

The Two Books of
Saint Andre

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DEDICATION

Melanie and Daniel, my daughter and son.

Rafael, my lovely husband.

María Elena, my dear mother.

Marisela and Andrés

Analy and Eduardo

Odin and Mónica

And my other sisters and brother: Ellen, Sara and Guillermo

And Guillermo, Leonardo, Andrés, Marcos, Ricardo, Daniel and

Vanessa

This book is dedicated to all of them. Thanks for being in my life. Of course, I have a lot of family and friends that I would have to thank but it wouldn't be enough pages in this book to name it all.

Also I would like to thank the readers which will take time to read my story. Thank you all.

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1 - THE COMMUNITY OF SAINT ANDRE

-The magic came by camel – so was my answer to Lato’s question, one of the magicians of the Supreme Court of Sorcery of Eisenbaum, experiencing the vague feeling that things were not going well. The peat of outraged magicians stacked in the tribunes waving their fists in the air and their poles in continuous knocking against the cobbled surface of the room, sent a relentless exasperating pounding to all corners and returning gnawing to my ears.

The expression of the inquisitor’s dislodged face was whipped up with each of my answers. I, mutinous, alone before the scaffold, separate from my sisters that I observed in the distance sitting on a burly dock and squeezed by two guards, reflected on the past events.

Was it there where it all started? Truly, I could not say, I would have to go back to some months ago, prior to my arrival at Saint Andre to live with my step-grandmother Gertrude, when I was not yet an apprentice witch and had no intentions of becoming, when still had not found the ominous ring that would upset every minute of my life, or even further, to the ominous death of my adored grandfather, Gennaro, who passed away from this world as departed the souls without sin, docile and in peace.

I must confess, without a doubt, that these were the last two events that precipitated the series of events that led me to that world tucked away, unnoticed, mysterious of the magic. Of that I heard only speak in whispers, under the security of a closed door and with a handful of candles; to emerge, after long years of study, such as a supernatural world, almighty, omnipotent, able to defy the laws more refined, natural and divine, in the hands of those few to whom its secrets are revealed.

It all started, I for my part, ignoring, looking from afar, indifferent in

the distance, pending more of the vicissitudes of this world of senses, than the other that was insinuated, promising and challenging, such as a lover waiting for the opportunity to get closer and strip his wonders.

I will start my story of the day I traveled to Saint Andre, in the company of my sisters, Beatrice and Mariana, when the only thing that I knew about magic were those cheap tricks of circus illusionists that dressed in black layer suit and scarlet lining, sprayed on bulky hats with a silhouette of fungus a sort of magic dust that made it appear the more rounded rabbits, that by a strange coincidence were always white!

That morning, the bus was hardly climbing the seaway slope. Stones, tree trunks, streams were recurring obstacles we had to overcome to ascend the Monte Glaslo by the sole serpentine road that came close up to the top to descend after, abruptly, almost in free fall-height, until the inhospitable Valley of Saint Andre, and when I said "inhospitable" I did not mean in any way to the quality of the field or to the natural wealth of the people, no, I am referring to the derogatory treatment which their inhabitants were bestowed on us since the first time we walked through the valley.

Our sweaty bodies were tortured by the midday sun and attached to the seats we were struggling to not bounce and crashed into a window of the unit. Radio broadcasts transmitted patchwork of sounds from the city but they were intermittent, without sense, as a tangle of chords impossible to identify. From very early, my aristocratic sister Beatrice had begun to distill her indignity. Thus, every minute, and to the whole world, she played her bit of indignation. She was outraged with the driver for driving so abruptly a bus as shabby and with so little ventilation, was outraged with the obese and picturesque madam that was sitting in the front because she opened the window that ruffled her hair, she was outraged, in addition, with a red-haired young seated behind her because he closed the window that made her heated, but above all, and with even greater relevance, was outraged by the circumstances that made us leave the comforts of our home in the city and transported in a vehicle so dishonorable up to the desolate village spread of farmers and cows, and who knows what other creeping creatures.

The driver seemed scared and desperate to get to the destination, not only by the filthiness of my sister who would exasperate until the most gentle of the monks, but by the ghostly figure that had addressed the vehicle at the terminal. His hunched over body, ashy skin, dark eyes within a sickly face peppered with warts was known by all the inhabitants of the village. Not in vain he flaunted the unenviable nickname of "The Executioner". Had addressed the bus shortly after us and had been installed in the seats on the bottom, while maintaining

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visual domain on all passengers.

My sister continued her equitable distribution of preaching indignity, immune to the harassment of the brooding character.

The thick vegetation blocked at times the exhausting sun's rays given us a small oasis of freshness and shadow. Through the glass panes of the window breaded of a dense layer of mud, I looked to the imposing and magnificent spectacle of the summits picking the cotton-clouds on the carpet of the celestial sky. A whistling noise of breeze ruffled my curly hair jumping by the rudeness of the road and by the inebriation of the wind. A bustling climbing slightly in intensity led me out of my lethargy and realized that we had arrived in the village. We disembarked from the unit.

The terminal was a procession of bales and packages that seemed to come alive, coming and going in all directions, of all sizes and colors. That bustle! Big and dark bales! As obese ladies belted by rods, dragged by starving and tired passengers; ladies embedded in broad skirts, crowned with head scarves that ended with a small loop lacing the neck; long bales and sharp, wrapped in paper or plastic to hide its contents to the prying eyes that settled along the landing platform. Small bales festooned with delicate color papers, ribbons and tapes, hiding, no doubt, some glittering jewel or ostentatious clock, for a girlfriend, wife or fiancée.

The first thing I noticed, in addition to the feverish activity inconsistent with the size of the town, was the hostility of their inhabitants; they looked at us as if a flying saucer had been landed sharply in its beloved San Isidro Plaza. They looked at us from the front, without dissimulation and with such an insistence that began to be annoying.

For the inhabitants of this tiny village, the world was confined to the four cardinal points stated in their geography, that is to say, to the north and east the mountain chain formed by the Monte Glaslo, to the west the Black Ranger, also called the Belt of the Devil, and to the south, a handful of smaller hills known as The Mininas. The next thing I noticed was that no one had gone to pick us up and this first snub was an indication of what would be the treatment that we would receive from our political relatives when we got to the residence.

The community of Saint Andre was not accustomed to the great changes. The strenuous monotony was exactly as their residents wanted it to be and will want for many years. The bakery of Mrs. Tula was exactly the same as her great-great-grandmother founded at the beginning of the century and was still selling the same baked pastries, with the anise donuts in the form of a circle and the candies lined with cellophane.

The drugstore of Mr. Anthony had the same bottles with heavy aqueous

syrups and colored pills piled under the Jose Gregorio Hernandez stamp which was hanging on the wall, next to the handwritten sign of "Today we do not sell on credit", that his grandfather, Domingo, had nailed sixty years ago; and the grocery of Mr. Eustaquio, boasted the same leather furniture, worn out and deflated where his customers expected sitting the orders of steaks and pork, bent its legs by the weight of the years and of Mr. Ramon, the cobbler.

In addition to the slinky monotony, Saint Andre was remarkable for its claims. By the opprobrium of the nature that took away the natural wealth it might boast, it concurred with using the ominous resource of the exaggeration, to exalt what the mercy of God and men had denied. In this way, thanks to the magic of the hyperbole, the crystal clear water of "The Cowgirl", was baptized with the bombastic name of "Big River", despite the thinness of its flow and that even though it was not big neither was river; on the other hand, the miracle of the multiplication came also to the four walls of Father Tobias's church, christened as the "Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Conception of Saint Andre", with the subsequent problem that when they went to refit the nickname in aluminum golden letters, there wasn't enough wall or there was too much letters.

Those houses, painted with the pesky earthy colors that were used by the founders in the days of the colony, looked at the firmament with the simplicity and the nostalgia of things from another time: with its red carnations of silky and curly head that sprouted in bunches, well in pots, either of the subsoil, in the gardens filled with cut ball-shaped hedges, all stringed and always looking toward the west, as soldiers guardians waiting for an invasion.

The cobbled streets, the lanterns of moribund lights and also the tiring air were the same, and never would have thought that in that remote locality the events that put us in contact with the magic would happen.

We resigned to expect sitting on one of the lengthwise benches in the boarding room. There, Mariana, my youngest sister, haggard for the onslaughts of fatigue and uncertainty, rested delicately her head on my shoulder and then sighed; Ah! That sigh! What significance! What a sigh! Her emotional exhalation expressed what thousand words could not have said. Mariana, timid and demure, never effusive, neither with the sentences neither with emotions... Ah! But she did wonders with the facial expressions and with the monosyllables. Her sigh, plenty of character and significance, marked the ending of a cycle and the beginning of a new life for us, full of uneasiness and disenchantments. In comparison, Beatrice was all effusiveness and dramatics. By Beatrice, the words acquired unsuspected meaning; she invented unseen words that the Real Spanish Academy was never heard of, with so outlandish

pronunciations, worthy of some African dialect. This sonorous inventiveness seemed to surface in her quotidian conversations, let just said that a person was wrong about the utilization of some term or word, she, rather than recognizing her mistake, she referred to the imaginary word, attributing its origin to the Latin or to some foreign idiom that the person was ignorant of, not having other remedy that to accept her eloquent rhetoric.

While we waited, I tried to remember my step-grandmother Gertrude's physiognomy, there had passed a few years from the last time that we saw her and even then her treatment to us had been frugal and tasteless at those times, but all that was coming to my mind was her image like an amorphous improbable mass without human known features, which is why I desisted of the idea and made a decision to wait until the original version arrived. My grandfather Gennaro never talked about his former woman, except on certain occasions that he received mail in and, as he went to the reading, his face went away turning more and more scarlet. What cynicism! – He cried out - What foolishness! What a cheek! ... And after uttering a collection of words that began with “what”, heatedly he kept still and pensive, without ever communicating us the cause of his misfortune. When we were going to live definitively with him, because of the death of our parents, he already had separated from her. For that, so much her image like her collection of cheeks went away blurring in the time.

Many hours passed and our step-grandmother did not show up in the terminal, well then, exhausted, we decided to take a taxi to The Borrascosa. The field was a vegetable yellowish extension, sprinkled of chiaroscuro spots and on the trees a thrushes' gale was frolicking and making good use of the shade of the few shrubs that even had leaves. Not even a small leaf moved, only quietness and sun, an infernal heat gushed forth of the insides of the land searing the tasteless pasture and dumbfounding the surrounding small brooks, and more quietness and sun. The vapors that were sprouting from the ground were regurgitating a familiar smell of grass and cattle dung, diluted, almost, for the scarce breeze that was threading way through the moving car's window.

The mansion was far away from the town and formed part of a handful of houses that was sprinkling the roomy country sides, little parades now in the fiery summer. Right after some minutes of the journey, we perceived the irregular peaks of the characteristic rooftop of the architectonic structure of The Borrascosa at last.

I must clarify that before that infamous moment when our grandfather died and the later journey to Saint Andre, we were convinced of that the world turned around us, that way the facts held it, that way our grandfather's mimes held it, and so held it the attentions of our

caregivers. In this way, I can say properly and without fear to shame, that at that time we were very conceited and spoiled girls. But not for being vain and spoiled we lacked a minimal legacy of virtues, no. As for me, I possessed the easy and eloquent art of the word managing, and to the prolixity of the words came together the art of the facial expressions; so in the ecstasy of my conversations I always accompany my words with the assistance of the hands, trained with the mastery of a ballerina in ballet, useful tip when a further explanation is needed or when English was not sufficient. Beatrice, for her part, walked her beauty in the streets of life and for so many shopping centers as possible, with the solemnity of a queen without a kingdom, asking for nothing else than an adulating submission, and when this unrealistic aspiration was not attained, a circumstance that happened frequently, she resigned herself to the silent admiration that produced in the subordinates on duty. Mariana, on the other hand, free of all obfuscation and vanity, transposed her likings in her three big passions: Animals, food and art, and in this strict order.

Not even Saint Francisco in all his glory had saved so many puppies, little cats and little parrots like Mariana in her ministry. Her abilities for painting surfaced to a very premature age. She counted on three years only when the nursemaid's panicked shouts informed our grandfather than something very serious was going on. The screams came from the studio, where Gennaro had piled up some religious objects that were expecting the transportation to the church; these included an oil painting of the renowned Spanish artist Matthew Santander, received on loan and brought to the house by the own hands of the painter. Mariana's tiny hands in the ecstasy of a surpassed creativity had transferred a wide range of little puppets and little animals, decorated with the pastel shades of a watercolor. Nevertheless, unsatisfied with this, she had stripped also of her sacred garments the Blessed Virgin, our Lady of Coromoto, who from her pedestal looked pained to the perpetrator, in her new role as Venus of Olympus. Since then, we have had to moderate the impetus of her art toward more creative ways of expression.

We arrived around three o'clock in the afternoon, the house seemed deserted; without the trails of Gertrude neither her granddaughter Leticia. The facade looked very much alike as the one of my memories, although it showed already the havoc of the attacks of time. On the surface of the entrance paved with stones had grown a green coarse moss which gave a carpeted silky aspect to the front. I tuned my knuckles and knocked at the gate; my sisters, to my side, looked at me impatient, with a face of annoyance and with the collection of suitcases knocked down by the porch. The door looked very dry and aged.

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A "toc-toc" rumbled from the other side and a few hurried steps approached. The housekeeper, Ño Josefina, came to our meeting. Our first impression was not good; she was enormous and with terrifying proportions. The most noticeable feature of her face was an immense and long hair surprisingly black that gave her several turns to the head, as if a crown of snake were resting on her quiet front and a flattened nose convincing informers of her African roots. Her white apron was too starched and it rose up in the tips giving her a flying novice's air. A head full of little black curls appeared behind her, and then the body appeared. The girl, as twelve years old, had a big smile with teeth as large that seemed to be the grain of a cob which covered half of her face; the other half was adorned by two great eyes.

-You must be the grandchildren of Mrs. Gertrude - Said in a conciliatory tone giving signs that they were awaiting us and opened the wide door, urged us to enter. However, she offered no explanation as to why they hadn't gone to pick us up at the terminal and we did not demand an answer.

-My name is Ño Josefina and this girl - Se said, pointing out to the owner of the black curls and the cob teeth - is my daughter, the bold face Salome.

The girl advanced two tiny steps and greeted to us with a gentle reverence without stop smiling. This small gesture of sympathy would weave irredeemably the loom of the friendship that we would share for the rest of our lives. And that way, giggle and all, she timidly went back to hide behind the mass that was her mother.

-I would like to express my condolences to you. I regret very much the death of your grandfather. By these lands he was very much appreciated, at least by the members of the servitude - Said with sorrow while lying down her voluminous figure to the edge of the door. Her expression seemed sincere.

-And I regret very much that you had had to leave the comforts of your home to come here. A place so far as this! Where even the jack lost his breeches – She looked at our faces looking for any sign of assent but she found none, so she continued with her outlandish monologue.

-But who would say that someone might die of a simple cold, right? I am so glad that you inherited that pile of money, so Mrs. Gertrude will be able to cope with the expense of having you here! To say the truth - Said lowering the tone of her voice, almost whispering – She was a little short of funds! She was lucky that your grandfather died and had not declined her as guardian of all of you in the testament, after the whole sordid affair of the divorce.

-Wow! – She said at the end sorry - I did not mean that it was a good thing that Mr. Gennaro died! Away from my thought such a thing! -

Then she tried to amend and explain her reasoning but the only thing she got was more mess, so at the end she just said:

-Please, forget what I said! After a certain age we all started to say foolishness! That is why older people are deposited in nursing homes!

The mere mention of my grandfather raised a stir of nostalgia in me. Mr. Gennaro, as was named by his employees, was a little old man, with the red face of the Andalusian people and the belly rounded by the sausages and black pudding that he liked so much and used to eat with extreme satisfaction from the populous trays of his dinner, lunch and breakfast.

He was dressed in khaki, always, with a convincing gray hat with the wing tips screwed up, and a pair of black moccasins that squeaky when he walked through the elegant salons of the house and that betrayed his presence long before his body was seen.

His pants and shirt, perennially starched, awarded him a crunchy touch to his hugs. His lack of enlightenment neighbored sometimes with ignorance, but in the absence of letters compensated with cunning and with heart. The fortune came to him almost by chance, in the figure of a French investor with a score of boats and no manners for business, and Gennaro with his score of manners and no boat for business.

In this way, in agreeing symbiosis, formed an association that allowed him to amass a large fortune with the importation of alien species, and these followed by grains, chocolates, jewelry and appliances.

It seems that, in matters of business, Mr. Gennaro was very capable, the success was instant and soon found him enjoying the benefits of the privileged class. But in spite of the pleasures that provided the money, nothing was equated with the great pleasure provided by the demonstration of our affections, which he returned with more affections, and with the flow of his love and furbelows, came his ration of wisdom, a little of anecdotes and his pile of principles. And is that all the love that we learned of this world came through his person! So much love for so little body! - I thought with nostalgia.

I was joined to Beatrice, in addition to the family connection, in a relationship of mutual disappointments, and it was because Beatrice was foolish, and foolish with uppercase "F". And her folly was always accompanied by rebellion. From there, our eternal struggle, I, trying to drag her into the ground of my rationality and her pulling at me with equal force in the opposite direction; only the sweet soul of the interposer, the peaceful Mariana, achieved placing ourselves in a midpoint of tense co-existence. Did we really hate each other? Yes! No doubt! Did we love each other? Obviously! That was the reason why we were seeing ourselves like a necessary evil that should support until the circumstances arrange the opposite.

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The housekeeper stuck at her diaphanous diatribe of sentences and sentences. I, that was having the soul opened for rhetoric and investigations and the heart closed for the reproaches, looked for Gertrude's figure or Leticia with a policeman's alert look, but neither one nor the other one appeared on the horizon. In the meantime, Ño Josefina and her little daughter finished the welcome ritual as we remained safe and hungry next to the doorstep. Having complied with the presentations, we passed the door's chink, and once inside, I felt sufficiently confident to speak:

-We would like to freshen up, if there is no problem!

-And eat! - Added Beatrice hastily and with impatience.

The fatigue had drained the courtesy cliché that is customarily said in these cases, so we were replying with monosyllabic on the questions that we were asked by the lady, in an effort to demonstrate how exhausted we were after nearly fifteen hours of travel.

-Ouch! But what charming children! – She said inadvertently with a tinkling tone.

I was going to replicate by saying that we were not "children", since I will soon be completing the eighteen years and my sisters continued with ages of sixteen and twelve, but I reserved the commentary so as not to appear too impertinent in the first encounter. A weak "thank you" came out of my lips.

-Follow me; little children (again the blessed word) - She said - Raise your bags! Mrs. Gertrude does not like scratching the floor - And began to move her exaggerated humanity with the liting step of an elephant, the bold face Salome was still trying to emulate her steps but to a lesser degree. Mariana did not fail to observe the hair of snakes that moved upon her head, as if it were to attack at any moment.

The lobby and lounge were very big, overflowing with furniture and works of art in a variety of sizes and styles; valuable without doubt, but placed so incongruous that altered significantly the overall harmony of the whole. It smelled of confinement and moisture and this strange smell was gushing out of all the objects in the house. Enormous wrought iron windows bear the weight of heavy red velvet drapes, perhaps in an attempt to give the room a French style. A ladder also French-style amounted to the upper floor where the rooms of the family were gathered; already we were going to climb up when we saw that the mulatto was bound for a side where a long and winding corridor, secluded from the rest of the house, ended up in a fifteenth century's uneven oak gate.

