr. Pavicevic.”

“If Repin kills you, he kills Guntram too, Mr. Lacroix,” Goran said softly.

Michel thought for a long time as having the Order's people around was certainly an inconvenience for him. “All right, I'll take no more than three of your men. I will keep my own.”

Chapter 32

May 3rd, 2006
Brussels

The four men standing in his office, pointing at Michel with semi automatic weapons, had not much effect upon the lawyer. He only lifted his gaze from the papers he was reading, and looked at them dispassionately. "My secretary failed to inform me of a meeting with you, Mr. Repin. Get your men out of my office before I call my own security people."

"You lied to me!" Constantin advanced up to the middle of the large office, its walls covered with bookshelves filled with leather bound books and two of Guntram's paintings, and stood in front of the large desk.

"I assure you that my people have a vast experience in taking the trash out. It wouldn't be the first time," Michel said in a deep voice. "They were practising just two days ago, Mr. Repin. Your people are not very sporty."

"Your mercenaries were just lucky."

"Private military contractors, if you please. They're quite sensible," Michel said softly. "Now, get your dogs out if you want to speak with me and leave this place alive. They've just arrived from Somalia. I believe, you're aware of the local traditions as they're your customers too."

The four men blocking the door with their own weapons pointed at his three bodyguards, convinced Repin of how serious Lacroix was. They looked well trained and dangerous, specially the two black very tall men. Constantin only moved his head, dismissing his men. He had already lost three good soldiers in their attempt to take Lacroix to him.

"Very well, sit down and we can speak in a civilized way. I dislike when people invade my property."

"You gave Guntram to Lintorff! I will kill you just for this. He's living in his house in Frankfurt!" Constantin hissed.

"Yes, children are never as parents want. He decided to return to Lintorff. I'm not happy with his choice, but it's for the best," Michel sighed and leaned against the soft leather chair, looking completely relaxed and unimpressed to be in the presence of an armed Repin.

"It's your fault!"

"You were not so adequate for him as I used to believe. Trying to ruin his career was too much for my taste, Mr. Repin. You will never have Guntram as long as I live."

"You will not live long," Constantin growled.

"You also not if I send you to prison. How long would you last in jail? Two days? A week? The Russian authorities would be delighted to see all what I have on you. Be glad that I didn't give it to Lintorff. I have also some ethics toward my clients."

"This will not finish here."

"Of course not, but bear in mind that I organised most of your companies legal framework. Many of your tax declarations are bordering on legitimate and it's only a matter of putting two and two together. Go away and forget that my son exists. He will do the same for you."

"He's mine and I will get him back."

"He has not much time left. If you love him so much, let him live in peace and joy. Guntram still appreciates you; don't ruin a good memory of you or your own life on a childish whim," Michel said with a tired voice as he indicated a chair for Repin to sit.

"It's not a childish whim! I love him and he loves me too!" Constantin raised his voice but sat where he should, unbuttoning his jacket before doing it.

"No, he's done with you. You lost him two years ago. Much to my annoyance, he loves Lintorff and vice versa. If you take him away, you will kill him. I had to return him to that scum before he would have died of a heart attack. His health deteriorated significantly when he was living with me. Think well if you want to be the one who buries him. I buried his mother and it's harder than you think."

"This will not be forgotten, Lacroix."

"Please, let's remember who we are, sir. Threatening is for the mob, not for people like us," Michel sneered. "As your counsellor, I would recommend you to stop this war with Lintorff. You have nothing to gain from it

and might lose everything. Your troubles with Morozov costed you Guntram. Next time, it will be your head. You have many cracks in your own structure and many willing to use them against you. Negotiate with Lintorff again; take advantage of the fact that he's going through a sort of bucolic phase with his children and in a generous mood. It's a rare event, almost like a full planetary alignment. Perhaps, I could intercede in your favour and Lintorff let you see Guntram, under surveillance, of course, as long as he wants. My son wants to reach an agreement with you too."

"I will not accept this!"

"I would have preferred you over the German also, but I have to swallow my pride and endure Lintorff. You have no idea how hard it is for me to refrain myself to shoot him dead or when Guntram shows me the pictures of his little bastards. Unfortunately, my son made his choice. Perhaps one day he realises how wrong he's, but until that day comes, I have to put my best face for his sake. You should do the same because this strategy of yours is not working at all."

"I will not renounce him."

"Yes, you have said it many times already, but tell me why do you like my son so much?"

"He's everything I desire; kind, polite, talented and good looking."

"Without the last part, you're describing a good friend. Why don't you settle for this? Guntram holds you in his greatest esteem. He told me several times that without you, he would have never had the courage to paint. You taught him everything he knows and changed his life like no one ever did before. Not even I was able to touch his life so much. Let him go and maybe he returns to you. Lintorff could never influence him as you have done. If you continue with this war of yours, only resorting to violence, he will be literally heartbroken. Allow me to negotiate on your behalf with Lintorff."

"What would I get? A letter per month? A picture for my birthday?" Constantin said with huge contempt.

"The right to see him and be his friend. In the moment, Lintorff plans to put my son in his castle, give him the children to play and lock the door while he destroys everything you have with a clear conscience. Guntram would never have sex with you on his own volition; you would have to force him and that is not what you want. My solution is better: be his friend and confident."

"If I agree to this, what guarantees do I have from you?"

"I give you no guarantees. I have the upper hand, sir. I only want to make my son's life easier."

"I don't believe you. You're afraid of what I could do to you."

"I already fooled the whole Order with fewer resources than now. Don't try my patience sir. Those men you saw here are better than Pavicevic's and I have access to many of your business. It's a fair exchange what I'm proposing you. You leave Guntram alone and give up to any romantic claims you have on him and I convince Lintorff and my son to let you come near. A little of competition is good to keep the German in place."

"You're a dangerous man, Mr. Lacroix."

"Do I have your word?"

"Do I have yours?" Constantin answered back, without believing in the other man's sincerity for a single minute. 'It's a door, better than nothing.'

"Yes, I will plead your case to my son if you agree to stop your harassment."

"I will not force myself upon Guntram, if he accepts to resume our friendship. You will refrain Lintorff from attacking me."

"Of course, I will. I believe you two were good business partners before he saw Guntram. My son also likes your children. He was always speaking me about your girl and the youngest."

"Very well, I expect to hear from you in a week."

"A month. These things take some time, Mr. Repin. And you have to reorganize your own backyard, sir. I believe Lintorff has been playing there during the past month, especially in Ukraine. He's growing very fond of that country."

"Thank you, Mr. Lacroix," Constantin answered with sarcasm, but took good heed of Michel's advice.

"Allow me to walk with you to the exit, Mr. Repin. These are my last days in this office. I'm moving to Zurich and taking over the Lintorff Foundation. If my son agrees, you can visit him in my house," Michel said nonchalantly, as he rose from his chair.

Constantin snorted at hearing the last words. "I see you also obtained something from Lintorff."

"Be it a lesson for you too, sir," Michel retorted dryly. "I have no sympathies for either of you."

"It's a mutual feeling," Constantin mumbled as he walked toward the door with the lawyer in tow.

"You will be hearing from me," Michel said and opened the door for the other. "Guntram left many of

his sketches at home. Should I send them to St. Petersburg?"

"I would appreciate this enormously," Constantin said softly.