-Mrs. Gertrude regrets that there are no available rooms - Continued by saying - and the temporary accommodation is in the basement while she finds a better place for you.

The basement? We looked at each other. What had happened to our rooms? Although for years we had not visited The Borrascosa, I recalled that mine was on the top floor, overlooking the lush gardens surrounding the residence, and to the sides, my sisters' rooms. Stringed, parallel to the immense corridor, was the rest of the rooms that completed ten, and at the bottom was a small seating area studio type where our grandfather used to gather to play and have tea in the afternoon, with chocolate, juices, almonds and raisins cokes. Those were the most pleasurable evenings of my life. The fun was the order of the day.

Indoors, we played board games: Monopoly, bingo and lotto where Beatrice, by force of constant and tenacious efforts, managed to pluck up a tricky person's solid reputation.

Outdoors, among the countryside full of flowers and the stooped large rocks that were sticking up from the vegetable bark, we drained our bubbling infantile energy in racing games, hide-and-seek and all of an ample males' repertory of entertainments. We were ignorant of, in those remote times and as we found out later, that the activities had gender, that way games for exclusive use of young ladies and a similar amount for gentlemen existed. We were in the prehistory of our infancy, ignorant of this sublime truth and became absorbed with all the impetus of our ignorance in such activities without the lightest indication of remorse or guilt caused by the gender issue.

On the wall opposite to the rooms a long window ran from end to end the entire aisle, embellished the environment with greenish shades of the pine trees and acacias that prowled in the surrounding thick grove, which were reflected in the spacious windows. It was not possible that all the rooms were occupied. The housekeeper was lying, and lied blatantly, and I could ensure that she was doing so with the consent of our Machiavellian step grandmother!

-Are the ten rooms occupied? For who? – I asked with incredulity. Mariana and Beatrice dropped the bags as a sign of disapproval, and with their hands on their waists, expected an explanation.

Nervousness was evident in the woman; she walked rapidly so as to not give time for more questions. She certainly didn't expect to be addressed by three angry teenagers.

-I fear myself that you would have to wait for your grandmother to talk about the subject. She will surely explain! I only follow her instructions – Said evasively.

What a cheek! What a nerve! What foolishness! Now all those words that my grandpa was exhaling every time he read the incisive missives received from Gertrude, came to my mind and now appeared in my tongue's tip. This time I was the one who distilled indignations, this

time I was the one pronouncing the words beginning with "what" but I contained my eloquence and tried to diminish my sisters' protests for the sake of preserving the good manners with the staff of service of The Borrascosa, that in the last analysis were having no fault for her matron's mandates. Beatrice expected an explosion of my dissatisfaction or disapproval, however she got surprised when I kept dumb like an oyster and walked behind the old woman like a robot, for which she was left with no other remedy that to retake the suitcase and to follow me along with Mariana.

No Josefina seemed to have no age; when she reached the fifty, she said, refused to continue adding years to her body and in this way she was made immortal; since then, the time had been parked behind her and her body ceased to produce gray hair and wrinkles. Beatrice looked at me with disbelief and even though I could not hear what she was saying as her lips moved without beeping, I recognized the gesture which indicated that the madam was crazy as hell.

The corridor was huge and at the end was topped with a heavy gate that sealed the entrance to the place. That huge cloistered door between two wooden columns tempered the passing of two worlds; the top and the bottom, as effectively as if an imaginary line had been drawn that separated by range of possessions the most affluent from the poorest. Well, those from "above", in other words, Gertrude and Leticia, governed on "the bottom" as omnipotent gods of Olympus, with the same toughness and folly that their Mediterranean counterparts. In this arbitrary classification, we stayed irretrievably encased in the group of "the bottom", flush with the whole of beings inhabiting The Borrascosa, namely, butler, gardener, maid, No Josefina, Juancho, bold face Salome, barnyard animals, rats and insects; all grouped under the same genetic label, as if a mischievous gene of "poverty" had been placed in our DNA strings, and conferring upon us all the same destination.

On the surface of the worlds' divisive door, there was a snakelike iron bolt screwed in and above two incrustations with the heads of two winged cherubim which in its time must have had the faces clean and polished, own of the heavenly beings, but now, as they were covered by a thick layer of soot, looked like two beheaded black little angels in search of their mutilated bodies by the suburbs of heaven or hell.

-Only the gargoyle is missing -whispered Beatrice in my ear. I cleared my throat to drown the scathing commentary of my sister. Beatrice, away from the subtleties that education and "femininity" impose, always used to say what she thought, and this peculiar feature of her personality seemed to flourish in the most inopportune moments. That way, if a person was known for his not much disposition to draw money from his pocket, her outlined little mouth attached him the pejorative epithet

of “ruin”, instead of “thrifty”, and in front of an ill-favored woman's sight, she promulgated it to the four winds like “hair-raising” instead of “not-pretty”. The housekeeper seemed not to listen to the commentary, and if she did, she ignored it. Mariana choked back a little shout than was cutting short his laugh.

We opened the door with difficulty. A dark deep attacked us. Mariana tightened my hand at the time that the old lady was groping the switch, when she turned the light on, it barely illuminated the compound. We took a brief look at the dark basement. A small ladder fell into that world of frets and boxes where a musty odor denoted a lack of cleanliness or poor ventilation. The same smell of humidity that was riding in the living room grew there with more forceful. In the center there was a clear and three little overstuffed mattresses and three blue wash-out wool blankets had been stacked.

In the background, almost stuck on the roof, it was seen a rectangle window blackened by dirt, where just three anemic sun rays had weathered the path to be reflected in prism on the wet surface of the floor. The insistent sound of a drop falling denoted the breaking of a pipe.

-Please get comfortable! - Said the housekeeper painfully - After I finished my work, I will come back to bring you something to eat.

She seemed like a good woman and was very distressed by the situation that we were passing. We went down the ladder with extreme care; hang on to the handrail which dangled incessantly, dragging the heavy suitcases by the wet rungs that blended to our step; already down, Beatrice and Mariana first toured visually the broad space, and then ventured out among the crates for a more detailed inspection.

-How can we be comfortable in this dump? - Bellowed Beatrice behind a cabinet which concealed her silhouette.

I was planted beside the housekeeper, trying to get more information about my relatives.

-When do we see... - I was going to say our grandmother but the word was blocked in my throat - Mrs. Gertrude?

The woman hesitated, ignorant of Gertrude's intentions regarding the girls. Ño Josefina was surprised by her reluctance to fit them into the principal rooms, given the fact that very few of the superior rooms were occupied. Besides the ones used by Gertrude and Leticia, the rest held old or decomposed furniture, out-of-use artifacts, that the old lady preferred to put aside in her particular furniture cemetery than to discard or donate to the charity, where they could, with some minor arrangements, continue, resurrected, lending valuable services. She settled the apron while responded:

-I don't know. Today it is bridge time and the madam is often absent

for a long time, - replied closing the door and taking the bold face Salome by force.

This indefinite world of privation and scarcity that now opened its doors with overwhelming rudeness, contrasted enormously with the snob opulence that, until now, we had enjoyed, in order to embark us, like lost tourists, in an excursion of poverty that would last for exactly six months, time stipulated for the lawyers for the delivery of our properties as soon as I got the age of majority.

-This smells horrible! – Beatrice said vehemently, with her insufferable air of superiority, with her perfect face framed in a flow of chestnut hair that seemed to float accompanying each of her movements. Her worldly spirit little endured the onslaughts of injustice.

And it was that this injustice was the first of which we ever had. Perhaps that was why we found it so fulminating and atrocious. It is not the same the injustice to others, seen from the distance, tolerated for other bodies different from ours, which started, no doubt, our most humane expressions of sympathy and understanding, than the injustice on us, the one that gets embedded like an annoying small stone in the shoe and taps us insistently the cause of our woes.

Beatrice frowned, wrinkled the mouth and raised an eyebrow; wrapped-up in that expression that always preceded her more sarcastic comments when something inconvenienced her.

-And do they pretend that we live in this? – She said accompanying her words with a skeptical look and a facial expression of open hands that reflected the exaltation of her spirit clearly.

I retained my laughter, I was amused by Beatrice's expressions of nausea in front of so much filth, considering that, certainly, the scab of dirt that extended to all measured like five centimeters. However, I had the good sense to abstain from the profusion of my laughter, sure as I was that this event would complicate the situation, so I decided to give an optimistic tone to my words and expressed:

-For the time being this is all we have! Let's clean this warren and try to see the positive side to the situation!

Beatrice grumbled between teeth as if she wanted to contain the words that were pulsating to leave. Then, becoming adapted more to the desires of her temperament than her sociability; she considered it better and said:

-There is nothing positive in this, dear sister! - She said with anger, dragging the words, as are told the things that poison the soul and when shared, also, poison the soul of others. Then, lost in her thoughts, ranked with her eyes the room looking for a moderate clean chair to sit and continue by downloading on my person the venomous phrases of her discontent.

My sister, the sweet, the one which is not intrusive, that would not take partisanship to one or the other side, the one with the blue eyes of agreeableness, breaded of spirit and conciliation, had been awarded from the early days of her infancy the thankless task as arbiter of her conflicting sisters. Far from our own drama, she had gotten close to a display case that was insinuating through the dusty glasses the figures of some miniatures; the silhouettes twisted of goblins, fairies and witches called her attention very much. Once the curiosity was taken down, she opened the door of the case and a deep smell splashed the room and made her contorted the face.

-This is all musty - replenished Mariana with nausea - And smells like very bad! - Said squeezing her nose.

Beatrice approached and pulled out a handful of white threads that were suspended in one of the four corners of the rack.

-And with cobwebs! - Beatrice remarked holding between her hands the subtle white cloth that still was supporting its only inhabitant: A millimetric trapped little spider that was still struggling to come out of the scramble.

-Let it go! - Mariana said advocating for the little animal.

The arachnid, a red marble pricked of paws, set the eyes on her capturer, and when she was distracted, burst out running with all the furor of his eight paws, disappearing for an old cabinet's crack, inundated for its relatives, termites. The girl turned around toward her sisters and made a comment:

-That little animal looked at me with eyes of hatred.

-The fatigue of the journey is doing you to hallucinate - I answered.

Always ready for action, I took command of the ungrateful task of the cleanliness of that filthy place. I judged by the indications that we would suffer through a long time cloistered in that piece. Fortunately, below the stair I found a stone basin, and a water key, and some brooms. Right away I embarked on shooting orders with the same animosity of a marshal at a battle field: Push those boxes! Shake up the dust! Clean the window! Clean the floor!

We moved tenaciously, shaking up dusts and accommodating heavy boxes that broke up in our hands as soon as we tried to locate them in a better place. We chased vermin, stabbed by shoes which showed their crushed down entrails doing that Beatrice uttered the more hallucinating shouts. Finally, we cleaned all that could become more orderly, to bestow a prestigious and hidden air upon that seedy place as if made for a room.

-Why do you have to be the one that gives the orders? - Beatrice asked around distrusted.

-Because I am your elder sister! - I answered shaking up a cushion that

was containing all the dust of the ages.

-It does not seem a reason to me! – She answered back while frowning and sweeping the floor with distaste. That was the way Beatrice was, bossy and grumpy, but under that sack of verbal resistance, she always accepted my orders with a certain dose of respect, which is why she finished doing what she was asked; not without regret, energetic and sequentially, and during all the time of the action she was performing. And it was that Beatrice's outcries were vain and superficial, she protested just to protest, without justifications neither reasoning that would hold the cause of her wailing. In this way, her protests got lined with the insubstantial touch of a crust whose pulp has been subtracted.

Unexpectedly, the rumbling of a screeching door that was opening boomed in every nook and cranny and we shouted unisons, jumping and forming a group at one bound in the center of the room. That way, embraced, found us the bulky silhouette that stood at the doorstep eclipsing all of the light that was coming from the corridor. We recognized Ño Josefina's figure supporting a tray with foodstuff in her hands and the bold face Salome holding a jar with a yellowish liquid. We relaxed and we began to laugh hysterically.

-Ouch! - The old woman said - What a triumphal reception!

We walked the little stair to the top to catch up the foodstuff; since we were not very sure that the stair beard the lady's weight and she neither did they attempt to descend, certainly with the same thought in mind. However, the bold face Salome definitely went stepping down, with little short steps as the ones given by Japanese women, one step at a time, and grasping the jar in the heights, as if a trophy will be. She flowed with the jingling liquid full with ices and ran to find her place in the clearing destined for the dining room where she invited herself to eat. From the stair, Ño Josefina apologized:

-This is all I can give you! In this house the staff of servants does not eat very well!

-The staff of servants? – Beatrice repeated the phrase with eyes so big that I thought they would get out rolling along the ground like marbles. She considered herself very aristocratic and nothing worse for her fine ears than being included in the crowd, that is, “the servant's class”.

–But we are the owners of this house! – Asseverated trying to rescue some of the dignity and the pride that had been snatched from her since the moment we stepped on the house.

I cut her short before she recited the string of events and reasons that made us the authentic owners and inheritors of The Borrascosa. In spite of my youth and inexperience, I knew enough of the ups and downs of life as to understand that Gertrude should have been orchestrating some plan to take off what legitimately belonged to us. We should prepare

ourselves to confront her the moment that she decides to see us; and given the circumstances, that moment seemed to be far away.

-Can we go out? – Mariana asked with her angelic voice - I want to see the garden!

Beatrice growled:

-We do not have reason to ask for permission, girl! As far as I know we are not prisoners!

The woman, ignoring my sister's comment, answered:

-There is no problem, Mrs. Gertrude and Miss Leticia left and will not arrive until very late – and saying this she took the way back to the kitchen to continue her occupations.

As soon as Ño Josefina left, leaving the bold face Salome who was so attached to us as the mushrooms to the dirty, we took the top off the tray to display the food that was consisting of an abundant vegetable dish, four ham slices with eggs, six pieces of bread and a lemonade pitcher, with more water than lemon and not much sugar. Everybody had an appetite but when seeing the starved saucer, the sharp sudden flames of hunger decreased to a large extent. Beatrice was suffocated, she could not understand how from her usual dinners of chocolate croissants and strawberry fell into the vegetable dish with lemonade. It was a too sudden change to be understood. Mariana decided to surrender to the clamors of hunger and not to get upset about the simplicity of the dish, the boldface Salome seemed to be used to the menu and as to me, I had no concern over how foodstuff was shown, as long as it was foodstuff.

Beatrice, giving a disdainful look on a potato, complained:

-We must do something! We cannot live this way!

The set of vegetables stacked on the plate showed innocent despite the lack of appetite produced in its dinner guests on account of its humble presence. It had not enough coloring, seasoning or texture. Nevertheless being these rustic viands the only source of available nutrition at that point, there was no alternative but to rescue the appetite in pursuit of survival. Beatrice was attempting to eat, but by pricking with a fork a tuber parboiled in excess, crumbled becoming pure. The spectacle of the potato with the bowels open, I had to say, it was nothing succulent, so she withdrew concentrating all her attention in the pink of the ham slices. For my part, I refrained from eating the cold meats and condensed my appetites in a bleached cauliflower lying desolate as the last inhabitant of the bowl. There, tarnished by the little colorful lineage, it hoped grateful until I nailed a tooth.

2 -STRANGERS IN THE VILLAGE

In the village, nobody knew who we were or for what purpose we had been installed in that town so remote. Mrs. Tula had been one of the first people in seeing us at the terminal; at a glance she decreed that we were dummies of the city. Since the death of her husband, Mr. Tomas, her only activity had been regaining pieces of missed conversations of those who passed under her window. No longer was she going to the bakery, attended by her sister, Felipa and her children, five boys whose father left them to pursue new trenched emotions in the city. Apparently, the old emotions rose by Felipa and her boys did not tempt him much because Joaquin had not returned yet and it has been five years since.

Mrs. Tula, thin like a bamboo, positioned herself, every afternoon, in an old armchair placed ingenuously next to the large window that was facing the principal street. The location of her house, in front of the hotel, put in difficulties to more than one unfaithful husband. They tried to slip by the front of her door with the conquest of turn in arms. It was said that she was the one who gossip to Mrs. Petra that her husband had been unfaithful with the lady that worked in the pharmacy and the spectacular beating that the wife gave to her consort had fed the village of rumors during weeks and had inoculated the poor husband against any other future temptation.

Next morning, Mrs. Tula got up very early; she could not stop thinking about the strangers that arrived yesterday afternoon. For the clothing, she was convinced that we were metropolitan. She began the morning occupations without getting away from the window to catch sight of us on our walking in the streets or at any store as tourists on vacation would do. However, close to twelve, seeing that there was no sign of us

at the town, could not contain the curiosity and decided to go out to the hotel, which was the place to hear about the latest developments in the community. She ran to her room located at the end of the corridor and looked for the usual black shirt and the gabardine skirt that went up to her ankles and dressed up without delay. Smoothed out the pleats with her wrinkled hands, looked for her Belgian wallet and ran out toward the front door. The familiar bustle of street vendors interwoven with the sweet aromas of the bakery and the fruit store were brought to her door. For a moment, she stopped questioning her actions, but the curiosity prevailed over the considerations, and after a few seconds, continued her advances without regrets. Crossed the street and reached surreptitiously the door of the hotel.

A contingent of people crowded in the reception, a similar amount was found dispersed in the ample space. The modern hotel, The Grand Prince, had been a large abandoned house resuscitated in the late eighty thanks to the Farfan family that bought it at thin hen's price to turn it into the only luxury accommodation of the zone. They owned an ample lot that was rapidly populated with other structures that were attached to the original construction, under the eyes of the inhabitants that saw the weighty tome as a disturbance in the legendary calm of the place. One could say that was the only modern construction of Saint Andre and highlighted as an elephant in a dance of ants.

A lady located behind the elegant cedar furniture in the reception addressed her:

-May I help you? – Said the receptionist giving her an evaluative and sarcastic look. It was noticeable, in whatever way, she was not very happy with the presence of the madam in the Lobby. It was a small town; therefore, the crabby person's reputation that Mrs. Tula showed off preceded her everywhere she goes.

At the time that she was going to answer, another voice to her back distracted her.

-Wow! Mrs. Tula in person! Is that you? - Greeted the Prefect Farfan, man of pudgy and severe face whose main characteristic was a thin mustache goaded disproportionately large for the size of his aquiline face. Of all the sons of Leonidas Farfan, Elias, the Prefect, was the most skillful in business and the only one that still remained in the village. The rest, seven in total, three women and four men, or had gone out, or had been married or had died, leaving him as the sole administrator of the vast property of the family.

A lot was said of the supposed honor of the gentleman and the dishonest and rigged works he used to perform in order to get his way. Recently, he was embarked on a project to develop a hotel center whose profits would go directly to his pocket. Saint Andre inhabitants, very

suspicious with their natural resources, knew that the proverbial quietness of the emplacement would be seriously affected by the development. However, the Prefect, skillful and unprincipled man, had gotten the approval of Father Tobias, of the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Conception, whose sermons addressed to the locals warned of eternal damnation and the gnashing of teeth that awaited them in hell if they did not take advantage of the draft. In the words of the cleric, just under the divine guidance (read the Prefect Farfan) the people would reach a state of permanent bliss and welfare. Even went so far as to remove the image of the Oratory of Saint Cipriano, donated at the beginning of 1930 by the then founder, Barabas Contreras, under the pretext of restoration work. A few days later, a new image was placed in the Chapel, with suspiciously similar features to Farfan's. The chin and the saint's cheekbones were swept and substituted for the squared jaw of the aforementioned, aside from the pricked mustache. But who would come up with the idea of thinking that saints have whiskers? It is a convention that celestial imagery does not suffer from the very mundane condition of growth of hair in his parts. All literature and classical arts offer us beardless, hairless figures, with faces on the verge of the ecstasy of suffering. No artist of the epoch would have ever dared at least to recreate some indication of pleasure on the Empyrean faces. Similar aberration would have been considered like an act of insubordination of faith, sinful, and without a doubt, out of consent. The old village women protested to the parish priest emphasizing that the lascivious stare of the Saint made them feel uncomfortable and that the smile replete of teeth was improper for Cipriano's solemnity. Nothing of his new appearance was divine, and with the "Saint" extirpation from his name and the subsequent degradation of the Saint to the mundane kingdom, they began to call him simply "Cipriano". As their protests were not heard, the old women did not have another remedy than transferring their devotion to another martyr, Saint Anthony, of more divine appearance.

Father Tobias used to spice up his sermons with details of all the calamities that might happen to the faithful to be seduced by the supernatural; as if the eternal torment were not enough, his allegories of the misery of hell with diligent detailed thoroughness, seemed to have the desired effect given the face of terror that exhibited his parishioners during the sermons trippers.

However, this fear was not extended to the Prefect Farfan, who attended to the masses only by his desire to gain support for his next nomination as mayor.

Mrs. Tula recovered from the surprise.

-I was walking around, and thought I could come to see the renovations

that have been done to the hotel - Said stressing the commentary with the eyes - It is noticeable the good taste! Sure your hands are in the whole affair! - Said flattering.

The Prefect puffed with pride. Nothing more encouraging for a politician than the comments covered with syrup of his voters.

-Yes, it is true, yes! - Said the Prefect by dragging his hands by the thin lapel of his cashmere suit newly brought from Europe - We spent a good hot stuff in this but the investment will be recovered as soon as I am elected mayor. Or, who knows? Maybe Governor?

Tula looked at him with surprise opening the orbits of her pop eyes and laying her hand on the politician's forearm, giving him a small squeeze of approval.

-Hopefully, your words will come true. No one else in Saint Andre can bear that title with more honor than you! I am not mistaken when I say that many of the inhabitants of this village believe that you have the conditions to qualify for the post. You are one of our own, as the peasants say, a truly representative of our town. In addition, you are elegant and distinguished. You could become Major or Governor if you propose. I have always thought that the Major and the Governor must live in the village. Otherwise, how are they going to know the things that we need here, don't you think?

-I am sure, Mrs. Tula! And that is something that we are going to remedy soon. Saint Andre must have its own Major and its own Governor and they should live here, in the town - Said sharpening his mustache with devotion.

-You are right, Prefect! The puppets of the city do not know of the problems that we, the people of town, have here. You have all of the attributes to be a good ruler. Nobody in this village can say the opposite! Count on my vote! - And saying these words she murmured some goodbye sentences and was bound for the way out. It was not convenient that a distinguished person like the Prefect discovered her smelling out what she has not lost. Later, there would be another opportunity to find out who the visitors were.

However, within the limits of her ignorance, she walked away thinking about how Farfan had been elected as Prefect if in Saint Andre there had never been elections!

Accusing Gertrude and her granddaughter Leticia of heartless would be discourteous. They far outweighed the definitions of the word. What strange predisposition of fate placed us in such crazy hands? I don't know! Destiny as an evil stepmother often concealed under the cloak of the most incredible futility its inconsistencies. Neither a maximum-security prison would apply the restrictive measures of freedom that the elderly woman with so much pleasure imposed on us. Within two days

of being in The Borrascosa, we already knew we were not welcomed.

Gertrude Zing, was as boring as the community in which she lived, her physiognomy comprised a stooped hump, a skeletal contexture and a rigid neck which made her look as if she was eternally cloistered in a harness. Added to this singular collection of attributes, was a rough and touchy manner. Dressed outlandish clothes bought in second-hand stores and used exaggerated makeup like the one belonging to a theater actress, provoking quite a large number of rumors and gossiping to her step for the town's tumbledown street; all related with her physical appearance and with her sustenance's source.

Her granddaughter, Leticia, was not very different, of scarce beauty, if there was any one; she was spoiled and manipulating, so stiff like her grandmother, as if a wire supported her feet forever. Nevertheless, all these particularities would have been ignored easily by the sharp observer, if they had been accompanied of an affable and affectionate character or a humble spirit.

She lived her messed up existence pursuing one objective only and, I have to confess at risk of being unveiling family secrets, the fact was that her dream involved finding a prestigious husband, whose fortune surpassed by more those of the other rich family in the zone, to keep her embedded in the earthly pleasures of affluence and notoriety. That was the only reason why she attended Straton School in search of one naive man who walks voluntarily toward the altar. This dream also was shared by her grandmother.

The Zing lived on a modest pension that they inherited of a distant relative. They never had worked neither they were planning to do it, but liked to show off of an abundance of fortune that no one possessed. The last thing of their deceits occurred an April Thursday, at the San Isidro's fair, at twelve fifteen in the afternoon. Tired of the tenacious indifference they suffered from the different personalities of the town, and in a long shot to pluck up the Prefect Farfan's respect, whom Gertrude had thrown the eye like future husband for her granddaughter, they expanded the rumor of a supposed inheritance that included, among other properties, an exuberant mine of gold located in the depths of a Latin American country, whose income would be soon received to live like queens. Pervert the day that lies speak in, the truth is separated to observe, unarmed, in the meantime, the small monster of deceit grows in its perfidy! The fear that the people of the town knew the truth maintained Gertrude sleepless three days a week and Leticia recessed in a state of anxiety that preserving her mood all the time.

As the day of our arrival approached, the old woman's worry was on the increase. How would she explain our presence in her home? On the other hand, Leticia, making use of the limited vocabulary that

characterizes her, helped by the convincing resource of the tantrum and the kicking made it clear that we were not wanted in the mansion, and Gertrude, in an irrefutable start of generosity said that she would keep us away.

-They are girls brought up in the city with delinquents and criminals and who knows what trickery would bring! – The woman thought.

On the supposed mine, they already had decided to maintain their lies, and the wealth parapet that they had sketched in front of their acquaintances and friends up to the last consequences, despite the suspicions of some unbelievers who had started to doubt that the famous gold mine existed.

To the sound of a cricket and toads serenade that was bursting in intermittently the nighttime quietness, the night danced conquering space, taking possession of the vigil of all of the residents of the town; with the exception of Gertrude who was walking around hitting the floor of her room with the twisted cane, overworked as herself. She had reached the night and the open window sparkled with the titillating light of the village street lamps.

An old, flaky mirror returned the shadow of her stooped silhouette. Stopped and sat in the rocking chair, exacerbated in her machinations. Suddenly her face brightened up with the expression of those who find an idea: She would locate the sisters in the basement! Why didn't she think of that before? She patted herself on the back for her impeccable judgment, ignoring the moral consideration. What better place than the basement? With the useless pieces of junk, rats and cockroaches!

Once she made her decision, felt much better. Walked up to the mahogany and wrought iron bed and dropped on the pink satin sheets. Minutes after she fell asleep, without realizing that on the window an immense black cat was examining all her movements. The animal walked out of the window and was bound for the compact shrubs of the garden in two leaps getting lost in the blackness of the night under the moon dug of clouds.

Two days after our arrival, the miracle occurred. Gertrude's stingy spirit sympathized and decided to give us the long-awaited interview. She urged us to find her in the small sitting room of the house, the one that was foregoing to the large room and whose access was forbidden to us.

If I ever had reservations about the integrity of the nature of my guardian, on that occasion all my doubts were clarified. At the door, we remained standing, as dictated by the education and good manners, under the threshold of the aisle arc as planted pine trees, patiently waiting for the invitation to get in. Instantly, Gertrude looked up and (left-hand rose with the five fingers pointing to the skies) indicated us

with a sudden sign that we should stop. This warning was, moreover, vain and useless, because we had been suspended in the shuttle for a while in the border between the hallway and the living room.

Meanwhile, Gertrude kept on checking the documents that were placed in her right hand. In the meantime, the other one, the left hand, continued her walled work to separate our worlds from hers. That was enough for Beatrice who had the patience of a grain-rice size, getting upset as the old woman continued to be imperturbable, enraptured in her documents. Beatrice's bubbling temper, for the lack of courtesy shown by the old woman, decided to pounce up to the nearest chair, dragging to Mariana, and pushing the full weight of her humanity on the Louis XV style furniture that was lying next to an oak dresser that had been exhibiting vases. She sat down Mariana on her legs.

-Come on, Camila! - Shouted at me from there - Take a seat while our grandma ends!

Ah! ... No one like Beatrice to spice up the evening with sarcasm! They were so accurate and timely, not a surfeit or a point or a comma, and with the precise intonation as corresponds to a good sarcasm.

Immediately, the woman lifted a cold gaze. The ferocious expression that crossed her face would have been sufficient to terrify the bravest person, but not to Beatrice, no, she continued impassive without the slightest indication of a cessation of hostilities. The woman held the gaze as if she would like to send my sister to hell, the same did my sister and continued to do so, firmly holding the gaze, until the other began to cry. Right after blinking, Gertrude took another second and went away walking little by little to the chimney, where she laid the papers on a shelf. Obviously, our presence displeased her and made no effort at all to dissimulate it. Meantime, I already had gotten close to my sisters and waited next to them.

The old woman and the cane gave some steps up to be placed in front of us:

-Thanks to my generosity I have decided to accommodate all of you under my roof. As you know, your grandfather did not let me rents or properties that allow me to survive decently. One could say that our separation was not friendly. Thanks to legal gadgets he invaded all marital property, leaving me alone and helpless to my fate. Even while living in this house, his lawyers did not stop harassing us. However, given my big heart, which Father Tobias can attest for the countless charitable works in which I have participated in the parish, and some others that are not worth mentioning, but not less important, I have decided to leave aside the bitterness and offer you shelter in my humble abode.

I began to feel uneasy. What she was insinuating about the conduct

of my grandfather was far from the truth. I watched her with amazement. In addition, the treatment that we had been dispensed from the moment we walked through the door was inconsistent with the "generous" words which she sprung up in her mouth.

-Thank you for your generosity, Gertrude, but this arrangement is only temporary. In six months, I will have the majority of age and will be able to have the properties that our grandfather bequeathed us, according to what was informed by Dr. Contreras, our lawyer. As these properties include The Borrascosa, therefore, by virtue of what was mentioned, I require that our baggage be sent immediately to our rooms.

She looked at me contorted, annoyed for the audacity of my requirement and was getting ready to put back. Beatrice and Mariana held their breath.

-That is not going to be possible! You were already told that all rooms are taken up - She answered back squeezing her hands - Besides, The Borrascosa belongs to me. My lawyers are in these moments appealing to the testament and working to make my right counts.

Those words pronounced with the tone of defamation boomed in my ears. For a moment, my words became clogged up in my throat and stayed there without being born. I got dumb, which was infrequent, in other words, no frequent at all and it was the first time that it happened. And in this suspended state, such as the one who wants to but cannot, I stayed a few seconds. Then, to my surprise, I found myself splutter the following:

-That cannot be possible! Our grandfather would have told us!

-True! Old witch! - Beatrice concluded recovering her habitual composure.

-Do you dare to call me a liar? Ungrateful girls! - She spat out the words moved by anger, her eyelids rose to join up almost with her eyebrows and her mouth arched in a glassy grin that was expectorating all kinds of foolishness.

-The pension that I would receive from your lawyers would hardly be sufficed to cover your expenses, so you will have to collaborate with some of the tasks of the house - and when she said these last words walked away from us, fearing a violent reaction on our part.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing! What a nerve! What foolishness! I made futile efforts to dominate my justified embarrassment. Beatrice and Mariana had remained silent. It was one thing that she will try to steal our property. That sort of behavior, although immoral and punishable, was something that my discernment, to a certain point, could understand under determined circumstances; but another thing, very different, was that of the material stripping she

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added the emotional stripping that summarizing was what Gertrude was done with us, taking away our pride of being part of a privileged class to throw us with humiliation into the servants' staff, accomplishing the housework of our own mansion.

-Are you crazy? Old witch! - Reacted Beatrice rising from the chair, dropping Mariana during the action.

-I won't move a finger in this house. I was not born to be a servant. I never, never, never, will do that!

The shouts were heard in the kitchen and the servants gathered trying to find out the cause of the melee, but not daring to get close to the lounge.

-Who do you think you are? A princess? – Leticia recited these words as she walked down the stair parsimoniously. We turned over toward the voice.

-This is my granddaughter, Leticia. The only young lady of this house – claimed Gertrude. The one you must respect and serve.

-Respect and serve? No way! - Reverberated Beatrice while I was making efforts to stop her from shouting curses.

Leticia stepped down and walked with flamboyance toward her grandmother and her cane. Her insolence appeared overwhelmed on her skeletal figure when she crossed the room with a vaporous gray poplin dress, adorned with wild flowers that looked very sad and desolate, and the white platform shoes that seemed plaster columns imprisoning her footprints supporting her wimpy legs about to splintering, were too high for my liking. Her indolence and laziness continued unfolding in that small room, such as a constant downpour on a winter night. Leticia smiled mockingly backed by the authoritative voice of Gertrude who recited the creed as a list of our obligations: we were not invited; therefore we were supposed to do certain chores to pay our livelihood.

The arbitrary list of assignments got distributed this way: Mariana, directed for the old man Juancho, would help to feed the chickens and the horses and if it was required, the pigs. Beatrice was assigned under Ño' Josefina's direct supervision of the kitchen and I would help the ineffable Leticia, who interpreted my arrival like a personal quick slave's acquisition to please her more insignificant and capricious desires.

Gertrude, whose upwind mentality echo her foundations in the customs of the fifteenth century, looked on with very bad eyes the newly acquired freedoms of the female gender, i.e. the right to vote, to be educated and to search for a husband for her own account. For her, the woman's place was in the house, along with the husband, to whom should subjugate herself with the resigned submission of a southern slave. She also informed that we would be registered at Straton School,

only because it was an indispensable requirement established by our lawyers to dispense the money of our expenses.

However, she made it clear her disagreement with this clause. Nevertheless, in order to make our existence more miserable, she instructed the kind-hearted Ño Josefina to submerging us in the useless world of sewing and embroidery, not to expand our intellectual or manual qualities but to keep us cloistered, without the chance to go out of the house and see people.

I must admit, without being ashamed and as we discovered later, that in these occupations we were exceedingly neophyte. The four dressed-up centimeters of fingernails with Beatrice's most exquisite crimson polish made it impossible that she hold a needle, much less pulling out any definite form to the tangle of threads which were lined up in her lap, as a revelry of strands twisted and intertwined with each other. In the end, our art works seemed to be the work of feudal peasants; they lacked the glare that gives them the enthusiasm and the sweet touch of the well done things, with the exception of Mariana's, of course, who as I explained, had the manual dexterity of a Da'Vinci and a Miguel Angel together; and if this seems an exaggeration, I could only justify myself by alluding to the assumption that my perception may have been clouded by my exaggerated love toward her.

After Gertrude completed her bitter litany and emphasized the sort of behavior that was expected from us, at the end, she ended the meeting and ordered our withdrawal. I took Beatrice and Mariana and pull them out of the living room instinctively and walked up to the basement under Beatrice's exclamations of indignation and the fun of Mariana chuckle.

There, with the door ajar, was expecting the bold face Salome, with avid curiosity and the soul smeared with anticipation. She did not have to ask how the meeting was as she already heard Beatrice's outrageous exclamation which vehemently portrayed the situation properly.

-How is it possible that they treat us like this? How do you let them get away with this? All this belongs to us! Do you know it as well! – Beatrice returned to lash out against me.

-I know, but at the moment we cannot fight against Gertrude.

How do you explain to the emotions the opinions of the reasoning? Vain task since its inception and a foolishness to try it. There was no way to make it clear to my harebrained sister that in some occasions, the best strategy was to surrender, not for the purpose of surrender itself, but rather to bring together the forces needed to lunge and subsequently ensure the victory, which, like in any game, the verdict is enacted only at the end of the contest. But at that time, it was difficult to find the precise words to calm down her impetuous spirit.

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-Would you take the chance to be separated from each other and being sent to any public charity institution? Ah? Ah? Six months is a short period of time and soon I will be eighteen, and old enough to go back to live in the city. Our home is waiting for us. In the meanwhile all of us must do what they want us to do and seek alternatives to get out of this rut!

My words seemed to achieve the desired effect because appeased her outburst, sought refuge in a disabled chair that lay sustained by some stilts improvised tied to two wires.

-I like the task they gave me - said the sweet Mariana.

-You would have liked everything! - Replied Beatrice strongly - even if you had been sent to clean latrines!

After a while of bickering, we agreed to do what we had been asked. Then, we lay on the mattress and there, in the depths of the cloister, I tried to say some words of encouragement:

-Let's look at the positive side - I said - they don't send us to clean latrines!

My sisters and the bold face Salome addressed me an interrogative look but they failed to understand the optimistic sense of my words.

3 - THE MANSION OF THE WITCH ZARNIA

One day something unusual and curious happened that predisposed to all the people against us. Although there were other incidents, also of a strange nature, being ourselves the only strangers in the area, the occurrence of such events was attributed entirely to our authorship.

The days passed all the same in that small and lost community where the Mondays looked very similar to the Saturdays and Sundays, but to tell the truth, also to the other days of the week, so, the weeks were all the same as the months and the months the same as the years. Fridays, however, had a slight change, the rustic tavern opened at seven instead of nine.

The parishioners, drunk and sweaty, that arrived in the early hours of the night to flood the extensive bar after a long day at work, seemed to exhibit a festive touch that did not have any other day. This way the gatherings proceeded with the drunkenness of the alcohol and the smoke from the rustic handmade cigars.

In some cases, the gossiping was so captivating and fascinating that the men stayed in the bar until the early morning and many times, even the afternoon of the following day, when some full of tribulation wives should have to go out of their houses with the suffocating heat to fetch the husbands that could not go back home for their own steps. Staggering, to the sight of the entire town, they accomplished the Way of the Cross of the tavern to home, escorted for the woman and the children in procession, under the devout persons' recriminatory look as they were thanking God not having to fight with similar husbands. The unfortunate still had to bear the irritated rebukes of her spouse, whispered in low voice, between teeth, so they would not be audible by another public outside the family. Exalted in the light of the day, the

stroke looked more like a felony.

This Friday, however, something unusual happened: the old mansion of the Witch Zarnia immersed in a chaos of twisted thickets, vines and vermin, began to be transformed without apparent reason. From the road, one could see the old structure wracked by the wet and mud, ivy breaded that dragged its arms like snakes across the moldy brick surface, as if a hand were covering the whole of the structure. From the windows, pieces of fabrics, that once were white, fluttered as flags of old pirate ships but now exhibiting the rusty, brown and greenish nuances of a long-term neglect in the open air; the entry sweep was bent and rusty as an old man bowed by the weight of the years.

No one had lived in the house since the disappearance of the witch fifty years ago, no one had come forward to claim it; nor was there in the village any mortal who dared to live in the haunted mansion of the dreaded sorceress.