* * *

Watching the Russian getting into his large car was a great relief for Michel. One of the monsters was appeased and now he had to corner the other one. 'It's unbelievable how childish those two can be! But I need him to keep Lintorff in check. I don't trust him for a minute. I'm saving his own hide when I swore to destroy him! Incredible! Time to put the fool back in his place. This plethoric phase of his is very dangerous for all of us. I'm sure now that he really loves my son, but he's a sociopath with money. If he's left to his own devices, he will buy paintings and canvases for Guntram, lock him in the nursery and start a Mafia war or an economical crisis just to make the world a safer place for Guntram.'

'The world would be a safer place without all of them.'

* * *

Guntram de Lisle's Diary
May 5th 2006- Frankfurt.

Tomorrow I'm travelling with Friederich and papa back to Zurich. I can't believe that the babies have arrived! Konrad called me a few minutes ago to tell me and I'm completely happy about it. I would go now, but my father decided to keep his schedule. Sometimes he can be very dense and old fashioned. Worst than Konrad! I can't believe what I'm going to write: I had more freedom with him than with my father. I remember now how he used to sit me to make my homework. Very nice, very kind, what a good boy you are Guntram but don't move your ass from the chair till you're finished! Sit straight and finish your greens! I had forgotten all this. I swear I will not do it to Karl and Klaus!

Who am I kidding? Probably I would do exactly as he does with me. The super revolutionary behaves like my grandfather according to his tales! Your father was stern? Did you take a look in the mirror this morning?

He almost kicked out Konrad from his own house for coming too close to me! I'm not a bloody maiden! I was living with him and with Constantin without asking his permission! I hope this improves after we are in Zurich.

At least it seems he has found a compromise for this situation. Yesterday he spoke with Constantin. I almost fainted when he told me during dinner that he had come to his office in Brussels with his goons.

"Don't worry Guntram. My bodyguards are used to deal with more difficult people than his men. They're kittens compared to what they saw during wartime. We spoke long and we might have a solution but I have to consult with you before I speak with Lintorff."

"I don't think he will hear you. Konrad dislikes you very much," I told him.

"I have also my opinion about him, Guntram. The thing is that Repin will stop to importunate you with his demands in exchange that you agree to give him your friendship and allow him to see you now and then. He would also like to continue to see your work. He will cease any attack on Lintorff too," Papa told me very calm.

I was a mess. Friendship with Constantin? I don't know. After Claudia's mess, I can't see him like I used to do. He terrified me in Rome and I only wanted to escape from him in Russia. Fuck, I was so desperate that I cut my wrists open!

"It's not a good idea, father."

"As you wish, Guntram."

"He's very violent and I don't think he will keep his word. He kidnapped a little girl to force me to go to Vienna! I would have never spoken with him!"

"Why did you go then?"

"To convince him to leave me alone! I'm afraid he goes against the babies! He's obsessed with me! I loved him, but he lied to me about his wife and children! When I was in St. Petersburg, there was a man with me all the time!"

"I never said that he was the best option for you, but you said it yourself. You have to convince him to leave you alone and this will not be achieved in one go. You've always spoken well about him, almost like a friend more than like a lover."

"Yes, I did but after Rome many things changed."

"He was a desperate man. We do many stupid things under pressure. This way you will be sure that he will not go against Lintorff's children. If you forgave him for lying about Roger, why can't you forgive Repin?"

"It's different! I love Konrad but I still don't know if I will resume our relationship. I'm only going because of the children. We will not share the bedroom, so you can keep your watchdog act to yourself!"

"Don't you think that you're being unfair to Repin?" he asked me with a blank face, only caring about the meat in his dish!

"How? He's a mobster!"

"Lintorff does the same but with more class, that it's true," he shrugged and asked the butler to get him more sauce.

"What is your game this time, father?" I retaliated when we were left alone. He's not the man who used to play horses with me. He can be cold and calculating to a point that I don't think Konrad could ever be. I'm sure my father loves me, but if he can play his game, he will do it.

"None. I'm only looking for the best solution for you. One in which you can still live your life like an independent person or do you prefer to hide behind Lintorff's back for the rest of your life, depending on him to take the bus or go for a coffee? He would love it, I'm sure, but it's a bad idea. Pacify the Russian front, so to speak. I will be present, if you want. I believe, Repin loves you as well as he can and he tried to do his best for you. Give him a second chance to be your friend. He asks nothing else. If you allowed Lintorff to come near you again, then the logical thing would be to let the Russian too," he told me with his logical voice. I could only gape at him.

"If you agree, I'll speak with Lintorff. It will be also good for him to recover his share of the Russian market. His associates are pressing him over this, Guntram. For all our sakes we have to stop what is coming. It can only end badly for all of us and innocent people could get hurt. Every time Lintorff attacks Repin, like he did in 2005, he loses his companies and people their jobs, all this without counting "military solutions". Whether you like it or not, you are in a place of an enormous responsibility, Guntram. I never wanted this for you, but somehow you landed there and now you have to carry this burden the best as you can. You're not a child any longer. You agreed twice to be Lintorff's consort and your responsibility lies in how you support him. Obeying him blindly is not the way, my son. You have the opportunity to prevent a long and bloody conflict."

"Konrad does not want that I'm involved with the Order's affairs."

"Of course he does not! I already read that script in 1985!" Papa snorted. "But you're in. Give Repin a chance and stop what's coming now. It's the only way to control Repin."

"Constantin will do as he pleases! Don't you know him already?"

"Repin will respect your wishes. Did he touch you in Rome?"

"He drugged me! He tortured and killed my bodyguards! He kidnapped a small girl!"

"So you wouldn't have a heart attack! And as for kidnapping, Lintorff almost threw you in his plane and forbid you to leave his house! You were not exactly a free man! Could you have just walked out of the door?"

"No," I admitted, "but this is a bad idea. Konrad will not allow it."

"Do you want to speak with Repin? It could save the German's position. He has also exhausted his own credit. Nothing would please me more than see him falling, but I'm sure that you would suffer for it."

"Yes, I will. He has given all his life to this organization."

"A total waste, if you want my opinion, but it's his life. I'm only concerned about you, Guntram. Lintorff should not choose your friends. You're a free person, not his toy."

It was hard for me to hear what he said but he was right. Konrad directs my every move, just like Constantin did. He exploded the moment I decided to risk my neck for Claudia. It's my neck, not his. "If I agree to his request, will Constantin leave you alone papa?"

"Yes, he will."

"Then, tell him I will see him after I have established myself in Zurich," I accepted very weakly. I'm totally insane, but I also don't see any other way out. "I don't know how I'm going to do it. I don't know how I'm going to live with Konrad again. I'm having all these doubts when he's not around," I confessed to my father.

"Guntram, there's no need for you to live with him. I'm more than able to protect you from Lintorff or Repin."

"I know, papa, but I want to come back with him and the babies. I do really want to have them. I love them perhaps more than the father."

"I know, although I don't understand it. If you want children, why don't you have your own? It could be

possible.”

“Because I know I will not last long. When Konrad told me about Klaus and Karl, I thought that God had given me a chance and I took it. I couldn't leave a child behind. Who would look after him or her after I'm dead? I want to live as long as I can for those babies, but I will not fool myself thinking that my health will improve. Dr. Wagemann spoke long with me and I have to be very careful for the next months.”

“You will get better once you're in a less stressful environment. You will see the babies and visit me once I have a place in Zurich.”

“Are you planning to take Fairuza to Zurich?” Guntram chortled, already imagining how crossed Friederich, Goran, Mirko, Ratko or Milan would be. She had started a campaign against the five men and she was winning in Guntram's view.