One day the witch disappeared without notice and never returned to the town. That Friday, however, the ivy and the weeds also disappeared from the house, as if an invisible hand had started to clean during the night. The windows offered a brilliance that only the water and the soap could give and the fetid sludge that settled in the garden was replaced by a carpet of daisies and sunflowers that danced merrily to the rhythm of the wind, giving away their vaunted perfumes. An ostentatious green grass had been perched also, graciously, all over the ground. All sign of decrepitude had been cleared overnight.

The locals, alarmed as they were due to this unusual event, began to speculate on what might be happening in the mansion.

So from the gossip of the early pregnancy of the laundress daughter, Matilde, without a known husband or boyfriend, they passed to the morbid speculation about the reasons for the strange event. For their part, the devout women of the sacristy, trained for Father Tobias's prodigious verbosity, were inclined to think than something diabolical or lustful was hiding at the mansion.

One of the ladies dared to suggest that there might be a Latin American drug trafficker coming to Saint Andre to escape from the justice finger; another said that it was a famous actress escaping the brutal harassment of paparazzi's, but were muffled promptly by the midwives of the church that had thought that the theory of the devil or the lust was better.

The four corners of the town, the bakery, the hotel and the grocery store, the usual places of meeting, were stained of rumors about the return of the witch to the valley, or maybe, of a member of her family that had come back to demand the right to live in the house.

But a week had passed and nobody had shown up at the town. Worried

and pressed for the inhabitants, the Commissary, that was aspiring to obtain a governmental position next to the Prefect Farfan in the next elections, was compelled to send off the two only and tumbledown officials that was having in his care, that stood out not quite to be a model of courage, in order to investigate the strange event. Next morning, with small-town reluctance, they appeared in person at the surroundings of the house; adverted with rumbling but nobody answered them. The door was without a latch. They entered trouble-free and made a revision of rooms, one by one, but they did not find anything suspicious. All they saw was an immensely very clean house, with modern furniture and prime quality finishing, but not any trail of the witch or other person.

-They must be spirits - commented one of the guards in the tavern later
- My aunt Clotilde said that the souls in grief could move objects in this world!

-Don't be silly! – The bartender answered caustically - How many spirits have you seen that like to clean and washing? Not even cleanliness is a pleasant task for the living! If I am a ghost, I would not be in the living's world doing the cleaning, not, mister. That I can assure you! If I am a spectrum, I would look for a good tavern, and from there, not even Saint Peter with all his court would be able to take me out! – He came to an end with a horselaugh.

-To me, that is the work of the girls that are staying at Gertrude's house
- Added the bartender's woman at the time she served several jars of foamed beers among the usual clients, making incredible juggling because the site was much crowded and made the transit very difficult.

-This town has lived in peace since the witch disappeared; and now those girls come and everything starts all over again!

A moist environment was pullulating at the bar for the sweat of the bodies and the vapors of the running cigars, fertile space for the propagation of the more farfetched rumors.

-That is so true! – Agreed a thin man with scarcity of teeth that was drinking liquor in the bar.

- We must watch those witches. Gertrude must take action! - Said.

Nothing like a good piece of gossip to uniform the judgment and the opinions. And in this case, they all agreed to attribute the fault on the strangers.

At the bottom of the tavern at a solitary table, under the shelter of the semi-darkness that concealed his face, The Executioner turned to sip his favorite pure-rum drink, as the “true man drinks it! – Used to say – Pure and without anesthesia!

He was trying to find the girls, as Zarnia requested it, however, he had had no luck since the girls did not leave The Borrascosa very often, but

that did not prevent him to remove patchworks of information from the inhabitants. Between swallows and swallows, the group that was going on the rise, followed its amenable conference on Gertrude's girls.

-It is said that the girls will attend the Straton School. That means that they intend to stay a long time! – Continued saying the bartender's woman - and not of leisure as Gertude said initially.

-Straton, eh? – The Executioner, scratching his chin with pleasure, smiled. It would be much easier for him to observe them. The man did not know why the witch had so much interest in the girls, as neither he knew why the witch disappeared fifty years ago although during this time he had received occasional messages from her through her cat, Frosenblack, with instructions to accomplish some tasks.

No one remembered exactly how he came to town. Suddenly appeared, at the time when Saint Andre was a little town surrounded by mountains and snakes all over and Father Tobias was still a child who liked getting wet with the swampy puddles left by the October's rains, throwing stones at the innocent birds that landed at the trees and running playfully after the iguanas to take out their eggs. When The Executioner arrived was almost seventeen and arrived alone.

The only baggage he brought was a bunch of little lice adhered to his compact hair jumping off the head and that boasted of, without a doubt, several days without receiving the visit of a soap. He established in a small house in front of the market, paying the leasing with some gold little coins, but long after the people knew his connection with the dark arts, it was said that he had a deal with the Devil who provided him with everything he needed. The first month he occupied refilling cracks, cleaning debris and accomplishing one than another plumber's little work. Soon he realized that would not subsist with those small tasks. It was then when the locals began to see him in the unlucky company of the enchantress Zarnia, to whom he supplied all of the elements necessary in order to accomplish her spells and enchantments, broadening his reputation of the laborer of the dark forces. When the witch disappeared, people stopped seeing him around the village.

Bad guy the aforementioned The Executioner, the beasts trembled to his pace, the horses shivered of fear and getting rid of their ties ran away from town to get lost of his sight. The Devil! and the devout women ran to hide under the roofs of their houses making the sign of the cross. The Devil! And Father Tobias left the church spraying blessed water on the colored houses, streets and on all the parishioners' heads. Father Tobias was very judicious and no head got never missing of the dedicated exorcism.

-That man has a pact with the Devil! - People said with hints of mystery.

-That's why the evil forces serve him; or,

-That man has no blood in his veins only sulfur spreads to his step. For good or bad, each inhabitant of the valley was adding more and more iniquities to the initial comment, with contributions each time more ghostly and demonic; and The Executioner came to form part of the set of living spectra that wandered, capriciousness, as souls in torment, the prodigious valley of Saint Andre.

The Executioner loved his life in town. How not to love it? It was a place buried in time, an enclave in the interception of two big mountains with its well-known Sunday market, its dispensary, its school, its church and its prefecture, all orbiting around the San Isidro Plaza, integrated perfectly with the magnificence of the surroundings. During the winter months, Saint Andre remained isolated from the rest of the world by the incessant rain that transformed its roads in dangerous traps of mud, impossible to transit.

He adored walking barefacedly on the dusty paths and the blackened, simple, gentle and strong streets that did not have the pretensions of the big city avenues. He fed his ego with the people's fear, which instinctively dislodged the sidewalk to leave him free road and not having to see him face to face. He liked that sensation, confused it with respect. Soon things will change! -Thought with joy - With the witch's return, another will be the story of this town and the glory of old times will come back.

Frosenblack had contacted him some weeks ago with the witch's urgent message to stay alert to her return. His services would be required again to full-time; he was also informed that he should monitor Montero sisters and The Executioner was not asked twice, much less of the sorceress Zarnia, for which he was always ready and willing, whatever the task at hand.

The days passed by to become months and, happily the longed day for our return to our dear city approached. During that time of eternal and immemorial annoyance, we became as adapted as we could to the boring routine of the house and to the village rigidity. Its inhabitants were still treating us with rude indifference, we were still the "girls of the city", crazy and neurotic. We had no friends; however the singular beauty of Beatrice had endeavored to a handful of admirers, of whom we knew how to take advantage when the occasion was required. And the occasion was required on Saturdays and Sundays, at three o'clock, the only days that Gertrude consented we leave the mansion to avoid the uncomfortable questions about us from her invited bridge guests, which allowed us to take a walk and disobey her orders as much as we want.

A Sunday's afternoon, the bold face Salome kicked about to get his mother's permission to accompany us to our habitual walk to the town.

On the dot we were both settled and perfumed, as corresponds to all young city ladies, with our flashy and modern dresses, a little exaggerated for the small-town life, but that for us we thought that they seated us very chic. The bold face Salome appeared with an exotic clothing of big fuchsias and orange flowers on a white background with a ribbon around her waist that ended with a huge red bow in the back, and that made it impossible to pass unnoticed, like a walking garden of petunias and daisies.

When we were leaving for town, Bartolomeo, the puppy Chihuahua with complex of San Bernardo, with a tendency to perform illogical and irrational acts, joined us. As I had said, Mariana felt a deep devotion for animals. From the day she found Bartolomeo almost dying, skeletal and full of fleas in the San Isidro Plaza, she had never been separated from him. At times he had tried to slip by to the basement with us, but Ño Josefina had a bloodhound smell sense much better trained than the one belonging to him and was always found, and dislodged without commiserations. Much had to beg Mariana in order that Ño Josefina authorized his stay in the property, since Bartolomeo lacked of the charms of pedigree dogs. The doggie, on the other hand, seemed to be a combination of rat and armadillo to which had been stolen lots of skin and hair, insinuating a clear-cut rib cage. It did not help him the fact that, either for grief or gratitude, he was always barking as a soul in pain. This was the reason why the woman was on the brink of retracting from the decision that it enabled him to remain at the house, away from Gertrude's and Leticia's alert eyes.

The rest of the service staff had also joined this conspiracy of concealment. Mariana, in the top of her excessive love for everything that had four legs, made an exception and also adopted to a hen of the poultry whom she baptized with the melodious name of "Filomena".

Having realized that the white meat, which appeared, delicious, on her plate each time coincided with the disappearance of a hen of the poultry, she undertook the prodigious task of rescuing Filomena, as a symbolism in representation of the salvation of the whole chicken species. Therefore, she proceeded to the kidnapping and Filomena was incarcerated in the basement, in an attempt to save her from perishing stewed or baked in a sea of vegetables and cilantro. Filomena was the most flirtatious hen of the county. Filomena's hooves were painted with crimson red polish, the same used by Beatrice in her wanderings. Filomena's neck was adorned with cannula necklaces detached from old outfits that were lying in powdered boxes in the basement. Filomena slept in a luxury box upholstered in plush pink color with a thicker wool blue blanket, elaborated and woven especially for her. Filomena was sprinkled with the finest perfume that my younger sister Mariana

subtracted from Leticia's drawer, when she absented to her boring piano lessons on Tuesdays and Thursdays. No Josefina did not cease to repeat:

-Mariana! Stop spraying perfume to that animal, that you are going to spoil the meat!

Mariana firmly replied that Filomena was part of the family and that under no circumstances she would be served as dinner. No Josefina watched her full of concern, but in the end she always gave way to the girl's supplications. This way, Filomena was staying and staying in the basement, and even Bartolomeo became used to her presence as part of the set of beings that lived in The Borrascosa basement.

The forest was expanded of spring, in brutal competition with the bold face Salome's dress, a flow of forget-me-not flowers trimmed the edge of the path that was taken to the town, and next to them, petunias and white lilies, plenteous of spectacular colorings, they bloomed in scattered bunches, under the envious look of the curled branches of the trees. Imposing oak trees extended their arms to the sky like asking for help and closing the road with their shade, leaving a few chinks where vibrating sun's skeletal rays slid. Free and fresh, the air sweetened the humid land that accepted our footsteps, as they sank soiling our white-hide slippers, now rimmed with a narrow mud necklace.

-Will we go by the Ice Cream Parlor of the old man Torres? – Mariana asked.

-I do not see why not! We always went by! – Beatrice answered raising the nose and moving the fan to drive away the heat and the insects that were crossing the road.

The Ice Cream shop of the old Torres was a little red house located in front of the San Isidro Plaza, opposite to the residence of The Executioner. From the outside, one could see the display cases tinted with the variety of existent ice creams inviting to an immediate testing. Some little tables dressed with red and white tablecloth were placed on the sidewalk and with chairs with white skirt, seemed to ballerina tutus. They completed the furniture of so prestigious store.

As we did not have money to buy the succulent ice creams and the old man Torres did not have pity to dispense for the penniless customers, whom he drove away under a mantle of insults shouted at the top of his lungs, with the recommendation of "do not return until you have enough money to pay my merchandise". But Mr. Torres's son had gotten attached to Beatrice and he managed himself to slide the most exquisite ice creams of nougat to us, buried under a thick cream cape of almonds, when the father's scrutinizing look allowed it, accepting as the only payment for so appetizing viands the most splendid one of Beatrice's smiles. With this trade, we were more than satisfied and

considered our account paid. Mariana was not in accordance with the way we got our Saturday snacks but the strong licks given to the ice cream cone decreased a little the weight of her conscience.

Also Mr. Tula's robust nephew was part of the admirers of my sister. He subtracted from the bakery of his aunt some delicious stuffed beige pastry cook's buns, whose aroma bounced for the town houses attracting the most demanding palates. The boy waited for us at the Plaza, kicking the sidewalk from top to bottom, and from the bottom to top, in an attempt to control the nerves produced in him by the most beautiful village girl, as he called for Beatrice.

From the distance, we could see the boy with gray pants and a strident linen shirt whose buttons threatened to go off toward the parsonage and fragrant shoes so varnished that shone like wet. However, we did not care much about the way he was dressed, but the brown bag he was balancing rhythmically to the sound of his steps. While we tasted the succulent buns that still were preserving the warmth of the oven and exuded a tenuous aroma of cinnamon, we offered some precious minutes of conversation with the boy, before undertaking the way back to The Borrascosa. This ritual repeated all of the Saturdays and Sundays but the sweetness of the ice creams and buns lasted all week.

That particular afternoon we were delayed and walked around avoiding the surrounding noise of the market, stumbling once in a while with the people that were in buying trifles. I was dragging along my sister Beatrice who, with great difficulty, could keep a steady step and yelled because of my impetuosity, since she wanted to stop to admire the delicate silver bracelet imitation that Mrs. Esther was exhibiting with so much pride in her weakling table. The last vestiges of the sun made the bracelets shine like diamonds in crystalline waters. Although she knew that there was no money for so outlandish pleasures, she liked to have fun trying on the jewels that her imaginary husband someday would give her as presents. Mariana and the bold face Salome walked hurriedly behind us and at their own risk.

From the window of the Prefecture, Mr. Elias Farfan observed the young girls walking by the market. The very same Prefect had brooded over the idea of becoming Beatrice's husband, after the death of her wife Lucrecia turned him into, according to his own words, the most coveted bachelor of Saint Andre.

Other eyes also followed them. Apolinar Garcia, confessed womanizer of crude manners with three marriages on his back and a lot of boys planted throughout the town, was hanging around the drugstore talking with the owner about the recent developments in the village. With a beer in the hand and in the other an improvised fan of newspapers, the one that was intended to drive away the suffocating heat with, he was

when the young girl's apparition grabbed his lustful vision.

-Those girls definitely are angels! I would like to visit that house full of beautiful women! What a pleasure! - He commented with roguery, between sip and sip - Oh! Who would say that Gennaro would produce granddaughters so beautiful... and so alone? It is a pity that he cannot see them now so grown-up!

- Come on! Put your feet on the ground, buddy! Poor people do not eat meat! No Josefina is the very devil in person when it comes to protecting those girls. Last week, Cipriana's grandson, Evaristo, tried to bring some flowers to one of them, and the women, after the customary warnings and having the boy disobeyed her warning, released the dog, which is very small but barked a lot, and made him run some miles away until he entered the town. He was left with more desires to keep on looking for what he had not lost - He said jocularly.

-I would not care to seize the biting by a dog for those girls! Hope is the last thing that goes away - Answered with a smile on his lips and the coquettish expression of a teenager, staring after the girls until they got away from town.

4 - AND THEN ARRIVED THE PUMPKINS

The inhabitants of Saint Andre were terrified. That morning huge pumpkins appeared in all the gardens of the community. These pumpkins crushed the red and yellow carnations that often danced coquettishly in the gardens and which were the pride of its inhabitants.

And what was the explanation given by the inhabitants to such event? Nothing more and nothing less than "that" was "our" fault! They threw the blame on us! They thought that WE did it! We! That came from the city, and knew nothing about agriculture. We! That did not know what or how to plant a tuber; much less take a grill or a rake. We! That mixed the studs with the artichokes. I had never seen such absurd! That was the kind of reasoning that made towns remained towns and not cities!

-This is the end of the world! – Shouted Mrs. Tula, hands raised to the head, looking at the giant pumpkin that had grown in her hallway. She cautiously approached and measured it with her body, it reached up to the waist. She went out into the street flipping and screaming howls. Already on the outside, she saw that other pumpkins had also flooded the gardens of her neighbors, protruding the bulky bales orange all over the place. Immediately she went into the house and taking the phone started to call all their friends, who went to her residence without delay. A small commission headed by the same Tula went immediately to the Father Tobias's house, where he, sleepy and blear, received them in the little living room that preceded his Office. It was the typical colonial house, with its ancient rooms, which smelled as camphor pills and burned-out kerosene, the moth-eaten wood windows on walls eternally chipped by the humidity of the last rains and the infallible paved hallway.

Saint Andre has always been surrounded by superstitions and legends,

“The Gutting of the Coffee Plantation”, for example, as the pawns named to a supposed appearance that hovered in the fields the nights of full moon, ascribing the sophisticated power to snatch the life of any mortal who stands in its way; the Whistler of the Dead Person Corner, slippery specter that ran playfully after his victims with the stranger and picturesque habit to whistle them at the ear, and the popular “Sayona”, woman of exuberant assiduous beauty which used to walk for solitary places in search of unfaithful husbands to kill those incautious entertained in the amatory arts. In the days when these apparitions walked through the land, the panic overshadowed the good judgment and the peasants were locked in their hovels refusing to work. The timely intervention of Father Tobias by performing an improvised ceremony of exorcism restored their faith and the courage to continue in the work. However, they had never been victims of a pumpkin invasion, or heard of a similar event had ever occurred in other towns.

-But Tula – Father Tobias gripped and sat down in one of the chairs upholstered in a faux leather material, of those that when one moves make embarrassing sounds and inviting the ladies to sit, he asked with obstinacy:

-What brings you here at this hour? I am barely awakening!

The old woman prepared to expose her story herself. Although she did not recognize it, this type of situations satisfied her enormously since they offered the occasion to exhibit her histrionic talent.

-Something very seriously is happening, Father! -The woman opened her eyes and whispered - The evil is taking possession of this town little by little - Said pointing out the index finger to the small amount of town that was shown in the window - Unless we do something soon, even the very same Satan will be giving your sermons at your church.

The Father stood up before the mention of the unmentionable, crossing himself and then returned to sit.

-Do not blaspheme, my daughter, don't be alarmed, Tula. Now what is happening?

-The devil, Father. The devil! The evil came to this town when those Gertrude's girls arrived - She said.

The parish priest looked up toward the roof like clamoring divine God's presence and some of his infinite patience. More for his disenchantment, what he found in the roof was a chipped surface roaring for the caress of one coat of paint. It was not easy to be that community's chaplain. Either by ignorance or inability to recognize the good paths of life, the truth was that the faithful people appeared at his residence under the most cursory pretext, at the most inconvenient hours, with the irrefutable excuse to obtain his wise advice, ranging from spiritual areas up to any other emerged from the improvisation.

-But, Tula. Those girls are just kids! Where is your Christian vocation? Tula didn't know where her Christian vocation was but what she knew was that the submissive attitude of the Father was driving the town to the next Apocalypse. She felt an irreverent desire to beat him and shake him and, by closing ominously the fists, almost was about to do so, but was repressed at the last minute thinking that this would be an impediment to entry into the world of the heavens at the time of exhaling the last breath and meet again with her deceased husband.

-Ouch, Tomas - she complained to herself in a very low voice - I wish that you really are in heaven! Then, controlling her impulses raised her voice lightly and limited her response:

- End of the world, Father! End of the world! It is not natural that a house has been renewed by itself; this is the work of evil spirits. And also grew sunflowers, indescribable, overnight. Everyone knows that these lands are not suitable for the sunflowers; it serves only for carnations and petunias, yes sir. And what about The Executioner? Now he is strolling in our streets as if he were our equal in the company of that scruffy cat that has the look of the malevolent creatures from hell. I tell you, Father, Satan is in this town!

-Enough! Do not mention the unmentionable - said Father Tobias making the sign of the cross again, losing his patience - What if he appears himself in front of us of so much calling him?

The woman kept on in a tone of secrecy.

-The case is, Father, that today in the morning some enormous pumpkins appeared in the gardens of Saint Andre. You know how it is! Pumpkins are haggish implements! Of witchery, yes sir! Sure enough, that we can cut them, but and if they go back to grow again? Who put them there? And where are we going to drop them?

The other women did not articulate words, only nodded with the head like pulling for some invisible puppeteer.

-What? - The parish priest said surprised, getting up and taking his hat to leave in order to verify with his own eyes the information that the old woman was providing him. He opened the door and the light of a blazing sun blinded him for a moment, once his pupils were adapted to the clarity, he headed towards the main street followed by the madams that were walking behind the Father in procession, while Tula kept on talking and making gestures. When arriving at the beginning of the street, he stood in the middle and foresaw the immeasurable pumpkins in all gardens. A multitude began to crowd to his side.

-Good Heavens! This is the work of the dark forces - He said making the sign of the cross for the third time!

And returning to the sacristy, he was not seen until some minutes after, when he came out with a jug of blessed water strapped to a wimp cart

whose wheels squeaked as souls in pain and began to spread the celestial brew on the mutinous and orange pumpkins, with the solemnity and the approach as if of a very fine perfume. That was the way Father Tobias was; for all material or spiritual illness, he brought up the well-known small bottle of the proverbial blessed liquid, which cured from the pains of the heart to the more obstinate measles.

After all the pumpkins had been sprinkled, and seeing that still remained immune to the effects of the supreme remedy, he added:

-We must make out a chain of prayers to ask for the divine intervention. As from today, there will be daily masses, every day at seven o'clock at night.

A loud murmur of approval was listening to at the entire street.

Just the barkeeper that was standing beside his woman on the sidewalk frowned and took the hands to his head. Masses at that hour meant minus customers for his business, and although regular customers did not carry his divine devotion to the extreme to attend the church every day, it was sure that their wives would make them go. The only alternative left was to resign and adjust the pocket.

5 – ONE BOOK, ONE RING, ONE GENIE

Without permission, such as rats and cockroaches, we broke, for the first time, into the mansion of the Sorceress Zarnia. I must stress that this sudden impetus browser had crossed my mind on several occasions, from the very moment when the structure, trellis, erect and defiant, floun the first signs of its restoration as a hidden giant in the thicket vegetation. Why is the house alone? How could it change so suddenly? Who lived there? The witch? The same questions that the town people asked were repeated clandestinely in my interior.

A certain day in which we walked resolutely toward the school, I bumped the magisterial carpet of sunflowers and daisies that danced rhythmically to the contact with the breeze, seemed to young girls singing happily holding hands and moving harmoniously in a rhythmic shuttle.

At the bottom, the mansion, like a colossal salt castle at a vast river of green spikes, shone. Right away, moved for curiosity, I decreased the step with the stare at the enigmatic house. We had come prattling gladly but, when getting there, we ran out of words. Some curtains of a soft white lace of Brussels greeted us from the top floor's windows. Uprisings for the wind resembled tenuous bursts of smoke fanned by an invisible force. In the distance, the front door straightened up imposing and threatening. It began to open little by little, unhurriedly, as if it is pulled by an imperceptible thread. I stopped cold, expectantly, just like my sisters. I held out the tense neck and saturated of curiosity, waiting to see somebody or something to come out of the half-closed door, but nobody not even nothing appeared. Just an intense smell of chocolate inundated the place and the cocoa's tenuous vapors made me to remember the delicious winter afternoons, when, surprisingly, our

grandfather appeared chirping his shoes for the extensive snow-covered gardens of our house, with the pockets full of Swiss and Danish chocolates, What a fineness!, in order to sweeten our palates, our hearts and any other thing that needed to be sweetened.

To my bad luck, the familiar aroma wafted between the sunflowers and the daisies, exalting my smell and enticing me of an intense and uncontrollable desire to find out the origin of such a delicate aroma, I decided to give free rein to my impulses.

Crossed the wrought iron gate, which was also open, the path to the door was fast. I didn't give my sisters time to stop me. I listened to their flagrant uproars on my shoulders; however, I did not give them the slightest hint of my attention. When reaching the porch, I stopped, lying on one of its columns in a gleaming white, to return to my breath. Seconds later, my sisters joined me.

Beatrice's reproaches were unleashed with the hysteria that characterized her and began to articulate the words in a tone that left no doubt of her discomfort:

- Have you gone mad? - Said seizing me by the elbow and trying to hold me back toward the exit.

But I was determined not to fall away from my original impulse and fulfill my questions with their respective answers, at all costs. I used my force to get rid of her arm. Mariana, on the other hand, contemplated cautiously the metallic registration plate that was placed to one side of the door, which had a few characters written in a foreign language and an emblem of a lion with the jaws open. On the right side of the porch, two armchairs very big, white wicker, with some overstuffed cushions upholstered with apricots, bobbed on alone spreading a terrifying sound, very similar to that of the shoes of the grandfather.

-It is the wind! - I told them in a soothing tone. Judging by the distrustful look that they gave me, they did not believe my assertion. Although the door was open, merely by education I knocked with the knuckles, but nobody answered. I knocked again. The tempting aroma of chocolate became to feel with more intensity.

On the latch of the entrance, there were other plated figures of muscular snakes and winged cherubs, decapitated also, like the ones shown in our gate of the century XV. These forms, in pronounced relief and in chiaroscuro tones, gave a gloomy aspect to the set of animal beings that were adorning the enchantress's gate.

-¿Do you think Gertrude is also a witch? -Asked Mariana.

- I have no doubt! - Answered Beatrice so poignantly - as her granddaughter Leticia is!

Encouraged by the lack of response and following my intuition that no one was in the residence, I ventured into the interior of the house,

against the will of the girls.

I shouted while pushing the door:

- GOOD MORNING! IS ANYBODY HERE?

My voice bounced in the walls reciprocating a weak echo that was going away at the room's open space. Bartolomeo, the faithful companion of our comings and goings, protector of our innocent bodies, that did not measure the size of the rival to open in imaginary duels with cats, squirrels and horses, positioned himself to a side of the porch, with the turgescient ears and the tail raised as a sign of an alert, always alert and always attentive, sending a clear and convincing message to us than translated into its dog language would say something like: "Are you crazy to enter that house? I will wait here for your return!" We, that at that time did not know how to interpret the dogs' language, attributed his lack of appetite to the fatigue of the long walk from 'The Borrascosa and left him frolicking at his improvised dwelling.

We walked in and instantly the door closed behind us and everything became muted. For a few moments, we remained silent, by more unusual that this fact might seem. The sharp smell of chocolate marked the way to the kitchen. I walked a few steps and behind me, my sisters, huddled together in fear.

-GOOD MORNING! - Continued to repeat as we walked, but no one answered, the only sound present was the echo of my own voice.

-It seems that there is no one!

Beatrice had already lost her patience. My adventurer impulses did not grace her whatsoever. She thought that the prolonged stay in a community as boring as Saint Andre had started to lose my mind, making me show the first signs of dementia. She resented that instead of the behavior expected from an older sister, I was peaking, in contrast, the spontaneity and recklessness of a mischievous child of three years.

-I suggest that we leave at this moment - insisted Beatrice prey of a strange sense of foreboding.

-Don't you want to know how a witch lived? We have nothing to fear, no one lives here!

The room was very similar to the one in The Borrascosa but without its ludicrousness or its eccentricities. A huge painting hanging above the fireplace seemed to watch the entrance to the lounge. The figure was dressed in black in the fashion of the ladies of the Renaissance, sitting on a black chair with the hands crossed on the torso; a bitter grin embellished her lips completing the Machiavellian scene. Her face was perverse, severe and furrowed by deep wrinkles, her owl eyes seemed to follow our movements to all sides. All the painting was designed in tones of black and gray. My younger sister looked on with horror the image of the oleo and even Beatrice seemed surprised by the macabre

force that emanated from it.

-I think we should leave! – Whispered the last one.

Ignoring their fears, I continued scrutinizing the living room's objects. There was an immense wall clock that was strangely dialing the hours and whose minute hand worked in the reverse direction to the right thing. A cedar library, covered with a bizarre varnish that gave it the appearance of a mirror, rose alongside but the few books that gathered in its shelves, dressed-up with a fine chamois dyed wine leather, were old Shakespeare's editions, Dickens's and Victor Hugo's. I hide my disappointment. None of these books had nothing that to do with magic or sorcery. I expected to find an ample abridgement of mystery books, crammed of millenarian enchantments and far fetched exorcisms and spells. And, judging by the objects found in the house, the only impression I was getting was that the witch seemed to be an extremely cultured person. Beatrice, which has no respect for magic, insisted on going away but I continued saying “no”.

-Not yet! - I insisted - Let's take a look!

From the living room one could see a zigzagged corridor that was going up to the kitchen, whose walls were covered with pictures with country landscapes and images of the same woman that was painted at the living room reflected her in various activities of her quotidian life.

- The Witch Zarnia, without a doubt! - I thought.

We walked toward the kitchen and carefully opened the hinged door that issued a high-pitched sound. A huge chocolate cake was on one of the granite-topped tables. We approached. What a treat! Delicacy of delicacies! That tempting exquisite smell of the senses! Instigator of taste!

The sublime spongy brown cake was covered with a chestnut-colored ganache surpassed by the sides, like a Caribbean Island volcano in eruption. A temptation too strong to put up resistance! Mariana, enraptured as me, looked at the culinary jewel with admiration.

-Somebody had to bake this for somebody else! Let's go! - Beatrice pleaded.

Not every day we hit the end with a chocolate cake like that, especially when in The Borrascosa the predominance of vegetables and lettuces in our daily diet was leading us to the threshold of the collapse, the despair and the indignation.

-No, let's wait a little! – I retained her at the time I sank, no hard feelings, my finger in the foamy cake, savoring and tasting the doughy texture with especial rejoicing, delighted and pleased. Mariana did not know if joining up with me or to reprehend me.

Beatrice, on the verge of the paroxysm, recriminated:

-Aren't you afraid of the cake may be poisoned?

-Who would use a chocolate cake like poison? – I reasoned.

-A witch, for example! – Beatrice responded - Don't you remember Snow White and the apple? Hansel and Gretel and the Sweetened House? They ended very badly for submitting to the temptations of gluttony. Can you think of someone that I know? Don't you believe that anybody may have placed this cake here to attract us for some occult motive that not yet we have discovered? Think about it! You are the rationale here! Aren't you?

I ignored the sarcastic comment that I attributed to the lack of gastronomic culture of my adored sister and I continued sinking more fingers in the cake. I did not remember having tasted a most succulent, tasty and beautiful delicacy. Mariana brushing aside her apprehensions sank her hand deeply acquiring a big piece of the dessert.

I smiled trying to win the indulgence of my sister, while my fingers went and came from my mouth to the dish and from the dish into my mouth. All of a sudden, we began to hear a noise. The sound was like a groan and it seemed to come from some place below the house. I interrupted the tasting for an instant. I washed my hands and wiped them with a cloth of soft linen that I found on the table leaving chocolate prints on it. Mariana did the same thing. The sound increased more and more in intensity. Mariana, whose cheeks were always bloomed of a tenuous rosy blush, began to turn gray, and later white. My sweet sister looked at me with her full moon eyes but I decided to ignore her silent request also. Ouch! What an error! How many nuisances I would have avoided if I had paid attention to the signs! If I had left the house in that instant, nothing would have happened!

-It comes from the basement! Let me go and see and right away we will go away! - I promised.

-All right! But I will not step down there! - Beatrice recited. Mariana was embraced to her with closed eyes. The three of us walked together. When getting to the basement door, they stayed behind, I gave a step to the front and turned the pommel with subtle remark and advanced toward the darkness. The basement was in silence. I lit the breaker and the light shone for my surprise. There were enormous packages covered of bed sheets straightened up threatening, but my resolution to explore kept me on track when the fear invaded my body. As an old saying says, the onslaughts of curiosity always are superior to those of fear.

Once I had found that there was nothing there and seen that the light illuminated conclusively all corners where it may lie hidden some spectrum, and that no living being, crawling or of some other nature, showed before my eyes, already a little more relaxed, I decided to snoop around.

Mariana selected the space closest to the door, in the event of a quick

and timely runaway may be required. She was confident in my decisions and actions, which were generally sensible, realistic and attached to the good manners, however it did not avoid that sometimes I let myself get carried by the impulses of the youth and undertake acts which in the absence of another denomination might be deemed as "vandalism". Mariana disliked this kind of behavior but the adventure of invading an abandoned house in the middle of nowhere and discover its hidden treasures, had infected her spirit trapped in the routine of a stagnant town and in the orders of an authoritarian step grandmother nothing affectionate. She admired me in spite of my quirky nature and my incomprehensible manners and Beatrice, she inspired her most radical expressions of compassion as she believed that after Beatrice's pretentious porcelain face was hiding the most insecure of the creatures. For my part, I did not share the appreciation of my smaller sister, because Beatrice had given strong samples of possessing a fierce nature, more befitting of an animal in the jungle than in a sister.

-If the people of the town know that we are here, we are screwed up! - Said Beatrice – They don't trust us. Imagine if they knew that we are in the witch house, we would be taken by witches too!

-That is why this visit should be kept in secret! - Shouted from my corner.

There were boxes all over the place and shelves full of books flooded with dirt, dust and vermin. My passion was the books so I was gutted to see how these books were lying forgotten in the dark. I look around without deciding where to begin my exploration tasks.

After a while, I chose the boxes that were located on the north side that were dirtier and mutilated and had, by the side, annotations with some tiny letters in a foreign language. I had to make a great effort to remove the box that was trapped in the middle of two others. I pulled and pulled with my two hands and at the end relented but the weight made me fell on my back with the box still in my hands; to my horror, a few seconds later, the rest of the boxes came over. My sisters laughed with fun, as a hyena. I got out of the collapse as I could, shaking me the dust of my clothes as I incorporated.

-Wow! - I said between laughter - Who said that kill the curiosity was an easy task?

With the intention of giving me a lesson, Beatrice responded:

-Curiosity killed the cat, you know? Don't you think that maybe the saying has something of truth?

I disdained the malicious comment, considered it unworthy of an answer. Mariana approached to help me. However, after thinking it over better, I replicated:

-If it weren't for the curiosity, we would be still living in the era of the

caverns, you know? We would have neither discoveries nor progress! Behind the crates, which I had crumbled, was hidden a black leather trunk with strange inscriptions. It was unusually big and over the top, in the central part, was carved the figure of a lion with the jaws open; and on the side, two bowlegged rusty loops. This emblem that appeared in all the objects in the house has already started affronting my curiosity. What does it mean? Could it be some kind of identification of the cult belonging to the witch? Or was it anything else?

I walked very carefully toward it and, with an open hand, took the earth piled on the surface. Questions were still in my head: what would that emblem mean? Would it be really some kind of symbol belonging to a congregation? And if so, why was that symbol also in the basement of The Borrascosa? The excitement fed my desires of answers.

- Beatrice! Mariana! I believe that I found a treasure! - They were the ingenuous words that came out of my mouth.

Then, they enthusiastically approached and helped me to drag the trunk up to a clear where the light was neater and brighter. Hidden under the dust, appeared a small rusty round-lock. I tried to open it with a hairpin which I drew from Beatrice's hair, and put it into the slot but the more efforts I made, the more the lock was close.

My sisters continued expectant, garrisoned side by side of the trunk waiting for the disclosure of its content. Quite a while I tried to force the stubborn lock but after several tries, I gave up. At the very moment when I quit the struggle and started to withdraw, I heard a slight snap on my shoulders, turned and the lid of the trunk stood up open before my eyes.

-This is very weird and murky - Said Mariana, but, once again, curiosity won over fear and she maintained her position.

I jumped to the trunk without stopping to think in the possible causes that had propitiated the openness of the same. I positioned myself down on my knees for a better inspection. The first thing I saw was an immense book, caramel color, with a tongue shape belt that embraced the entire circumference of the book. Centered there was a registration in golden letters in the facade that said: "Sacred Magic Book". In the lower right corner, in smaller letters, it could be read: "Proprietor: Zarnia, The Enchantress, Abramelin's Pupil".

Then my sisters kneeled next to me. I undid the straps and released its yellow and tired pages; the writing was in black ink and had illustrations in vivid colors. I checked the Index and read aloud:

-Fast Witchcraft Manual, in five quick and easy lessons.

-Effective amulets at low-cost materials.

-Magic Carpet versus The Broom. Why carry a passenger if you could take five?

-One minute Enchantments: for hurry up witches.

-How to deal with a troll and go live in the attempt.

Within those pages found as random, the mysterious world of magic unveiled before my eyes. I couldn't be happier! Who in his remoter dreams has not wanted to find a magical book in order to solve all the problems? Owns' and that of humanity's! Who hasn't dreamed of an enchanted wand to make reality what the mind can imagine? I, soaked in its mysteries, rummaging its treasures, like an infant in the presence of the sea for the first time, carried on enraptured.

The book was full of enchantments, exorcisms, incantation and spells. The dust accumulated on its sheets made me cough a little. However, not enough to stop the thorough inspection. Some of imagery were not likeable of looking, there was diabolic creatures, half human, half animal and others impossible to identify, in frankly grotesque and hostile attitudes; I passed those sheets rapidly to avoid that Mariana saw them, since she was very impressionable.

-So, after all, this house indeed belongs to a witch! -Mariana concluded after reviewing the objects.

After a while, I turned over the Book, already decided to take it with me. If the witch had not needed it in all these years, then she would not miss it. And with this deductive reasoning, I kept on drawing things from the trunk. The girls also had fun with the uncovered objects.

A while later, Beatrice released one of the utensils that was reviewing and, with exasperation, looked at the time and reminded us that it was late. She scowled as she noticed that did not get any response on my part. With more resolution repeated:

-I think it is time to leave! If we arrived late to school, Gertrude will form a tantrum of the size of the world. We can come back tomorrow!

Absorbed in my thoughts, I guessed that something so precious could not be left to drift. For tomorrow, it may be late, some intruder, different to us, could break into the property and take all the treasures. Without much conviction, I responded:

-Alright! - And continued taking things from the trunk without making any gesture that would suggest that I had the intention of going out of the house. These comments were the ones that always presided at the hecatombs my sister and I frequently bottled ourselves in, and the ones that Mariana had to tap to put holy remedy. However, in that opportunity, beyond the expectations and without mediating any motive, Beatrice got comfortable submissive to my side helping me to take out the rest of the elements that were in the coffer's bottom.

There was a robe of soft black silk with a label attached to it saying "Dry Wash!, there was a traditional black witch hat in the shape of a cone whose tip was exceptionally high and pointed with a tendency to

stoop to the sides, there was a wooden spoon with a label "Only for Salem witches". I remembered an old story that the grandfather used to tell us which says that in Salem, during the time of witch persecution, those spoons were used as wands in order to avoid being described as witches and as the spoons were culinary instruments in common use in that time, no one was burned by having a spoon in the kitchen.