“Sure, she's my housekeeper,” Papa told me with self sufficiency. This could be a huge and epic explosion when the Germans and Serbs hear about this. Somehow they don't like her and vice versa.

“Friederich can't stand her. She fights with him the whole day and with Konrad too! Imagine, she kicked him out of his own living room! Fairuza told Friederich to go away several times! She does not allow Mopsi to sleep in my room!”

“Good and sensible woman. You also need a firm hand sometimes. Friederich should be nice to her or she will stay in the castle with him. She has already expressed her desire to continue to look after you.”

“Father, Konrad could accept to ask Constantin once per year for tea, but to live under Fairuza's fist will be too much for him!” I laughed.

“A Fairuza in his life would have helped him a lot,” my father laughed and I can really imagine how it would have been for Konrad: to be commanded by a woman! I guess he would have had stroke in less than a month! In a way I feel bad for Konrad. If I agree to resume our relationship as it was, he will get my father as father in law. I guess he has no idea where he's getting in. Coming to think, none of them has any idea of what the other can do.

They both need a Fairuza in their lives.

* * *

Guntram had tried several methods but he couldn't sleep. He had counted sheep, drawn to the point of exhaustion, watched TV but it only caused him a headache. He was restless and worried about the next day and his return to Zurich. The bag and the clothes laid on the chair, ready for tomorrow, were a painful reminder of what was coming next.

'I have to do it now or it would be impossible once I'm there. Why am I such a chicken? It's just a talk and he's several thousand kilometres away.'

He flipped open his mobile and looked for a long time at the photo of Konrad holding Karl deeply asleep in his arms and smiled when he remembered that 'it was impossible to get one with Klaus. He was furious because it was his bottle time. He's way too temperamental!' “You also, Konrad, you also,” Guntram whispered while his finger traced the contours of their faces and knew that he had made up his mind.

Still in his large bed, hoping that the covers would protect him against evil, he dialled the number by heart quickly, hoping that it was still valid. He hesitated before pressing the send button, but closed his eyes and punched the icon and held his breath at the distant sound of the ring. His heart beat when he heard the baritone voice he knew so well barking “*skazhite mne,*” and gulped to suffocate the bile's taste in his mouth. “It's me, Constantin,” he whispered with a raspy voice.

“Guntram?”

“I'm sorry to call you at this hour, must be very early there. I...” Guntram babbled, unable to stop his words.

“It's all right. It's 9 a.m. I'm already working in my office,” Constantin answered and waved his hand to dismiss his secretary. The elderly woman obeyed without saying a word and closed the door behind her. “I can speak now.”

“This is Konrad's mobile. He gave it to me,” Guntram said, so the other would understand that it was not a secure line.

“Will you not be in troubles?”

“Most probably, but I know you have spoken with my lawyer and I needed to talk with you.”

“This is most unexpected, Guntram. I don't know what to say.” Constantin's brain searched for a plan but his mind was blank. “I never thought you would call me again after Vienna. I shouldn't have told you.”

"It would have come up some day," Guntram sighed. "It was not your doing, Constantin. I didn't like that you used it in your benefit or that you threatened a small girl."

"Guntram, you have no idea what I've been going through since you left Russia. I hoped to recover you and did all what I could to gather the money, but you abandoned me in June. You dumped me! In the full sense of the word! Not only that, you allowed Lintorff to fool you and started to live with him! How do you think I took it?" Constantin shouted at the end.

"It was very bad from me, I know!" Guntram also shouted. "But you drove me mad in St. Petersburg. We had nothing going between us for a long time before! I guess I didn't love you any more much before Olga! You didn't love me too! I was just a nice toy for you! I almost jumped in Konrad's plane!"

"I love you more than anything in my life. More than my own children!"

"Constantin, you only love yourself. You treated me like a pet!" Guntram shouted him. "I was eighteen when I met you and almost a child. I grew up and changed, but you didn't want to accept it. I will never be that boy again!"

"Have you called me to argue?" Constantin huffed and felt his coldness return after the explosion.

"No, I only wanted to tell you that I'm coming back to live with Konrad and that I wanted to sort things out between us. You said no strings attached."

"I do want you with me, Guntram."

"But we can't be together! I don't love you and I guess I never did," the youth confessed. "I misunderstood and confused many things. I admired you and needed your love and support. Without you, I would be still in Buenos Aires, painting and throwing things to the trash can, deeply frustrated and bitter. You showed me another world and I loved you for it; as a friend or a brother. I gave you all I had just to reward your kindness to me, but I should have gone away much earlier, much before Olga's intervention. I ruined your marriage and my life because of my own cowardice."

"What the hell do you want from me, now? That I leave you alone so you can fuck all what you want with Lintorff? Is that it, Guntram?" Constantin shouted on the edge of his nerves and left all his strategies behind.

"I don't know if I'm returning with Konrad, Constantin. You can be sure you destroyed that. I don't think we can be lovers again," Guntram admitted very slowly.

"He was in bed with your uncle! Not I!" the Russian roared. "I only told you the truth! I can't understand why you don't love me! I, who did all what I could for you, but you fuck with the man who killed your family and fucked with your own uncle! He took you just because you looked like him and were already tamed! A nice looking doll!" Constantin roared once more, letting all the fury and tension accumulated over the past months flow freely.

Guntram closed the eyes and felt the anger and impotence tears ran across his cheeks but he made no sound as Constantin continued to insult him. 'The worst part is that he's right.'

"You were a sweet and lovable child and Lintorff turned you into his whore! That's what you're! His zombie whore! How can you let him touch you? Don't you have any kind of pride? You're nothing than a replacement for him!"

"As I was a plaything for you," Guntram said very softly, interrupting the tirade. "I love him Constantin. I'm sure of it. I love him like I never loved you. I forgave his lies because I do."

"You're insane!"

"What do you want from me, Constantin? Vendetta for leaving you? That I return to you? What would be different? Nothing. You would be always on the edge thinking that I was with Konrad or that I can return to him. Do you want that I paint for you? Tell me, because I don't know any longer."

"Come home."

"No, why would I do it? We both would be unhappy because the Guntram you know is dead."

"What do you want from me? You know my terms."

"Your terms? Are we discussing a treaty?" Guntram smirked and Constantin's anger increased once more at the mock. "I was sincere when I offered you my friendship, but the best would be a clear cut for us. You don't understand this is over."

"Friendship? What kind of friendship can have two people who shared their lives? Guntram, you're very wrong if you think I will settle for this."

"It will not be a conventional one, I admit. Why do you still love me if you say that I'm a crazy whore?"

"Don't speak about yourself like that! You're my angel!" Constantin shouted.

"I was never an angel. I'm a man like you are. I guess you idealised me and now don't want to let your

dream go. It was also hard for me to let go of you, but I did. You have to do the same for your own sake. I fear for you, my friend.”

“Don't lie to me! You care nothing about me!” Constantin could see the game in the young man's words. Exactly as he had done it countless times. 'He learned that from me.'

“You're wrong. I still care about you and I'm concerned about you. Konrad is after your throat this time. Before you were only competition for him, now you're an enemy. He has much more than you, Constantin, and he will use it against you. His people are ferocious like your own,” Guntram said, sensing that his former lover was more relaxed after shouting with him. “I don't know if I'm going to live with him again. I'm only meeting the babies. That's all,” Guntram confessed.

“I know.”

“When I saw you in Vienna I only wanted to offer you my friendship because I miss you,” Guntram said but corrected himself quickly. “Not in that way. I miss our talks, your advice and how you didn't judge or criticize me.”