There was also a copper cauldron very worn-out considering the green and brown spot and the bright erasures seen in the bottom; there were robust cups whose walls were decorated with representations of the heavenly beings and some stones and leather amulets.

As I was busy snooping around the property of others, I ignored the torrent of questions that they were starting to crowd in my mind. Who was the Witch Zarnia? If her figure was the one that was in the living room's portrait, she should not be very good. She had a maleficent and pervert expression that was piercing the paint's frames and soaking up the surrounding environment of a spectral aura.

Where would she be now? Would she approve that a stranger be checking her things? Certainly not, then, I drove away these thoughts of my mind and went on with the exciting work of exploring that magical territory like an urban Marco Pole. Stirring between the things that were spread on the terra cotta floor, Mariana emphasized:

-All these objects are witch stuff - But her words did not indicate any emotion. The fear was gone, given that in the house there was nobody who could chide the intrusion.

Beatrice for her part, seeing that there was no way we arrived in time to the school, resolved to leave aside her considerations and enjoy the objects found in the few remaining hours of the morning.

-As you are so much interested in witch stuff – Suggested at the time that was tossing the garment on my head, dimming my sight - 'Try out the tunic! It seems your size and is better than your attire!

My sister had reason in her appreciation because any cloth would have been better than Leticia's darned clothing, which was the only clothing that Gertrude provided us for the day-to-day routine. I placed the toga without delay and the black and conical hat got magnificently strung on my head. At first sight, they looked very big but when I put them on, they fitted to my body's lines perfectly.

That way, dressed-up with the clothing of the old-time witches, full of prestige and arrogance, under my sisters' approving look, I continued checking boxes and plus boxes, without realizing about the fast step of the time. In one of those boxes, precisely, Beatrice perceived a bulky bag, very dirty and worn-out, of gray leather. She took it for impulse and threw its contents upon the polished surface of the floor. What we saw astounded us with such surprise that we were speechless for some

seconds: a precious handful of shining stone necklaces and some elongated basins bracelets that sparkled like the flames of a deep fire. A pirate's all worthy booty! In the face of such magnificence, we looked as they shone with; Beatrice began to scrutinize more carefully the skewered of jewelry that was lying entangled as one fist on the ground. She proceeded, then, to probing and untangling some of the parts, and hanging them between the fingers.

-Are these real? -Asked Beatrice while sitting with some jewels on her lap. She looked at them enraptured, its quality, its brightness, its color. To test its hardness, she placed a piece between the teeth and bited, fairly rudimentary method, without a scientific grasp, but that within the scope of her knowledge seemed to work quite well.

-I don't know. They seem real! – I said with the same grade of stupefaction.

Mariana had recovered from the surprise. She knelt down next to Beatrice and took a colored necklace, then, after scrutinizing it; she released it again at the lot. Her deductive mind had begun to analyze the scope of this finding.

-This is wrong! This is very wrong! It is not the same to play and take old objects, which are useless. If this is valuable, they must belong to someone. We can't take it! We could go to jail! - Said scared.

I had to acknowledge that her approach was appropriate, timely and accurate. By this kind of situations, many had finished behind bars. Beatrice by her part had taken a handful of necklaces, suspending them at the height of her eyes and was delighted by the sharp flashes that were fired in all directions. Among sighs, she hid the secret longing to keep any of them.

- We will have to report it to the police! – I said.

Beatrice paralyzed her scrutiny for some instants and staring at me answered back:

- Police? Who assures you that they will be honest and deliver the treasure to his legitimate owner – She added while taking three necklaces more and linking them to her neck and catching two bracelets winding them around her left-hand wrist.

- Can I keep it?

- Absolutely not! Not at all! - I answered back - We do not need it. In five days I will have eighteen years, will have our own money and will go back to the city, very away from The Borrascosa and its ups and downs forever. We do not need to make life difficult for ourselves with a theft of this magnitude! It is very dangerous!

We argued a lot about the best destination for similar booty. At the end, we agreed to leave the treasure just where it was, because if some owner existed, he would appear sometime to take possession of his

goods. Beatrice protested for a moment, but became convinced of the argument when at the end we indicated how bad she would look cloistered at a prison for life and with a worn-out orange uniform.

-But that does not impede that we use the jewels while being in the house - I said to conclude the discussion.

Immediately afterwards, with great joy, we began to place jewels on ourselves and to pose in front of a mirror that was at the bottom of the room and which extended throughout the fourth part of the wall; we could glimpse our figures to complete body. Dressed-up with the most blazing jewelry that I had ever seen in my whole life, we submerged ourselves, without a lot of thought, in the subtlest of the capital sins, vanity. Then, one of the jewels called my attention specially. It was being hidden in a box of green velvet, seemed to be secluded from the rest of the things, as if it was a very special object.

I took it, sat on the ground and opened it. A solid gold ring of many carats with a sheet in relief that contained the figure of a lion with the open faucet, shone. Again the scheming emblem appeared. It had ruby incrustations and its reflection maintained captive my look. Without thinking it twice, I drew it from the case and tried it on my finger. It looked big, but instantly the ring's circumference got smaller and adapted to my finger. I moved away my hand to appreciate it with the perspective of distance. Pleased, I checked how well it looked at my finger. "Just like my mother's fingers", as my grandfather used to say, "molded as the ones of a pianist". Suddenly, Beatrice's call puts me back to reality.

Beatrice bumped into a strange object hidden almost behind the mirror. It was a bottle with so intense incrustations of the navy blue mosaic that seemed to be black. Its base was broad and the top stretched out narrow and curved lightly toward one extreme like a swan's stylized neck, quite heavy for its size. She locked it in her fist and gave it to me.

-How beautiful it is! - I said grabbing it by the beak and shaking slightly. Mariana and Beatrice stood next to me with interrogative expressions. There were some little shouts that seemed to emerge from within. Intrigued, I shook it again and the little shout repeated. I unscrewed the lid of the bottle carefully; perhaps some animal had been caught without remedy in the cavity of the luxurious dark container. A humming noise deafening, as a hurricane, came out with force. So sharp was the movement that made me fall headlong down the floor and in doing so I threw the bottle that crashed directly against a wall. Fortunately it did not break.

To my surprise, after dissipating the dense fog of green powders; a dark-skinned boy appeared, wearing an olive-green pants and a fuchsia

turban tied of graceful form in his head. His torso was naked and his hands ornamented with gold rings and precious stones, a massif medallion covered much of his muscular chest. The texture of his skin was chalky and oily.

Beatrice and Mariana ran screaming and waving arms. I had never seen them before to run so fast and lively to hide behind some old boxes, but I was with the appearance, completely lying on the floor, without any possibility of escape. I was astonished by this entire magical event, full of joy at seeing the reality of magic. I wanted to learn its secrets! I wanted to be a witch! I wanted to know everything! And I would count on the aid of the Witch Zarnia's book. Oh! How irresponsible my desire was! And, unfortunately, I would soon give an account of this.

At the beginning, the boy seemed stunned and looked with obstinacy the irremediable packages that elevated seemed like ghosts to the point of scarring. He was making efforts by trying to remember where he was. Suddenly his small eyes fell to roost at mine. I was still lying on the cold tiles and for a few seconds I looked at him as he was looking at me.

The scene that followed seemed plagiarized of a Cantinflas's film. The revolutionary spirit that was hibernating under Beatrice's soft skin jumped over her civility's barriers to look so barbarian and fierce like the fiercest of the Vikings, acquiring the closer object as a weapon. This weapon turned out to be a red fine heel shoe that we had found some minutes ago in one of the boxes and of which we pronounced some jokes since they seemed the gloomy version of a goblin's shoe, very full of tribulation and worn-out. With the blunt object in her hands, she pounced on the young boy, who was surprised by the ungrateful reception and ran to hide behind one of the packages that, by a strange synchronization of the destiny, it was the same package chosen by Mariana as a hiding place; with the subsequent cries of surprise uttered by both sides, and a subsequent career in the opposite direction to get away from each other.

While the Dantesque scene developed in front of my eyes, I had the time enough of incorporating and shaking up my clothes. When I finished, Beatrice already had put her hands on the baffled young who kicked about and vociferated trying from slipping out of my sister's irate hug, and brought him reluctantly to my presence. Mariana followed the steps to a cautious distance.

-¿Who are you? – I asked.

The above-mentioned boy looked contrite. Once diluted the little confidence he could have had on us, he knelt down in front of my feet, waiting for surely another onslaught of attack where he was the innocent victim.

-I am... a Genie! - Replied hesitating with the gaze awash with terror.

I looked at him in detail. Nothing in his appearance denoted aggression or danger. He seemed confused and helpless.

-I was locked up in the bottle by the evil sorceress Zarnia when I was just beginning my learning to be the most famous Genie of Persia.

-Sorry - Said taking a breath of air, then, continued - I am claustrophobic, and all these years of confinement did more to increase my ailments. In addition, it worsened my migraines and my stomach ulcer, I suffer from asthma and other respiratory disorders, and also I have a small nervous system disorder. For everything else, I'm pretty healthy. Are you apprentices of the sorceress?

I looked at him up and down and from bottom to top. The same did my sisters. This situation was extremely bizarre. We were there, in the depths of a basement, speaking with a stranger who expressed to be a Genie but that did not have the features that were supposed to have these apparitions. On the other hand, it was logical that he would have been confused in thinking that we were Zarnia's apprentices, after all, we were in her house and I was wearing her dress.

-No! We are not! – I clarified - I never thought that there were genies, I have always believed that they were stories characters or inventions of "One Thousand and One Nights" book. Now that I see you, I don't know what to think! Are you sure that you are one of them?

This time it was the boy who reflected his surprise, nobody had ever doubted his words, so crossing his arms replied more quietly:

-Well, I left a bottle under a dense cloud of green powders; I enlarged before your own eyes. Is not that sufficient proof that I am a Genie? My name is Batam-Al-Bur, at your service – Then he finished with a bow.

Mariana and Beatrice smiled and were going to take a seat on a little stool, while the Genie and I remained standing. I judged that there were no reasons to worry about the boy, if he had been dressed in a more normal way, he could have been taken as one of the village brats.

-My name is Camila – I introduced myself extending my hand to shake his, in exchange he took mine and stamped a loud kiss on it.

-Your name is too long; I will call you "Genie".

His forehead creased and his shoulders shrugged. He was very proud of the origins of his nickname, his ancestral roots and the sound that emanated from the pronunciation of his name. In no way he wanted to be called "genie".

-In this case, then I will call you "little girl" - replied.

-But that is not my name – I protested.

- Obviously, Genie is not mine – he stressed.

-Good! I understand your point, Batam –I answered

- Batam-Al -Bur – he corrected.

In the "The One Thousand and One Nights" book, a Genie's appearing

meant the obtaining of three desires for the fortunate that would have found the bottle. My spirit was overwhelmed for the joy that this supposed, I rushed to ask:

- Batabur, since you are a Genie, will you concede me three desires?

Mariana that had remained away from the conversation approached us to ask if she was also granted by wishes. Beatrice did not even move, as she did not believe in the supernatural events and thought that there should be some rational explanation for these situations. Again it was highlighted the antagonism of our characters. Hers, impulsive, visceral and incredulous, mine, wandering the borders of rationality, although at times, touched by the imaginative lot with an overwhelming effervescence that kept me surprised.

The Genie looked at us with such firmness that we experienced the sensation that we had said something wrong, after that he spoke:

-No! Why do you all want to three wishes? More than three hundred years have passed since Aladdin. And yet, each time that a human is with a Genie, the first thing he does is asking him three wishes. No one, not two, three! Very bad publicity for the genies this matter of the wishes. Not all of us have enough power to accommodate them. Sometimes when we attached one, we must wait a reasonable amount of time to gather the necessary impetus to give another.

My initial joy was supplanted by a bad mood and the same should have happened to my sister who returned to be planted in the stool.

- And what are genies for, if not? – I asked.

He answered:

- I do not know. I did not finish the course. The only thing I know is that I am supposed to do whatever you ask me for.

My fertile imagination furrowed the seas of the possible things to place me in the utopian field of the unavoidable things. Reflected a moment; for the past six months the only urgent desire that had tormented my soul was returning home. However, this longing would soon be filled in the exact course of five days, without delay or legalisms; by which I saw no need to spend a desire in an aspiration that was already a fact.

-All that I ask for? – I imagined myself getting rid of Gertrude and Leticia and this light thought sent shivers of satisfaction for all my body. Nevertheless I abstained from pronouncing this desire loudly. Instead I asked:

- What can you do for me?

The Genie took some minutes before answering my question and, with the hand on the chin in reflexive attitude, walked a few steps for the narrow available space in the room; finally answered:

-I can make out color fog, make animal sounds and cook stewed lamb.

-That's it? Even I can do that! They are simple things!

Scowling by my lack of effusiveness, he said:

-Do not undervalue the simple things, girl. Sometimes they are the ones that can save you in situations of extreme danger.

I understood, in my exalted disillusionment, that if I wanted to get my desires, I should try to get the means for its attainment. Back to the reality of my circumstances, I realized that we had been in the witch's residence all morning. Our absence should have been noticed at that time, at the school and at The Borrascosa, and the imminence of the repercussions that this act would bring sent a bitter taste to my throat. The worst thing was that I had dragged along my sisters with me. I began to feel exhausted from the weight of the fault that was crowding in my shoulders. When I already was about to communicate that we should leave, the Genie cried out:

-Ah, wait! – He did a pause to take some tumbledown yellowish papers out from his pant pocket that displayed in front of his eyes and whose length came to the floor.

- Let me see which one is the month promotion to liberate a Genie - Then, went sliding the sheet in his hands at the time he recited:

-780, 1289, 1890, 2005, here you are, present-day, and you are worthy of... - A crack with his fingers on the pearl-shaped surface and a magical heavy Persian carpet appeared on the floor, rose-colored, bordered with a light beige fringe and adorned with Arabesque textiles with threads of silver. He completed the sentence with pompous tone:

-It is a beauty! Three velocities and came with its functioning manual! The last and most modern thing in all Persia: The Magic Carpet of Abdul's kingdom - He said so with great pride.

The carpet was suspended as fifty centimeters off the ground. I approached incredulous and put my hands above and below, trying to see if it was not a cheap trick. Beatrice guided by the curiosity also approached to do the same. She distrusted the intangible things and of the existence of supernatural forces, for her, a carpet was a carpet and nothing more, an inanimate object without any will on its own whose sole purpose of existence was bearing the footprints of humanity and accumulating the dust of the centuries which subsequently would be swept by the servitude. Right after her recognition, she addressed the Genie with sarcasm:

-I am sorry to report that right now Persia does not exist, in its place Iran is.

The Genie continued talking without paying attention to her:

-Although if you prefer a camel, you will have to wait a month since we ran out of them but you won't get a guarantee for camels. Besides, I particularly believe that the carpet is the best option since it does not stink!

As animals' supporter, Mariana approached saying:

-I prefer a camel! - Next she added - You do not seem a Genie!

Both were there, mutually seeing each other, at the end the Genie answered:

-Of course I am! And how are Genies supposed to be?

-Big and powerful?

Feeling the pain that we doubted his words, he refuted with a powerful and vigorous voice, coming more from hope than from veracity:

-I can become big and powerful! I can take the size you want, if not, how could I get short to fit into a bottle?

-Are you truly coming from Persia? - Wondered Mariana curiously.

Batam expounded his chest with pride, nothing more pleasant to him than to disseminate the wonders of his birthplace to attentive and dedicated listeners, and with all the Oriental pride that was fitting on his veins, said:

-I was born three hundred years ago at the sultan Abudamen Suleber's kingdom. The most beautiful place of the distant Arabian lands, where the gold sandy dusts of the very desert are comparable only with the beauty of the young women from the vizier harem and the evening sunsets of Anuac's dunes. Oh, beautiful land of Anac's ancestors. Its castles constructed on a white-marble plate that only grows on the stone pits of Abdul, have ivory columns, so polished and transparent that you can see your image as in a mirror. In that place, the sun's reverberant rays never rest, neither for the days nor nightly, since they are so pleased to be in the dunes that expatriated the moon forever to the Zurinar's oasis, where the winds, whirled and viscous, transported the golden sand grains and can bury a complete city in two seconds, in order to dig it up the next second.

And so, he would have continued telling us his history, if Beatrice, the unbeliever, had not interrupted him:

-You are very weird to be a Genie!

After I listened to his exposition, found out about two things: That he loved his country deeply and that he was a funny neurotic person. All of a sudden, the Genie changed his expression to one of extreme terror. He got closer to me and taking my hand asked with a tone of an imminent danger:

-Since when do you have the death's ring?

His comment took me by surprise. How such a precious and splendid jewel is a death's ring? Had he said "death's ring"? Impossible!

-What are you talking about? I have just found it in that trunk – replied indicating the place with my index – and why do you say that it is called that way?

His dark-colored face had turned the same as a pearl-shaped white.

-Because the one that has it dies. That's why it is called that way!

I looked at my hand. This time, the garment did not seem so dazzling to me as in the beginning, stained its glories and discredited by the ill-fated words of the Oriental. How could so exquisite jewel be the carrier of so infamous destiny? The answer came immediately to my head, only upon the world of magic that would be possible. And in that precise instant, the brilliance of magic, blinded by the evilness of its dark side, did not seem so attractive to me.

-You must be wrong - I responded with reserves.

He took my hand and examined it attentively, turning it over in all directions, after that, he replied:

-No, I am not! - And going to the Enchantress's Book, took it and began to poke around in its pages. It did not take him long to find the image that he was searching. For my consternation, it was labeled like the "Death's Ring", title nothing encouraging that produced a great restlessness in me.

- Read and find out for your own eyes - Said indicating the page to me.

I began to read rapidly. The unlucky spell had its origins in the sorceries practiced by ancient witches of a remote region of New Scotland. That spell would send the bewitched to dwell in the depths of Zoroastro's underworld, Master of Darkness. The book described the ring with all its details and, very to my sorrow; I had to recognize that it was the same ring that was attached to my distinguished finger. The text continued saying than after five days, the devils of the Master of Death and of the underworld, Zoroastro, would appear to take me to that darkness's kingdom.

Troubled by such woeful omens, I set aside a little bit from my sister trying to digest the proverbial news. How was this possible? In five days I was supposed to meet my eighteen years and would definitely go back to the city, not what will happen, to become an inhabitant of the world of the shadows, whose neighbors would almost certainly be demons and who knows what other creepy creatures, similar to those which appeared plated on the gate of the witch. Perhaps, it would be desirable to get closer and begin to make friends with them! What strange thoughts provide the fear! Extensive chills started to go around my body. I looked to my sisters and continue reading the passage that said:

"The days are numbered for the carrier,

The shadows will persecute him,

From the depths of the earth they will come

Covered with the evil of the centuries

With the beam, which cuts the silver wires of life

On the fifth day, his light will no more exist,

Darkness will charge the carrier

With the very essence of his life"

What a macabre poet would compose such perverse verses? I commented the Genie that I did not want to frighten my sisters, so that we should handle this matter with subtlety. Beatrice seeing that I was whispering with the Genie approached asking around:

-What is happening? What does that mean?

The Genie shouted with horror hysterically:

- YOUR SISTER IS GOING TO DIE!

I looked at Batam with surprise. Maybe genies did not speak the same language than we do. Why then he did exactly the opposite of what I had asked him for?

-Do you know the significance of the word subtlety? – I asked him but I could not prevent him from telling my sisters the whole story hurriedly. Seeing that the terror and the uncertainty installed on my sister's faces, I tried to babble some encouraging words:

-Don't worry! I will think of something.

However, Batam kept on dismantling all my arguments.

The Genie shouted:

-NO! There is nothing you could do! It's over! - He said bursting into tears.

I did not know if starting to laugh or cry. If the person going to inhabit the shadow kingdom were another person different than me, the scene would have been quite comic, indeed!

A genie, who had just known, cried out with all the cruelty and emotion of a soulless, in a way that was far more tragic and sonorous than my own sisters whose eyes only showed a slight glare of tears, confirming my initial verdict: he was a neurotic!

Within this entire bustle and the exaltation of the affections, I tried to remove the spelled ring from my finger once more, but the very stubborn was very stuck and very tight. With the teeth as a tool I made another attempt, but what I did was hurt me and the pretentious jewel did not move an inch, seemed to be part of my own skin, as the dermis and the epidermis. We all gathered at the center of the room trying to order our thoughts.

-Do you think that I could find a counter-spell in the Book of the Sorceress Zarnia? –I asked anxiously to the Genie while continuing with my unsuccessful attempts of taking out the ring.

-I don't think so. It is a book of darkness; you have to search for a book of light that can offset the effect of this spell!

-A book of light? Where the hell can I find one? – I asked with exasperation.

Annoyed and disgusted, Batam recommended me to stop the blasphemies; because he was not to blame for fate turns and that with

this type of expressions I would not get the divine favor, but rather accelerate the already tragic denouement.

-I told you we should not enter into this house - sentenced Beatrice - something sinister is felt when one enters. Now, you can see the result!

-It cannot be that bad, something has to be done! - Said Mariana trying to convince herself - you're a Genie, you must know!

The Genie quaking with fear to the responsibility that supposed to be the chosen to provide the holy remedy to such setback. Then he recalled the golden days of his childhood, his lack of courage had provided him strong rebukes by part of their caregivers. No genie should be branded as a coward, they could be able to lack other virtues, of course, but courage was not a part of the list of dispensable attributes.

However, for more efforts that he was doing in pursuit of the acquisition of the so renowned value, this seemed to become diluted at his self-pity's hills. And to date, aggravated for the long-lived prison suffered under the Witch Zarnia's hands, there were no indications that this situation would have gotten better in any way. Now, the distant monster of infancy, the old and forgotten devil rose to torment his old and forgotten injury.

-I have never been in this situation, but if I were - said to me -I would try to look for any enchantress's or magician's assistance.

-Perhaps you should dial at the 800-Witch - Mariana suggested.

-I do not believe that an 800-Witch ever existed and if so, it should be for the exclusive use of enchantresses or witches; which, by the way, we are not. Before trying the alternative proposed by the Genie, I decided to exhaust every resource to my reach.

-Let's go to the kitchen, there must be some utensil that I could use to get rid of this.

Placed in rows we went over the distance between the basement and the kitchen. Both the Genie and my sisters took turns to try to get the troubled pledge of my hand. Sideways we saw the cake's remains, then through the diffused light of the events, no longer looked so succulent like in the beginning.

Batam took a large glass bottle containing watery liquid, which appeared to be yellowish oil. Hollowed his hand and poured a substantial amount of the liquid.

-Give me your hand! - Ordered. I delivered it timidly and the Genie in a bit of vehemence that I had not seen until now began to rub my fingers rudely. He spoke of the warm days in the scrub and the laundering of the tanned camel skins in his beloved and longed Persia

I ignored, of course, the comment comparing my dermis with the one of the ruminant. He praised without modest his skills in this profession

and emphasized the recognition granted by his counterparts, skin bleachers, during the time spent on such lofty task. But the strong movements only managed to irritate my skin and do not achieve in any way that the ring moved a centimeter.

Then it came Beatrice's turn. She grabbed my hand and with great resolution sank it under the cold water stream that flowed from the tap, as if she wanted to stifle it. Then, with a sharp movement, withdrew it and dumped on it a few drops of a bottled soap that was exhaling small bubbles that were flying up to crash against the walls of the sink.

-You'll see who is more persistent! - She talked to the hand as if the hand had an existence on its own.

- You'll see who wins, you or me!

But, after a while, she was also defeated. The liquid, however, gave me a terrible sting that lasted until the next day.

Straightaway, Mariana's turn came. She went, enthusiastically, to the cabinet that contained the silverware, opened a drawer without hesitation and drew the brilliant sheet of a knife. She tried to introduce the sharp tip between the non-existent space of the ring and my finger, being ignorant of my small whines of pain, although a red little thread of blood indicated her that, perhaps, she might have been hurting me, which is why the task was suspended. That way it ended the misfortune of my wretched hand, which continued carrying still its ill-fated load.

After several considerations, they concluded that any method of extraction should necessarily pass through the amputation, thing that I refused to emphatically insinuating that I might need my finger in a future and that I would prefer to take the ring out with my own method. We departed toward The Borrascosa with two new possessions: The ring and the Witch's Book. With sorrow, I got rid of the clothing of the enchantress that looked so good on me.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when we started the long walk of forty minutes that would take us back to the house. The winding forest had begun to acquire a dark turn after the concealment of the sun behind some leafy dark clouds that presaged rain. A silver thundering thread left the darkness of the skies and a portentous racket confirmed the initial assumption of rain. Small drops began to fall and to stain the sandy surface, we could not stop at that time, in short all the ground would be a huge marsh and would be impossible to follow the way back.

-Camila, how are we going to have a Genie and a carpet in our basement without anyone seeing? We already have Bartolomeo and Filomena, and you know how much we had to fight to make them stay!
- Asked Mariana while walking.

She bent forward from time to time to gather gooseberries that

abounded on the trail, after a few bites and found them in extreme degree of acidity as they were not yet ripe, she discarded them in search of other, ignoring the drops that began to put heavier on her jacket and make it more difficult to walk. Beatrice was concerned that her hair succumbed under the effects of water and protected herself with a jacket which placed on her head.

- True! - I replied while addressing to the Genie - I am afraid that the only way that you can come with us is if you're going back to the bottle.

Instantly, as if I had said that he would be buried alive in the depths of an Aztec pyramid, without bread or water for three hundred years, he erupted in pleading with the same vehemence of a campaigning politician and prostrating at my feet as an animal crawling, he begged me:

-Noooo! No!! Have mercy! I'm claustrophobic! I can't stand one more day of confinement. Oh, Mercy! Ay, I am having a headache again - Said by putting the two hands in the temple - Mercy! Mercy! Have mercy of your submissive slave!

The dramaturgy of the Genie, more than a tragedy it was a comedy. But not because of his burlesque touch it ceased to have a certain tone of misfortune, so I stanchd my laughter with respect and answer:

-What if we left the bottle without the lid so you could be able to enter and exit to your whim?

The Genie again regained his composure:

-Would you do that for me? - Batam-Al-Bur meditated for a moment to respond:

-It is Ok! It sounds reasonable! Where are we going to live?

-You are going to live in your bottle - Replied Beatrice – we will return to our grimy basement.

-Do you live in a basement? - Asked with astonishment by opening his enormous eyes.

-Why not? - Replied Beatrice attacked in her pride – You live in a bottle!

-This is a long story that I have to tell you in our way to the house. In the meantime, we should hurry up since they must be missing us.

The rain raged, leaving no choice but to run to a retreat under the leafy branches of a tree that was cradled under the lashes of the harsh wind in a storm. There we stayed and expected the rain to abate, meanwhile, we questioned the Genie about what he knew about the sorceress Zarnia. Nothing of what he said was encouraging, quite the contrary, were so infamous his references that we decided not to return to her home again.

When we arrived at The Borrascosa the cloak of the night had covered us completely. We glided without being seen by the wide corridor, which at that hour was deserted. When my sisters and I already were in

our mattresses and while I was searching for a convenient place to put the bottle between the boxes, Beatrice gave free rein to his discomfort.

-We went away all day long and nobody became aware of our absence? That much they want us?

-Yes - Mariana sighed - it is so sad that nobody felt our disappearance.

-Come on! It is not a big deal! Surely there must be an explanation and we will find it out tomorrow – exclaimed putting out the light's breaker and returning back to my place. Then, I listened to Mariana purring again:

-Camila, are you awake?

-Yes! What do you want?

-I am hungry! The noise of my stomach doesn't let me sleep! - And obviously they were so pronounced that even I could hear them.

-Eat the magic book! - Stressed Beatrice – At this time we could not go to the kitchen. Thanks, Camila! We missed dinner.

I had no arguments to refuse the sarcastic commentary of Beatrice. Although my pride was hurt, I had to recognize that, on this occasion, the reason accompanied her. Humbly, realizing my foolishness, I was ready to put a remedy. I took a few apples and cookies stored on a small piece of furniture that served as a table, and which I used in the task of restoration of the books that I found abandoned in the basement.

Back to my mattress, I gave the apples and cookies to Mariana and Beatrice who emptied the dish in a few minutes. Then, they said “Good night”, and fell into a deep sleep, effete, by the events and the tensions of the last few hours.

For my part, I tried to sleep. I closed my eyes but I couldn't. On the table, the book of the witch was lying helpless, with its dark aura and its deployment of spells, such as making propaganda into the underworld. After much reflection and little remorse, I had to conclude that in some part of my family tree there must have been some Montero offender.

My fanciful dreams outlined him as an old marine, traversing the sparkling seas in search of adventure, stealing bulky spoils of jewels and precious stones, just as the ones we found at the witch home, transported by the English or French fleet for the queen or any member of the royalty; or like an old cowboy from the American West, with his dusty boots and spurs, stinking of sweat and brandy, raiding weaklings carts with their precious cargo of gold, blowing his body to the wind on the trot of a horse so black as a coal; I, without aspiring to similar feats, was contented with stealing sorcery books and rings of death.

Suddenly, the idea of dealing with my own mortality made me understand the vulnerability of life. What folly it seemed to me now the idea to enter into the witch house and to be sentenced to death for having followed a silly momentum with the sole purpose of satisfying

my curiosity!

What silly it seemed to me the motive that had provoked such conduct and what price so high I should have to pay for so small imprudence! Losing my own life, not for a heroic, praiseworthy act that will be talked about in future generations, but for a banal, nothing virtuous impulse, provoked by the weakness of character. My heart was sending me stabs of pain at the thought that Beatrice and Mariana would be under Gertrude care. All these considerations passed through my mind, very fast, as I was reflecting on the important events of my life; and after a lot of thinking, the raw truth arose before my eyes: there were no highlighted facts in my life.

I had not yet discovered the mysteries of love, nor traveled to the distant lands of Egypt with its fascinating pyramids and its enigmatic mummies, nor walked by the powerful ruins of Machu Picchu, nor seen the portentous skies of Bogota, nor navigated through the narrow gorges of Venice, or visited the giant cathedrals in Madrid or the glimmering white towers of the Taj Mahal, nor the sumptuous waterfall Angel Fall, nor perceived the subtle aroma of the Dutch tulips, nor tasted a faint taste of the Swiss delicacies, nor the French pastries, nor the Mexican toasts. The length of my goals went far beyond the length of my life, which was five days. From the reflections I passed to the resolutions and decided to use the maximum of my faculties and all the possible and impossible means of which I had personal knowledge of to counteract the curse of the spell and save my life. Then, I slept.

In the morning, I told my sisters, who had jumped out of their mattresses and had been swirling around me, about my resolution.

-I firmly believe that what this book says is true. It is not common what has happened with this ring. Whatever I do, I cannot peel it out of my finger and that is exactly what the book says that would happen when you have the sorcery of the Death's Ring. It is not my intention to stay idly as the days pass by and reaches the moment of my extinction. Don't want tears or sadness. I want you to be cheerful so we can find the cure and get out of this situation without further inconvenience.

The first rays of sun began to peek through the window. The babble of a pair of birds was heard from the outbound branch of one of the acacia trees of the garden. The girls looked at me without knowing what to do or say. Faced with so much uncertainty, I suggested taking a walk up to the forest.

-The walk will clear our ideas and will comfort our spirit - I told them in an attempt to encourage them.

-Do you think it's a good idea to leave the house after our yesterday absence? - Asked Mariana.

-It doesn't matter! Apparently, they didn't miss us - Replied Beatrice at

the time that stood up and looked for her clothing - In addition, today is Saturday and it is assumed that there are no classes on Saturday. They won't look for us at the school.

Agreed on the destination, we promptly got ready and took the bottle of Batam-Al-Bur, but first we made a short stop in the kitchen to supply our pockets with crackers, peanuts and a few soft drinks, to liven up the road until we get the meeting place.

On the way to the garden, I took the bold face Salome that was sitting on the porch stair savoring an angular sideburn. I dragged her along with us toward the little path that was taken to the forest, with the fruit juices still dripping for her forearms.

The bold face Salome asked a lot of questions investigating the cause of our disappearance of the day before, without peeling back the teeth of the fruit, for what her questions came impregnated of a juicy tropical aroma. After her curiosity was satisfied with our answers, she indicated that yesterday her mother had been out all day long, which is why she did not notice our absence and Salome deviated the suspicions of the other members of the servant staff indicating that Gertrude had punished us and that we had remained locked-up in the basement.

In those algid moments, the happy, noisy and tenacious spirit of Salome, with the corncob smile never apart from her lips, was the necessary, indispensable ointment, for the relief of our sorrows. The contagious melody that she started to sing from the very moment we stepped on the slope, removed the sadness from our hearts and laughs sprang up like the waters of a strong spring. And it is that Salome sang very badly, but this small inharmonious arbitrariness, known for her and for all those that knew her, never prevented her from singing the happiest and melodious songs; that in the absence of the stave notes study came out with the candid touch of an effusiveness without frontiers, and coated with the language of the soul, marched to delight the ears of the other souls that, without the intimidation of musical rules, listened recognizing in them their own language. In this way, the indulgent listeners were always left with the feeling of having been listening to a great soprano.

In the depths of the forest was a place where a huge cedar trunk, dry and shot down by the force of the wind, lay on the side of the road. Other colleagues trees, still erect, projected their arms over it, as a sign of mourning or in a vain attempt to protect it from the harshness of the weather and threw a huge shadow that covered much of the perimeter, and that we used to hide of the flagellants rays of the sun every time we gather to read or talk about the trivia of the day.

Already sitting, we have communicated the Death's Ring news to Salome and started the discussion on what should be done to get rid of

it. In the end, we agreed to dig through the book to find out the remedy to the spell.

-There is something here - I said after a long time of scrutinizing the volume, whose pages were very wrinkled tired of bearing the stiffness of my fingers – I guess I found something interesting!

I shook the bottle so Batam could be able to leave and I could have the chance to ask for his advice. Instantly, he appeared, sleepy, stretching the arms and opening his mouth in a huge yawn. He wore a long gown, multicolor, with a wide ribbon as belt and the sleeves had a wide opening where one could observe his hirsute arms.

-How can you sleep at a time like this? – I remarked.

The Genie finished stretching out and giving a general look to the surroundings, scrubbed his eyes and began to shake off the dust from the edge of his gown dragged from the ground. Batam was very staunch in his personal care, and his outlandish costumes were always very much in agreement with the fashion in regard to color, combinations and textures.

- I was not sleeping, I had a headache!

Mariana and Beatrice laughed in front of the evident lie uttered by Batam and commented that if he were Pinocchio, his nose would be getting to town.

-I found something in the magic book of the witch Zarnia, it speaks of a very special place called Eisenbaum, where the world most powerful magicians and witches live. It says that it is a mystical place. Do you know it?

We stared at him waiting for an answer, in the meantime, the Genie, with the hand on his chin, seemed to scrutinize the most separated boundaries of his memory.

-No, I have never heard about that place! I come from the Orient, of the lower deserts of Sudan, where the temples shine under the Persian Sultans' powerful sun, where sorcerers and magicians live in the same regions than men, where camels are so big like mountains...

Beatrice interrupted him - I know, bla, bla, bla, Persia, bla, bla, bla, Persia!

He twisted his eyes and answered:

-I have never heard of such a place.

-It says that the only way to accede the city is by magical means. Would you say the carpet is a magical mean?

The Genie opened his big eyes while responding. For him, all the good things came from Persia, consequently, thought that the carpets were much better than the flying brooms, which he considered insecure implements and exceedingly unhealthy.

-Yes, of course! Since the times of the Baghdad Sultan, carpets are the

preferred magical implement in all Persia and much more ancient and comfortable than the flying brooms.

-Do you believe the carpet could take me there? – I asked very anxious - I do not have time to lose. I must try to find somebody that could help me!

He considered his answer very carefully since my sister's tempestuous face indicated him she was expecting a short and concrete answer, without preambles or coddling.

-There is no site or place where a carpet cannot go! - He responded.

I exhaled an expression of relief.

- I will go with you - said Beatrice.

-I will go also – Mariana insisted.

- I would like to go too - stressed the bold face Salome.

I looked at them and thanked with affection their unconditional support and love, but I sensed that I should undertake this journey alone. Enough damage I had already done and I did not want to take them to an uncertain destination.

-I would prefer you remain here; I do not want to put you in danger.

Beatrice jumped and stood to the side of the Genie. With magic or without magic, she felt the obligation to accompany me. Inwardly, she thought that the ring and the sorcery were inventions of a witch without occupation, which had been given to the task of inventing such spells to frighten and intimidate their fellow human beings. What is more, in her opinion, the witches were not but women dressed in outlandish costumes that cured with herbs and potions, which had nothing magical. In her view, the only apparent cures were the product of the healing properties inherent in the plant itself.

-Do not even think about it! I won't stay alone with Gertrude and her terrifying Leticia. End of the conversation!

The Genie felt that he should also give his unconditional support; after all, so far he had not been able to give me any desire.

-I'll go! I hope it will not be much colder, since I get sick very easily. ¡Achu! - And when sneezing, some imperceptible saliva drops were going to hit on Beatrice's face, which came against the Genie with sovereign slaps.

After the mishap, the first phase of the plan was defined: I should go to Eisenbaum without delay. It was decided that the bold face Salome will stay at The Borrascosa to cover our absence before the angry eyes of Gertrude and Leticia and to divert the diligent questions that could be asked by any member of the servitude, as she had done the previous day. The bold face Salome was very skillful and her inventiveness was the best that existed in Saint Andre. She knew how to make the more credible excuses in the strangest circumstances. I didn't know how

much time we'll take to go and come from the legendary city, so her help was required in every possible way.

We were talking about the details of our departure, when from the bushes, unexpectedly, a huge animal jumped up to one of the leafy branches of the cedar, which was covering us with its shadow. Mariana and I stood up and looked toward the branches trying to find out where the creature was; then, we saw it: it was like a monkey, big and dark, but it could also be a great bird. Soon we got out of the uncertainty. A cat spoke:

-Whatever you do you can't twist your destination – by its words I figured out that it was speaking to me.

The Genie immediately recognized the cat; nevertheless, most of his misfortune had been caused precisely by him. Beatrice and Mariana kneeled down to pick some stones scattered on the ground and that they were thinking to throw to scare off the jack.

-Frozenblack! I thought that you had vanished the same as your owner - Said the Genie.

-Do you know it? – I asked Batam-Al-Bur without looking away from the speaker jack.

-Yes, it is the former mascot of the witch and the one that set me up to imprison me in the bottle.

-It's a cat and speaks! - Mariana said with astonishment.

-Don't trust him! - The Genie affirmed – it has the shape of a cat but is one of Zoroastro demons, The Lord of the Shadows.