“That was because you were perfect for me. In every detail.”

“But I'm not any longer.”

“That's right. He ruined you. You're now cold, bitter and calculating. Before you were kind and generous to everyone.”

Guntram wanted to shout against it, but he preferred to leave the other win the battle. “Yes, that's true. I'm not the same, but I still would like that we are friends again, as we were in the past.”

“Now is when you make your offer?” Constantin huffed.

“I make no offers, Constantin. I just want that we see each other at some point, in Zurich. At my father's house or somewhere else,” Guntram said stiffly and started to lose his patience with the stubborn man.

“Don't you need Lintorff's permission first?” Constantin sneered, unable to believe that now his angel started to negotiate with him exactly as his father used to do. 'First he shows the whip and now he reassures me and offers a second rate deal to force me to lower my expectations.'

“I don't need Konrad's permission. In fact, I need no one's permission to choose my friends,” Guntram said in a voice that Constantin had never heard before and it sent shivers through his spine.

'In a way, he looks much more to his father than I ever noticed. Perhaps it's true the story that he nearly killed the young Lintorff for insulting him. He can shoot very well and survived Stephanov. He's not the person I thought, not at all. He's sick, not weak.' The Russian coughed lightly before he spoke: “Write to me when you're settled and we will see, Guntram.”

“All right,” Guntram wanted to say, but Constantin had hung up the phone without any more considerations.

The Russian stood from his chair and sighed, terribly tired, more tired than ever, drained from all his strength. 'Lintorff has it harder than I do,' Constantin pondered while he poured some vodka in a glass. 'No sex, no sweet obedient dove, babies crying out loud and shitting everywhere and Lacroix as father in law! Guntram will do as he pleases and the minute he has enough of the German, he moves with papa and his Hutu, Tutsi or whatever they're, now living in the midst of the Order's territory!'

He chortled softly, considering the irony of life and finished his drink. 'The intelligence reports on those mercenaries are impressive. I wonder if Lacroix would let me use one of them as liaison officer for Somalia. Lots of customers there and I need some business diversification. The Americans are pressing too much in Central Asia and my margins have dropped by sixteen percent I have to rebuild what was lost. At least, the German cleaned up my backyard and saved me the costs of a divorce.' His eyes wandered across the room and fixed on his children's painting once more and he noticed something for the first time in more than a year. 'The stamens of Sofia's flower are badly drawn. I wonder why Guntram did it. Normally, he's more accurate. I'll ask him next time I see him. It's not urgent. In fact, it has no importance at all.'

'Why did I ever think that Guntram was a sweet child? Those misperceptions may cost me my head!'

* * *

Guntram was shocked. Had Constantin really hung up on him? It certainly looked as such. He turned off the mobile phone and checked his watch: 4 a.m. 'Maybe I can sleep a few hours now. Tomorrow, Konrad will explode the minute I tell him about Constantin, but he has to learn that he can't control me. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of all of

them, including my father.' He switched off his bedside light and turned around in bed. 'Drawing portraits in a square couldn't be that bad.'

* * *

'I can't believe she's still around,' a very tired Friederich thought when he sat in the ample and comfortable leather seat in the Dassault. 'Never in more than forty years of working for the Lintorffs, had I had to suffer such a woman! Who said that Muslim women were submitted to their husbands? That's a blatant lie! Was she not going back to Brussels? No way she stays in the Castle. This is where I draw the line.'

Fairuza threw a boisterous look at the old Austrian, still looking at her with his superior air. 'Just because he's the boss, it doesn't mean he can treat me like that. All of the servants in that house treated the dog better than me. How can Mr. Lacroix let Guntram live with them?'

"Fairuza, once we land in Zurich, you can take the flight to Brussels. Charles will be waiting for you in the airport to drive you home. Take the rest of the week off," Michel said and she only looked at him furious, but the man returned a cold stare to her, suffocating the protest before it started.

'Was it so easy?' Friederich thought. 'It can't be. We did all in our hands to get rid of her!'

'Well, my father knows when to stop. Konrad would have killed him if Fairuza was setting a foot in his home.' "Friederich, do you think I could use my former bedroom?" Guntram asked very softly to the man sitting next to him while his father and his housekeeper had started a quarrel in French in hushed tones.

"Certainly, my child. It will be ready when we arrive. Antonov will be staying in the other one. Should I send your dog there, too?"

"If it's not too much to ask."

"No, it's no problem at all. Dieter will see to it."

"Don't think badly of me because of this. I've been thinking a lot and I still need time."

"His Excellency will understand. He's glad that you return to help him with the young princes."

"I'm not sure if I can return to what we had, please understand me."

"I always feared that this would hurt you very much. I did my best to keep the Duke away from you, but he was in love with you and he still is. He will accept your timing, Guntram. Once, he told me that he would be blessed for the rest of his life if he were to live only a month with you." Friederich took the youth's hand and squeezed it briefly. "You have been very good and noble to him. You have always treated him with honesty and honoured your promises. He can't ask anything more from you. He has to wait till you accept him back or not and he knows it."

"I still love him, but I don't know if I could, you know."

"It has to come from your heart. It can't be forced nor rushed. It will come in its due time."

"What if it doesn't come? What should I do?"

"This is something to discuss between you two, my child. Alone. You should always be forthcoming to him, no matter how hard is the truth. He trusts you with his life and I know he's deeply ashamed of deceiving you."

"Thank you, Friederich. You have always been very kind to me."

"I only want the best for you both as you both deserve a chance to be happy together."

* * *

"The only thing I ask from you today is to be quiet. Just for an hour, exactly as you're now. We don't want to frighten your tutor in his first ten minutes in this house. You already got rid of the nurses," Konrad said to his sleeping eldest son with a gentle voice. "Do this for me, and I'll name you my successor," He caressed the baby's face with care and smiled proud of his son but still nervous about his well-known temper. 'Not even two months old and a well defined personality. We will fight a lot during his teenage years. Karl is sweeter. It would be better if Guntram sees him first.'

He kissed his babies on their foreheads and left the nursery to be replaced by one of the three nurses, standing at the door.

"Is everything to his Excellency's liking?"

"Very well, Ms. Ehle. I will return at twelve with some visitors."

"As you wish, sir," the woman bowed her head to her employer and sighed when he was away. The Duke was the most demanding, authoritative employer she had ever had and almost like a rock when it came to his

own children. While most parents did at least the effort to carry their own babies or at least give them a bottle, this one only glanced disapprovingly at the nurses and expected they to fulfill the babies' needs. 'Certainly, this one will never change a diaper or warm a bottle. Poor children with the father they have! I hope the new tutor accepts to stay so we don't have to deal with the Duke any longer!'

* * *

The chief butler was a mess. Should he from the servants or not? When Mr. Elsässer was coming to the house, he normally made an inspection in the kitchen, and he could find up to the slightest wrong thing. It was mandatory to do so when the Duke was returning from a trip, but for the boyfriend? In theory, Mr. de Lisle's rank was exactly as his Excellency's, but they had quarrelled in March and the young man had left him the same day. Only in June, he had accepted to return, but obviously they were not a couple any longer as he was going to sleep in his former bedroom. Should he ask the Duke? Probably not as he had returned in a very bad mood from the States with his children. That the eldest one had been screaming most of the journey—according to the two nurses, unable to calm him down despite their efforts—could be the source of his bad temper this morning.

"Mr. Antonov?" Dieter asked to the bodyguard reading some reports in the old Guards Hall, "I wonder if you could help me with some questions regarding Mr. de Lisle."

"What is it?"

"It's about today. As you know, Mr. Elsässer told me to move his dog and belongings to his former room and I wondered what to do."

"Easy, gather everything and put it back there," Alexei said. "It's is not my job."

"Regarding his arrival today. Should I form the servants or not?"

"Good question," Alexei mumbled.

"The Duke is in his private studio and does not want to be disturbed at all and Mr. Elsässer's mobile is still off."

"Form the staff at the entrance, we have not been informed of any changes in his status," Alexei decided. 'If the Duke gets furious, I can always tell that he's the Griffin's Consort, besides, Goran would kill me if any of the men show any disrespect toward Guntram. He's so sensitive. Why does Guntram bring a lawyer along?'

* * *

The first one to jump out of the car was Mopsi, glad to be back home, after recovering her master. She dashed toward the main door and nearly collided against the tall blond Alpha in charge of the pack, but the man ignored her as it was his use. As usual, she growled at him softly and continued to the kitchen to check that everything was in its place.

Konrad had heard the cars parking outside in front of the entrance and stood up to receive Guntram. He was so nervous, but he forced himself to remain calm, repeating for the tenth time that his kitten had agreed to see the children and wanted to help with their education. 'If he accepts them, he will accept me back at some point. That he doesn't want to sleep with me is understandable and expected. He kissed me twice already!'

'Yes, like a brother, nothing that could be compared to before,' his conscience informed him. Konrad remembered the second kiss, on his cheek and the light, almost ceremonial, embrace Guntram gave him the night he left for New York. 'And he's back to his old room. I wonder if he will ever come back to mine. He's here to be their tutor and the rest is to be seen. We are back to the original offer; friendship and nothing else. No, something else: Jérôme de Lisle is included in the pack. The worst deal of my life.'

'No, one of the best; otherwise he would have disappeared with my kitten. I won his love once; I can do it again. The odds were much worse than they are now.'

Realising that he was going to be late, he shook his head to cast his ghosts away. 'Be calm and the rest will come by itself.' He closed his laptop, where he had pretended to work, but nothing had been done and went to the door, descending the stairs slowly and looking poised, a huge contrast against the turmoil he felt inside.

He noticed that the door was opened and all the servants had been lined up. 'Good Dieter remembered because I forgot to tell him.'

The butler looked certainly nervous and only peered for a second to his Duke, with Alexei towering at his side. Konrad simply stood next to them, impassable as always and watched without interest how the chauffeur

opened the black Mercedes door and the pug ran toward the kitchen. Michel Lacroix descended from the car and only stared at him with a mix of contempt and coldness. So focused was Konrad in his adversary that he missed the moment when Guntram, approached him timidly and greeted him in a soft voice.

"Hello, Guntram, Welcome back," he said very formally and cracked a smile.

"Thank you for the invitation, Konrad," the boy returned the smile very briefly and shyly.

'This should be forbidden. He can't smile at me like that and expect that I keep my cold blood!' Konrad thought and again, Guntram had to repeat his question a bit louder than before.

"May I introduce my godfather to Mr. Antonov?"

"Yes of course," Konrad said. "Antonov, this is Michel Lacroix, Guntram's godfather. He was staying with him in Germany and will move to Zollikon."

"How do you do, sir?" Alexei said out loud and extended his hand to the man, a bit taller than Guntram, but not much and wearing a seal with a black stone and a tiny golden Crenel cross over it. 'From one of the oldest families, like the Holgersens or the Löwensteins.' He bowed his head to the man.

"Guntram has spoken very highly of you, Mr. Antonov. I'm indebted to you for all what you have done for him," Michel said gravely and shook the Russian's hand.

"It's my pleasure to look after him, sir," Alexei said and moved aside.

Unable to hold himself any longer, Konrad ignored the venomous look from Michel and grabbed Guntram by his elbow and led him inside, out of the heat, followed by Friederich and Michel. "Come with me, I'll show you the babies now," he said to moderate the abruptness of his actions. "Friederich, take Mr. Lacroix to the living room, please."

"Certainly, sir," the old man sighed and added when Konrad was away. "Perhaps Mr. Lacroix would like to discuss with Mr. Antonov Guntram's security details."

* * *

Guntram felt himself pulled by the arm toward the main stairwell. "Wait, please!" he whispered and disentangled from the strong grip. "We need to speak in private. Without my father or anyone else present."

"Guntram, you will like the children. Don't worry."

"Please, it's important that we leave some things clear before I see Klaus and Karl."

Without saying another word, Konrad turned around and walked toward his own private studio in the tower. Guntram seemed to hesitate to enter in his quarters, but he took a big breath and followed the German.

"Please, do sit down," Konrad said nervously.

"Thank you. There are two things I want to tell and then, if you still want, I'll see the children."

"I'm listening." 'If Lacroix has been setting new conditions, the answer is no. He's worse than the Vicomte!'

"The bad or worse?" Guntram said, weakly smiling and very nervous.

"Let's start by the bad."

"As you know, I asked Friederich to send me to my old room. I know, I should have told you first, but I didn't reach any conclusion till this morning. I don't think I could resume our intimacy as before."

"I understand it perfectly, Guntram. As I told you, I'm willing to wait for you till you want. I'm glad that you decided to return for our children's sake. I hope we can be friends."

"We can't be friends, Konrad. I know this," Guntram said dejectedly.

"Are you having second thoughts about it? You don't want to be my consort any longer?"

"No, I want to stay with you and the babies. We cannot be friends because I love you despite all," Guntram confessed and blushed.

"Do you still love me?"

"Like always, but I fear my reaction if you touch me. I can't get out of my mind what went between you and my uncle Roger. My father told me several times that it was something akin to a magnetic passion and that you never loved each other, but the picture Constantin showed me, keeps appearing in my mind."

"Your father is right. I never loved Roger like I love you. You gave me my life back and my children. I'm deeply ashamed of my past with him. I never wanted you to find it out and be hurt for it. You are the last person I want to hurt in this world. Your love, when I had it, showed me that another world was possible. I will wait all the time you need to accept me; my whole life, if necessary. But please, don't go away now. I need your support to look after the

children. I don't know what to do and I'm lost without you.”

“I missed you every day all this time, even if I was furious with you. I wanted to hit you, to smash something in your head for lying to me.”

“You had every right to do it.”

“I was in the hospital. Dr. Wagemann must have told you already. My health is worse than before and I will not last long. There are not many chances that I live longer than my forties. Do you still want me as tutor for your children?”

“Yes, I do. I'm sure that your health will improve. You were much better since you came from Russia.”

“Yes, but the allergy episode and the stress in March were too much for my heart.”

“We will solve one thing at a time, Guntram,” Konrad whispered and his hand reached Guntram's to pat it briefly. “Now, tell me the worse,” he said encouragingly.

“It's about my father and Constantin. Hear me out before you shout, please!” he tried to stop Konrad from exploding but the man only looked at him furious. “Please, Konrad!”

“If Lacroix has been dealing with the enemy, he's in deep waters, Guntram. I will not allow this! I granted him a full pardon and the first thing he does is running to the Russian?”

“The Russian went to his office in Geneva! He had to deal with him!”

“What was it this time? He gives all our plans in exchange for his life?”

“No! I had agreed to be friends with Constantin again. To see him now and then, at my father's house in Zollikon. Perhaps give him part of my material.”

“Never! You will never come near that slime again! You don't have my permission! I'll have a word with your father for proposing you this! This is outrageous!”

“Konrad, please, don't be mad. I have already spoken with Constantin, last night with the mobile you gave me and agreed to this.”

“How dare you! You're my consort! You should have consulted with me first!” Konrad hit the table with his fist and Guntram flinched at the noise.

“You would have refused it.”

“Of course I would! Look what happened the last time you saw him!”

“We need to stop this madness. You're going to lose a lot if you continue with this!” Guntram shouted back. “Do you want to risk your position as *Hochmeister*? Besides, Constantin was not interested in me.”

“That's one of his charades! You should know him better!”

“No, I know him well. He's not interested in me any longer. I'm useless now and frankly he doesn't want to carry with the dead weight I am nowadays. Maybe he has found another artist too. There are hundreds of us. He didn't like that I was negotiating with him. He said that you ruined me and that I used to be a sweet child, but now I'm a bitter man. I guess, he finally realised that I'm not the person he used to love. His last words were “write to me and we will see”. It's over, Konrad. He has given up on me.”

“Your father had no right to make you speak with this man! Much less in your condition!”

“I'm not a frail maid, Konrad and I can make my own decisions. He only told me about it, but it was my choice to phone Constantin. I have not informed Michel yet and I would like that you do the same. He should stop meddling in my life. Once, he's installed, I will write to Constantin and you can check the letters,” Guntram said visibly upset at both men.

“I will not let you have contact with that man!”

“You will not decide who are my friends or not, Konrad. I only swore to respect you and stay away from the Order's business. If you are jealous of Constantin it means that you don't respect me at all, thinking that I'm going to be unfaithful to you. If this is the problem here, I leave now.”

“It's not that! I trust you. It's just that Repin is a criminal and you can't stand any more stress!”

“I will not open another front. If this helps Constantin to get over me, so be it. I can't live the rest of my life hiding behind your back or in fear that he would attack us,” Guntram said very calmly. “If you want, I'll leave now,” he added softly.

“No, stay and meet the babies. They're waiting for you,” Konrad replied with a small voice, understanding the he had to accept the young man's conditions or Guntram would really leave him forever this time. This was his only chance and he had to seize it the best as he could. He rose from his chair, circled his desk and took Guntram's hand without asking for his permission, to pull him from his seat. “Come with me please, they should be awoken now.”

"Thank you, Konrad," Guntram said with a shy smile and followed the Duke through the corridors up to the nursery in the third floor. With his heart fluttering, he stopped in front of the main door to the playroom and looked at Konrad in the eyes.

"Come, Guntram. Everything is as you left. The decorator finished her work based on your ideas and the furniture you chose." The Duke opened the door and softly nudged the boy inside the large room, bathed by the sunlight, painted in beige and with some cupboards to store the toys, a small table with chairs, shelves for a few books and Guntram's drawings framed and hung high.

"Everything is exactly as I imagined," the boy said in awe and noticed the tall woman standing there. "Hello."

"Good morning, sir," she greeted him curtly and bowed her head to the Duke, before leaving the room in haste.

"Maybe the children are still sleeping. They sleep the whole day," Konrad said gently.

"Should we return later?"

"No, when they sleep, they do it like logs." 'Fortunately,' he thought before opening the door with great care and inwardly praying that Klaus would continue to sleep and avoid making a scene. "The one in the cot at the right is Klaus and the other is Karl"

Guntram entered in the large room containing two large cradles, individual baby changers, closets and two comfortable sofas and rocking chairs. Doing his best to be silent, he approached Klaus' bed and was immediately taken by the baby's soft features, so similar to his father's up to the last detail, even with his frowning expression. 'He might be getting hungry,' Guntram thought. He smiled very softly and felt that he couldn't leave him any longer. "He's very good looking with that light brown hair. I bet his eyes are blue."

He turned around to look at the other child, sleeping all sprawled in his cot and was surprised to see that he looked much more beautiful than his brother, with a small round nose and almost white hair so blond that he was. This one slept peacefully and obviously satisfied about something. 'The contented little baby,' Guntram thought and leaned over the cot to see him better.

'That's right, focus on Karl. He won't make trouble.' Konrad thought, while he checked anxiously every movement, grimace or word that Guntram might have said. 'He looks already in love with them.' With great care he advanced one step toward his kitten, ready to catch him once more, but the wooden floor creaked and Klaus wailed in his usual way, much to Konrad's horror.

Guntram couldn't believe that someone so small could make so much noise and stood there frozen when the nurse ran to the cot with a dummy in her hand. Konrad only sighed, knowing that it was useless to try to fool Klaus. He watched as the woman plugged in the pacifier, but after two sucks, Karl spat it out with all his strength and cried one pitch louder. 'Be quiet, please, the last I need is Guntram running away because of your temper!' he pleaded silently to his eldest son.

"May I carry Klaus, Konrad?" Guntram asked, while the nurse did her best to calm down the furious baby, nervous that her employer was looking more crossed than usual.

"Please, do it, sir. I'll get his bottle ready in a minute," the woman said quickly and picked up the baby with a "hold well the head, and everything will be fine."

Still afraid to do something wrong, Guntram took with infinite care the baby from her arms and rocked him a little with a "hello baby, just a second and you'll get something good."

To everyone's surprise, Klaus stopped his crying and fixed his big blue eyes in Guntram and nestled better against the young man's arms.

"That has never happened before, sir," the nurse said astonished. "Sit in one of the couches and I'll bring you his bottle," she added, glad that the little fury was silent and busy with his inspection of the new tutor. 'If he can get this one quiet, I will not resign at the end of the month. I've never seen a baby so ill tempered as this one. Exactly as the father.'

Guntram sat in the rocking chair while he whispered to the baby that he was going to get something to eat. Konrad was shocked, but relieved that his kitten still liked Klaus after he had shown his temper. "Maybe he only wanted to be picked up. He's almost asleep again," Guntram commented to Konrad.

"Don't you think we didn't try that already?" "I think he likes you very much, Guntram," Konrad said and went to Karl's cot. 'I wish someone would have carried me like this,' he thought briefly, before stroking lightly the sleeping baby's hair, oblivious to his brother's temper display.

"Here you are, sir," the nurse handed the bottle to Guntram, who started to feed the baby.

"Klaus is very nice," Guntram said, smiling to the baby, busy with his milk, but looking at him carefully. "He has your eyes and features, Konrad."

"He has a lot of temper, Guntram."

"No, he looks like a peaceful fellow," Guntram protested and removed the bottle from the baby's lips. "Hey, wait a little or you'll choke," and Klaus didn't complain at all when his normal reaction would have been an explosion.

Karl decided that it was his turn to get something too and started to make small inquiring sounds from his crib and Konrad picked him up and ordered the nurse to get another bottle for him. "When she's back, give Klaus to her so she can change him and you can hold Karl too. He's starting to smile."

"Klaus too," Guntram commented, his mind only on the baby, partly asleep over his shoulder.

The nurse returned and took Klaus, who only whimpered a little at losing his comfortable pillow. Karl looked at Guntram for an instant, but soon lost interest in him and focused on his bottle. Guntram held him for some time and enjoyed one of the baby's big automatic smiles when he touched his small nose.

* * *

"They're really handsome and cute babies, Konrad. You must be very proud of them," Guntram said softly when both men left the nursery.

"They like you very much, especially Klaus. Do you like them too?" Konrad asked nervously.

"Of course, I do. I'm in love with them since I saw their pictures."

"Will you stay and be there for them?"

"As long as I can."

"Thank you," Konrad said with his heart. 'Now, my children have a chance to live a happy childhood, something I never had, no matter how much Friederich tried.'

"No, I should thank you for giving me this chance," Guntram said. 'I only hope to live till they go to the University.' "Do you think I could take the babies for a walk after lunch?"

"Yes, of course. Take one of the nurses with you. It's not too hot today. But you don't need my permission at all. They're yours as much as mine. You're their legal tutor."

"Thank you," Guntram said, smiling to Konrad. 'I guess we can be good friends, after all. Being here is not as bad as I thought it would be.'

"I believe we have to feed your father before he charges in here," Konrad said very seriously and Guntram chuckled. "He must be thinking that I'm being less than honourable with you and could leave his housekeeper here," he added without any intention of being funny, wondering why his kitten found so entertaining his Via Crucis with the bossy and rude Muslim woman.

"My father knows his limits. He sent Fairuza back to Brussels this morning. She was quite upset with him as she dislikes you."

"Dislikes? That woman hates me, kitten," Konrad sighed and noticed how stiff had turned Guntram at hearing the nickname. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"It's all right. You had no bad intentions, but I would prefer if you call me by my Christian name. The other was in the letter I read."

"I understand, it will not happen again."

"Don't think you're free from her. She comes back in a week to inspect where he plans to move and where she will live as she can't stay with him. I guess, she wanted to bring her two nieces and nephew here."

'Oh, joyful moment,' "I'm afraid all positions within my staff are fulfilled. You should speak with Friederich."

"No, please. I love Fairuza, but this is your house. You were very kind to let her stay with me in Frankfurt, but I realise that she's more apt for my father's lifestyle than yours. She was also too much for Friederich's nerves."

"He threatened with going into retirement, Guntram. For some reason, he blames me of this situation. He will never bring me coffee in the mornings again," Konrad complained and Guntram chuckled again at his grievous face.

"Let's rejoin your father before I loose my cook too."

"He promised to behave with you, if you could do the same, everything would be fine."

"I will treat him with the courtesy he deserves as father of my Consort."

They entered in the large living room where Michel and Alexei were talking in amiable companionship.

"Michel, you should see the babies! They're very cute!" Guntram said excitedly, rushing toward him.

"Some other time, perhaps. I must return to Geneva today. Tomorrow, we can have lunch if you want, Guntram," Michel stopped his son's exuberant joy. "I have a meeting with Elisabetta von Lintorff at the Foundation and I hope we can reach an agreement."

'Good luck, my Aunt will eat you alive.' Konrad thought deeply satisfied.

"I believe the lady was not informed about this change in the leadership, my Griffin." Michel said very displeased at Konrad.

"Dr. von Kleist did his best to speak with her, but the princess would prefer to speak with the new president," 'You survive it, it's not my problem.'

"Yes, I've already spoken with her and we agreed that she will keep her position as President and be in charge of the public relations while I take care of the executive and strategic decisions. It would be a pity to lose her as she has good and sound relationships with most of our donors," Michel said, rising from his seat. "I'm leaving now."

"Would you not like to stay for lunch?" Konrad said, secretly glad to get rid of him but somehow concerned that Elisabetta and him had avoided a clash and were cooperating with each other.

"No, thank you. I have to drive back to Geneva," Michael refused curtly and approached Guntram to give him a hug—much to Alexei's surprise that his Duke was not jumping to strangle the man for touching "his" Consort "Take care and we will see each other soon. Don't get tired around the children, Guntram."

"Do you have to go?" Guntram lamented.

"It's for the best. You should get used to this and rest a bit. We will see each other tomorrow and perhaps could come to the great house hunting with me."

'What? What about the part, visit twice per month?' "My chauffeur will drive you to the airport, Mr. Lacroix," Konrad said out loud, without missing the look of deep sadness in Guntram's eyes.

"Thank you, but my own people are here with my car. We drive now."

"Good-bye, sir," Konrad said and extended his right hand.

"Take good care of him, sir." Michel preferred to let the rest of the sentence dangling in the air.

"Most certainly I will," Konrad fulminated him with his eyes but the French didn't seem fazed at all and only hugged his son once more, muttering "*à demain*," before leaving the room.

"Allow me to accompany you to the door," Alexei offered and went away with him, leaving them alone.

"Déjà vue, Guntram," Konrad shrugged and sat where Michel had been sitting, glancing through the window to check that Lacroix was really away. 'Damn! The commie has a Maybach fifty-seven? Good choice. Karl Marx must be turning in his grave.'

"I beg your pardon?" Guntram said dumbfounded and already feeling concerned about his father as he watched the large car drive away.

"The first time you came here. Everybody ran away and it was just the two of us for lunch," Konrad smiled at the memory. "You were quite edgy."

"From one Mafia boss to the next, but I didn't know that at the time. And he looked sterner than the other."

"I had no idea of how was your character. I was expecting someone very different."

"I imagine, a crazy artist, living with Constantin. Not the best introductory card, I admit,"

"Both our lives changed in a 'dates' house', and here we are now. I'll do my best to make you happy living with us."

"I was always happy with you, Konrad. I'm now with Klaus and Karl. It's just the other thing."

'The 'other thing'? Why can't he be more specific? But if he starts to speak with riddles, I'm on the right path.' "I'm glad of this. You also make me very happy, Guntram," he replied softly and both men fell into a tense silence.

* * *

"Why do you tell that the lawyer is family? He has no family!" Jean Jacques mumbled to his boyfriend, busy with the pigeon's sauce and controlling from the distance what his new helper was doing with the salad, the

kitchen brimming with activity. "Get your hand away!" he hit Alexei when he tried to steal one of the pastries for the afternoon.

"Just checking for poison!" the Russian chortled.

"Imbecile! Get out of my kitchen!"

"All right, I thought you wanted to hear the rest of the story." Alexei shrugged, perfectly aware that the chef's curiosity will make him rethink his threat.

"All right, take it as it's ruined. So the lawyer does not stay for lunch?"

"No, he's French, from Saint Cyr, and the next CEO of the Lintorff Foundation. He specialises in corporate law and Guntram was staying with him."

"Why?"

"According to the Duke, he's his godfather, but they look very similar and in a way, he reminds me a lot of Guntram. He was very kind to me and knew that I took the boy to the hospital. But, here comes the big part; The Duke dislikes him very much, but tolerates him. In fact, this Lacroix moves his Excellency at will. How did he become the next CEO?"

"Answer me this. Should I serve apple ice cream with strawberries?"

"I guess not, Guntram stays in his older room."

"*Merde!* I have a mission for you, Alexei."

* * *

After lunch, Konrad and Guntram stayed together in the library as it was too hot and sunny to be outside. Like before, they sat together, speaking in hushed tones about non controversial subjects like Economy or what Guntram had seen from Germany. They took the babies out and once more, Klaus preferred to be in Guntram's arms while Karl was with his father. They walked across the forest and had dinner together. Guntram was surprised that how easy it seemed for him to return to his old routine and before he knew he was once more sitting in his usual spot at the library sketching the babies' faces while Konrad had his usual glass of cognac.

The Duke noticed how tired Guntram was and decided to call it for the night, walking him up to his room and bidding him good night.

* * *

"Did you put the wooden blocks under the mattress?" the cook whispered when Alexei sneaked into his room, after dinner.

"It's the most stupid idea I've heard in years, Jean Jacques. I could be in great troubles."

"Trust me, Alexei. My people invented the art of gallantry! It's just a slight push in the right direction. Those two being friends only? Please! What if this continues and the boy finds someone better? If we consider the raw material we have here, Guntram will be running away in two weeks! The Duke is really a turn off for anyone. You can't make a sirloin out of an old dry bone!"

"Leave them alone! It's their problem!"

"No, it's not their problem: it's ours too! I've spoken with the nurses and Guntram is great for the babies. He calmed the little pest in no time, without mentioning the larger pest. For the first time ever, the Duke fed one of his children! Today, I served him Brussels sprouts and he ate them all. Any other day, he would have sent the dish back to the kitchen! They should fix their problems and the best is to do it in the bedroom!"

"What makes you think it will work at all?" Alexei whined.

"Trust me. I know exactly what I'm doing," the cook said very confidently of his skills. "I saved some ice cream for you," he grinned. "It would be a pity to waste it."

"Leave it for afterwards," the big Russian chuckled and winked. "I think I deserve a prize for risking my neck for you."

* * *

Guntram couldn't understand what was wrong with his bed. It has never been so uncomfortable. Once more he turned around trying to find a comfortable position, but it was impossible as he felt that there was something sharp in there. 'Not something, but several things. It wasn't like this before!'

'Brother, there's nothing wrong with it and you know the real reason for your uneasiness. You want the other bed as it's warmer than this one.' his inner voice intruded once more.

'Bad mattress, that's all!'

'In a several millions castle? Please! Lie to yourself but not to me!'

Guntram checked his watch; 1 a.m. In the darkness of his room, he looked for Mopsi with his eyes and found her in her basket, sleeping and snoring. 'Gosh, she's really loud for a dog. Was she not staying at Konrad's before? He must have had a hard time with her. She's not helping me at all!'

He sat on his four posted bed and switched on the bedside light, hoping that the pug would awake, but she continued to snore a bit louder than before. The lad sighed and realised that he was not able to sleep with her around or with the mattress.

'Time to ask for political asylum, brother. You're certainly welcomed upstairs,'

'Shut up!'

'Big bed, noiseless,' his inner voice tempted him.

Guntram sighed, aware that the dance with his conscience could last till dawn and made up his mind. 'Just sleeping there, nothing else. Only for tonight, till I find a place for Mopsi.' He dressed with his robe and put on his slippers. 'I hope Konrad does not kick me out for this, but honestly all the servants are sleeping and I don't want to bother them. Sleeping with Alexei is totally out of the question. Jean Jacques would kill me in the morning!'

Very carefully, he opened his door and peered into the deserted hallway, noticing that Alexei's door was closed. He shut down his door, doing his best not to disturb his dog and full of doubts walked toward the stairs.

Still hesitating, he debated with himself once more about the convenience of knocking on Konrad's door. 'He must be sleeping by now,' he thought, but saw the light coming through the door, as if he were reading or working in his living room. 'Just once, if he's still up, he will come, if not, I return to my own bed and complain tomorrow to Friederich.' He knocked softly, but said nothing.

Konrad was surprised that someone was knocking at his door so late. It could only mean troubles and put aside the book he had been trying to read since several hours, unable to sleep, too excited and plethoric in his bliss, as his kitten was back. He went to answer the door and was shocked to see the young man standing there.

"Hi, I'm sorry to disturb you but I can't sleep in my bed. I don't know what's wrong with it. Could I stay here?" Guntram blurted at full speed and Konrad was speechless.

"I'll go away, if I'm bothering you," the boy added, feeling very ashamed that he had disturbed Konrad, who was only gaping at him.

"No, no. I can't also sleep. Come in. It's very late. I don't know if we could prepare another bedroom for you. I apologise for the inconvenience, Guntram." Konrad recovered from his shock and quickly thought that calling one of the servants would be very daft and counterproductive for him.

"No, I'm sorry to be such a bother for you."

"Not at all. I was going to bed now. We can share it, if you don't mind," the man suggested. "I swear to keep my hands to myself," he added at full speed.

'Bugger!' Guntram's inner voice yelled, but the boy managed to keep a straight face. "Thank you, Konrad. I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Get in the bed and I'll change into my nightclothes." He moved away from the door frame allowing the boy to come inside and go in a straight line toward the bedroom. He followed and took his own pyjama from under the pillow on the right side while Guntram went automatically to the left side, with the confidence of a shared intimacy. Konrad had to make a supreme effort not to stare at the boy when he removed the robe and left it over one of the chairs as he always did and returned to the bed and slid under the covers.

Konrad went to the bathroom to change himself. 'I have to let him make the first move.' He put on his pyjama and made a ball with his clothes, without caring about the jacket and cursed when he squeezed the toothpaste almost pouring all its content over the sink. 'Calm down or you'll screw it up!'

Taking a deep breath he opened the door and stood motionless when he saw again Guntram in his bed, lying as always on his right side, curled up and almost asleep. 'He's everything I have, if he would just give another chance.' Konrad turned off the light and walked toward his side of the bed and removed the covers, still afraid that this move could scare away his kitten. But nothing happened and he slid in, checking that he was well covered. He settled in the bed and turned around in his attempt to ignore that he was there.

He laid awake for a long time, remembering how it was before and all the joyful moments they had shared. 'Others will come with the children, even if we are only friends.'

In his sleep, Guntram turned around and he put his arm around Konrad's waist, seeking for his warmth and protection, and surprising his lover. Konrad turned around and gathered the youth in his arms as they used to sleep in the past. 'Maybe he shouts at me tomorrow, but I will not miss this opportunity,' he sighed and closed his eyes, revelling in the small body curled in his arms, sleeping deeply for the rest of the night.

* * *

Friederich was surprised when he found out that he was missing one young French boy. Obviously, Guntram had not slept in his room and what was Antonov doing there so early?

"Have you seen Guntram, Mr. Antonov?"

"I would look for him upstairs, Mr. Elsässer," Alexei sauntered, glad that he had been fast enough as to recover the wooden cubes and slid them in his pockets one second before the butler entered in the room with a tea and Guntram's morning pills. "I'll take the dog out, now. Come, girl, come." He crouched and patted his thighs to call the dog, jumping from her basket. 'I have to make another suicidal mission and return them to the nursery. I'm getting old for this job.'

Still gaping, Friederich could only mumble "I see," before leaving the room to order Dieter to move everything back to the Duke's quarters, once they were out of bed. 'It's impossible to run a house under these conditions!'

* * *

More relaxed that he had ever been in months, Guntram woke up in Konrad's arms, disoriented for a fleeting second of his whereabouts. He looked at the other man's face and smiled, remembering how much he loved to watch him in the mornings, looking like a small child. 'It wasn't that bad, Guntram. We could give each other another chance after all.'

He caressed his face delicately to wake him up and smiled at him when he opened his eyes, still partly asleep. "Good morning, I have to disappear before Friederich comes in."

"He will not come, he's crossed with me since Vienna. I have to fetch my coffee downstairs now," Konrad whined and Guntram's smile broadened. "It's not funny. He told me to get it by myself!"

"I'll get dressed and I can help you to get to the dinning room. It's far away, but we will manage," the young man teased him and laughed when the other closed his eyes in delight at the caresses he was receiving from Guntram. "You were right about something else."

"What?"

"My dog snores very loudly. It's impossible to sleep with her around. I will have to move out."

"I'll tell Friederich to look for another place for her."

"No, she's happy there as I am here," Guntram whispered and blushed.

"Then we will move you here and leave the dog there, *Maus*," Konrad said softly and bent his body to kiss his kitten, happy to feel his kiss returned without reserves and with true love.

Finis

March 12th, 2011