The jack mewed and jumped up to a lower and less exuberant branch so we had the chance to observe its stylized plumpness.

-And soon he will come for you, Camila - said uncurling with arrogance - nobody has ever escaped from the curse of the ring.

I judged that animal very unfriendly. I had never liked cats, and much less those who speak, and much less those who speak of horrible things that would promptly be happening to me. A slight shiver went through my body.

-Wow, that is what you think, pussy! - I exclaimed throwing him a stone that Mariana placed in my hand, but it has not reached its destination since Frosenblack evaporated at the precise moment in which the rock was going to beat it. For a brief moment, Beatrice looked at me, and then continued with a harsh and decisive voice:

-Pussy? - She proclaimed – Is that all the insult you could think of?

-I think it is nice - Replied Mariana.

- Hello? Does anyone here know what we are dealing with? –Argued Beatrice – There are demons, ghosts, witches, speaker jacks and who knows what other things we will encounter on our way. For God sake, this magic thing is driving me crazy!

-You are right! – I said - I will think of more insulting insults!

The bold face Salome missed the whole scene because at the time of the emergence of Frozenblack she had withdrawn from the clear in search of wild flowers for her mother.

At The Borrascosa, Ño Josefina was waiting for us at the door with a face of a few friends, the hands on the waist and the frowning, unequivocal signs that showed she was not happy. I thought we had been discovered, as we approached the woman yelled:

-Where the hell have you been? – She asked without preambles - I have been looking for you. Mrs. Gertrude is very angry and is expecting you at the studio – and referring to Bartolomeo pronounced:

-And get that dog out of here! - Bartolomeo seemed to understand that the woman was talking about him, because he hid his tail, gave half a turn and went to wriggle out by the window overlooking the basement. The bold face Salome was satisfied with delivering the flowers and with doing caresses to her mother to ease the annoyance.

Obeying the order, we walked in silence, first up to the basement to leave the book and the bottle and later up to the studio. On having come, we found Gertrude stopped along the large window and Leticia seated in one of the armchairs nibbling a cookie.

-I told you, grandma. Yesterday they didn't go to school, - Leticia exclaimed with triumphal air when we entered the room. Gertrude moved away from the large window lifting the cane and shouting insults to us that had remained dauntless under the door frame. They had never allowed us the entry to the studio, the only beautiful place in the house that was decorated by the grandfather and therefore it did not suffer from the general bad taste that was reigning in the residence.

Leticia continued her verbal attack:

-They did it on purpose, grandma! – She kept on inciting - So that you do not receive the money of their expenses. They know that if they don't go, you won't receive a penny.

The most surprising thing about Leticia was her skill to promulgate the most ludicrous nonsenses in the most improper and inopportune moments. They flew from her mouth, without the most minimal apex of intelligence or discernment, spreading its poisoned aura on the nourished public who was ready to listen to her imbecilities, and the nourished public was always composed of “them“ and “us“.

-COME ON! I am waiting for an explanation - Gertrude shouted at the edge of the hysteria - Where have you been the whole morning?

Her cane also seemed to rattle of hysteria. At the moment I was going to open my mouth to answer, the figure of a camel, caramel color, grazing on the lawn, paralyzed my look. Across the window, I saw it romping between the tulips and geraniums in the front garden. The

unmistakable movement of its mouth gave me the understanding that he tasted with special joy Gertrude's delicate flowers.

The annual spring contest of the Saint Andre fair was ruled for next Saturday. The best floral arrangements of the region were exhibited there and my step grandmother had won unconquered the last three years; but judging by the events in full development and the voracious famine that was boasting in the vigorous movements of the jaw of the ruminant, this year the award would go to other hands. I closed my mouth trying to find the way of distracting the oldster and her granddaughter, who at any moment might direct their look outward and see the unusual scene. I pinched Beatrice's arm and made signs to her with the eyes so that she looked at the window, when she did, was hoarse nervous. I feigned a dramatic faint and, at the moment when Beatrice approached to help me, I whispered to her ears that she had to go to the basement and take the Genie bottle and make him come to take control of the camel. At once she left with the excuse of bringing a glass of water to me. Mariana, that had been foreign to the events, approached me worried, I did a wink to her that seemed not to understand since when she raised the head and saw the animal he commented with passion:

-What a beautiful animal! - Said filled with enthusiasm and, dropping me apart to run swift and fast up to the garden to obtain a better sight.

Gertrude and Leticia approached the large window contemplating amazed the animal. No Josefina had already gone to the garden taking care of the situation, with a broom of wide bristles she was giving blows to the extraordinary ruminant, which before the fury opened by the woman, ran with an urgency to get lost between the filled bushes. After that Beatrice came, I was still on the floor, she whispered in my ear that she could not extract the Genie from the bottle since he answered that had a strong headache. When we lift the sight, Gertrude and Leticia were looking at us fixedly and suddenly popped in with insulting phrases that we could not understand because they were speaking the two at the same time.

-You, ungrateful creatures! You do not appreciate the sacrifice that I do to maintain them under the same roof.

-I am sure that this is her work, grandmother – exclaimed Leticia addressing to me.

-How can be my work to place a camel in your garden? – I answered defensively, trying to seem convincing – Surely it was an escaped animal from the circus.

Gertrude walked striking her curved cane against the wooden floor. She was upset and the alteration reflected in the bluish vein that was sparkling in her forehead with every word she promulgated. Her skeletal

hand showed her increasing tension. Clearly, she could not blame us for the irruption of the ruminant in her garden since she had no idea that the camel belonged to the Genie of the bottle, but nevertheless, we were given the responsibility and the subsequent punishment.

-This behavior is finished now! OUT! OUT OF HERE! YOU WILL BE PUNISHED IN THE BASEMENT BY THE REST OF YOUR LIFE! - She stressed furiously.

-That in your case are five days – Beatrice whispered between teeth to my ears.

-This comment is very cruel – I answered.

-You are right, forgive me! I did not know why I said it.

-Stop whispering! Out of Here - the oldster articulated.

Beatrice, my adorable sister Beatrice, always with the biting and suspicious comments on her lips, often we got entangled in words, but our fights did not have tangible consequences that could muddy our relationship, but were remaining wrapped under the indulgent cloak of the anecdote. She did know neither the "tact" nor the "consideration". Her spontaneity was bordering sometimes on the imprudence. Once when she was ten years old she chased a dwarf for the whole diversions park with the indiscreet question that was patrolling in her mouth: "How being so small have you a beard and an old man's face?" This indiscretion cost to all of us a chat on the part of our grandfather on the big truths that sometimes we had to keep untold not to hurt other's susceptibilities.

-That's it! – Gertrude informed us in an emphatic way -Get lost of my sight! Go to your room! Already!

-Do you mean to our basement, right? – Beatrice answered.

- OUT!

The above mentioned judgment was not well received by us used to the freedom in our actions, reluctant to cloister in the basement for a vile and unjust punishment. Nevertheless, the intelligence that was residing in our beings advised the silence and the submission, which allowed us to act with restraint when the irrefutable voice of our grand stepmother ordered us to imprison us again in the cave that was the basement.

-As for your faint – she said when I was already going through the door - I will call Dr. Asdrubal.

Dr. Asdrubal was Gertrude's old friend and came occasionally to perform medical examinations for us in order to guarantee the good health of the "girls". Very often he engaged in sovereign disputes with Ño Josefina for some discrepancy as to how treating an ailment.

-Ño Josefina, do not be so obstinate – the doctor used to say - for the stomach ache already exists pharmacological remedies.

-Those do not serve – always answered the oldster – Nothing like a

good spoonful of castor oil and orange.

In the end, we were the ones that had to take the remedies of Dr. Asdrubal and more behind those of Ño Josefina. We felt a special bond with the mulatto, the only member of the mansion who was feeling affection for us, in addition to the bold face Salome and the old driver Juancho. Her old and warm hands were always inclined to spread caresses, to clean tears and to treat beaten fingers; however, her pulse did not tremble at the time of using a good leather belt to drop punishments.

-A good punishment is better than a hug – she said - A hug entertains for a while but a punishment teaches you for the whole life.

In the short time that we knew her, Ño Josefina had tackled with energetic discipline the task of educating us, including as her intelligence allowed it, the manual and culinary arts, which we were learning more or less well: to weave and to embroider, essential tasks for any decent miss, as well as the secrets of a good kitchen to delight the future husbands. Clearly, Mariana was not feeling very at ease with these tasks since, according to her own words, it didn't make sense to learn them since she was never going to marry and preferred to occupy her time in more profitable tasks like harassing the courtyard, climbing trees or embracing Bartolomeo. Nevertheless, she had not left another option but learning them since the flexibility of the woman in these matters was void.

When we came to the basement, I looked for the bottle, turned it over furiously and gave it a dry blow in the base, with which Batam-Al-Bur went out shot off against the floor. There he recovered his normal size.

-Hey! How is it that when we needed your help you did not come to rescue us? – I asked him violently.

-Oh! Ay! Now in addition to the headache, you hurt my neck – He stressed petting the lump that had begun to form.

-The devil your headache! There is a free camel in Saint Andre, which, for your information, does not breed camels, so I suppose that its appearance has something to do with you!

-It is not my fault, the lid of the bottle was opened, I believe that it escaped while I was sleeping – expressed apologizing.

-Then you were sleeping – Beatrice annotated.

-Hurry up! Rescue your beast before the locals see it, till now only the inhabitants of The Borrascosa have seen it. I convinced them that the animal could have escaped from the circus, but the circus will not come until June – I enunciated - Go and return soon!

The Genie went out in search of his camel and I remained with my sisters in the basement. Seated on the mattresses, we began to assemble the objects that we would take to Eisenbaum. Minutes later, in Saint

Andre, a very surprised Mrs. Tula put her head out of the window of her house to observe a dark-haired young boy, dressed in strange and slovenly clothes, chasing a camel for the whole main route.

-This is the end of the world! - She added crossing herself and closing the window strongly – End of the world!

That night we began the arrangements of the trip without delay with intense activity. The suspense of the coming events kept us in a state of extreme anxiety. Mariana, making use of an extraordinary delicacy and tact little seen in the members of our family, wondered out loud, so that we all could hear it:

-The magicians would be friendly? Will they help us in this bitter situation? - While she was talking, she caressed Bartolomeo's fragile loin, who was coming undone in flattery in her lap.

The same question that was alarming my sister alarmed me all night long.

- I do not know – I responded - but I must go. I must exhaust all the resources to save me. I insist that you should remain. This can be dangerous!

Beatrice looked at me with a nuisance face, as if she was tired of discussing the same matter.

-Not at all! We will not be left behind and less when we are all punished - She said and began assembling the things that wanted to take. Piled up a large number of outfits, including a night garment that had rescued from one of the boxes.

Seeing the uselessness of these clothing, I chose to offer my humble opinion:

- Bea, (Beatrice diminutive) where do you think you are going? Just take the most indispensable outfits! This is not a vacation. We do not know what we are going to find there!

Practical and provident, Mariana had placed her belongings in a bag and on this operation had only spent less than five minutes. While caressing Bartolomeo and enjoying giving him small kisses in the loin, she finally asked the question that had been tormenting her the last minutes:

- I do not want to leave Bartolomeo – She said surrounding him with her arms - perhaps when we return, we might not find him! – Finished her affirmation with a sigh sprouted from the soul, which passed through the heart and went out through the mouth. I looked at him and sighed also. The dog threw a look at me with its best helpless face, the ears pouring him from the sides, the open snout and the rosy tongue hanging with spasmodic panting. I did not have the courage to say to my sister that he had to stay.

-Look for a rope and see how you can tie him in the carpet!

Little Mariana was already prepared since she extracted a robust rope

that had remained hidden from my sight under a sheet, until she got my permission. The proverbial carpet that would serve us as transport the following day was lying coiled next to the gangway. Beatrice stopped a moment to investigate it. Nothing seemed especially different from other carpets she had trampled and this was producing a big suspicion to her.

-Are you sure you want to use it? What if we fall down? – Beatrice consulted.

-Have you ever heard of an accident in magic carpet?

-No!

-Then, they must be extremely secure! - Beatrice twisted her eyes, which in her particular corporal language meant “Go to hell”.

Then, the Genie came back with the camel, which had been reduced up to a size that was fitting perfectly in his hand and with a finger crack introduced it again in the bottle. The bold face Salome was with us. Her look denoted excitement and the desire to accompany us. Many arguments were necessary to convince her that her presence was more necessary in the house to conceal our absence than climbing on a magic carpet that was going towards an unknown destination. She informed that Gertrude and Leticia would go to the city the following day; therefore, we would not have to worry about them.

-We will set off early! - I said - so you'd better go to sleep and I would recommend praying!

I couldn't stop thinking about the passage of the following day. I double-checked that the book was in my rucksack and then I returned to my mattress. Tired and anxious I rose the look towards the window. At that moment a moon chub was emerging under a litter of dark clouds that were concealing part of its silhouette, provoking a sinister scene worthy of the most horrifying terror movie. I hoped that it should not be a premonition of what will be expecting us in Eisenbaum!

- Oh, God - I thought – I also hope that tomorrow the sky is cleared and cleaned and the carpet does not crash.

The light extinguished and I devoted myself to look for the sleep that was fleeing implacably from my eyes.

The inclement morning came with its sea of incandescent light and a concert of roosters and canaries. We got up at five o'clock in the morning, before the other inhabitants of the house awoke. We secretly crossed the corridor and, reaching the door to the courtyard, we stopped. I opened the bolt with supreme care and it expressed a rasping sound in the absence of lubricant. Seemingly the noise did not alert anybody because the silence continued. We dragged with effort the heavy carpet up to the back of the courtyard, there unrolled it and placed it carefully on the grass. I made sure once again I took the book

of the Enchantress Zarnia, in spite of the adverse comments of the Genie, the intuition indicated me that there I would find the solution to my problem there. The girls placed their baggage on the carpet. Beatrice kept on looking at it with suspicion.

-Do you know how to drive it? – Beatrice asked.

-Soon we will see, I suppose that Batam knows how to.

The mouth of the Genie twisted in a fear sneer.

-Do not look at me! I have my own transport! My bottle!

-Don't even think about it! You will go with us! And that is an order.

And then, in a more affectionate way, I asked him:

-Please, try to help us to move, please...

I advanced straight up to the carpet. It was rigid but as soon as I trod on it got up as to fifty centimeters off the ground. I dropped a scream and gave some steps backwards, later I advanced up until being located in one of the corners, while I made signs to my sisters so that they climbed on it quickly. They did it without delay and the Genie and Bartolomeo jumped seconds before the carpet was going out giving some weak turns for the courtyard. I placed my hands without much pressure in the head on the carpet, according to the instructions of the manual, and it gave two sudden shakes and rose a little more. I pressed again and it went out shot off floating up to one of the windows of the mansion where I saw that Leticia was sleeping placidly with a white facial mask, which gave her the aspect of a ghost.

Beatrice and Mariana lined up on the sides with Bartolomeo in the middle, which had covered its eyes with its paws and was dropping small groans of protest and Batam-Al-Bur placed next to me.

-UP TO EISENBAUM – I shouted impregnated with the spirit of the adventure - And the carpet gave three more runs up to rising little by little and leaving behind the sharp-pointed roofs of The Borrascosa. The altitude was not affecting us; we could breathe freely, which calmed me. As we were rising more and more one could see how the trees were getting smaller and smaller, like greenish and yellowish cotton flakes, the rivers looked like tiny crystalline silver threads winding the irregular surface that was supporting the houses, the trees and the mountains. While we were traveling at vertiginous speed, I glimpsed a flock of multicolored birds whose plumage was imitating the colors of the rainbow. They were flying at the same height as the carpet and were observing us, suspicious, through their small oblique eyes. What a beautiful spectacle! Astonishment of the nature! Such as beautiful colors are only possible under the creative God hand!

-BATAM, I AM COLD – I had to shout for the deafening noise of the wind – CAN YOU GIVE US CLOTHES TO WEAR? THAT WILL BE MY FIRST WISH!

-RIGHT AWAY, MY EXCELLENCY – He shouted.

At the moment a thick green fog wrapped us, when it dissolved, we found ourselves dressed in a few tiny proper outfits like Persian odalisques.

-ARE YOU CRAZY? – I cried – THIS IS NOT THE KIND OF CLOTHING I WAS ASKING FOR. NOW I AM COLDER.

-BUT ORIENTAL CLOTHING IS THE ONLY ONE THAT I CAN DO! – He protested –BESIDES, THEY LOOKED GREAT ON YOU - He said flatly.

-I WANT MY CLOTH BACK – Beatrice shouted – I HAVE MY BELLYBUTTON TO THE AIR! THIS DRESS IS FASHIONABLY A HORROR!

-BUT I CANNOT UNDO IT. I DO NOT KNOW HOW!

I suggested maintaining the outfits; it was very probable that the Genie in an attempt of making appear new clothing pulverized those that we already had and made us looked like Eva in the magicians' paradise. The wind began to dishevel our hairs. My sisters had a smooth, luxurious, celestial hair, as if a delicate spring was sliding uninterruptedly for their shoulders that settling gently in their waist. The ribbons that artistically rocked in their resplendent hairs seemed to support themselves with special condescension and grace. My head was another matter. My ringlets were running in wild stampede in all the directions. No Josefina crossed herself whenever she was going to begin the arduous task of brushing my hair; therefore, I began associating this act as something malignant to which it was necessary to be accompanied by God's blessing. The tortoiseshell comb, of little teeth as to inflict major pain, began its obstacle race from the crown itself and by force it was managing to come up to the final goal of my waist. My sisters enjoyed the spectacle. They sat down taking delight with the multitude of expressions of my face and the variety of sounds that the vigorous pulls of the woman were making me drop. A grease plaster assured that the rigidity of my ringlets supported at least until noon. Nevertheless, the grease was not part of the implements that I packed in my small trip rucksack.

-How far is Eisenbaum? – Mariana asked beginning to feel the ravages of weariness - I believe that Bartolomeo is scared.

Armed with binoculars, like the big discoverers of history, I threw a glance to the surroundings; the small houses were turning out to be incredibly small with their terracotta roof and windows lost in the constellation of greenish plantings, in which there were minted hillocks of cattle and sheep. And I kept on looking and looking, towards the north, towards the south, towards the sides and further away, because the truth was that I had no idea of the time we'll take to get to the

magical city.

When we reached the ocean, the blue immensity was reflected in all the extensions with sparks produced by fishes winding the whitish froth for the optical illusion of the exhausting sun rays bouncing against their tiny bodies. In view of the sea, an unknown terror assaulted me. What would it happen if we were rushing to the water? I regretted never having learned to swim. I appeased the anxiety of my vision and tried to think about another thing.

-Calm down, sisters – I shouted - Soon we will be there! At least, I hope so!

- What if we get hungry? – Beatrice asked to the Genie - What would you give us? Coconuts and bananas? Or some strange thing from the dessert?

The Genie crossed the arms with annoyance, directed his look to the blue seas and answered in a spiteful tone:

-According to you, I never do anything right!

Beatrice calm down and I whispered:

-It is not the best moment to anger a Genie!

I did not know at what moment we fell asleep. When we awoke, we were shocked by the impressive pointed mountains color emerald, whose summits were radiating a resplendence that was stunning the sight. The vegetation was dense, sowed with small stone houses. We began to go down and observed, astonished, the lofty collection of millennial birches whose trunks seemed to project their silhouette up to the infinite; a smell of wild cherry flooded the whole scenery. A green-blue serene lake similar to an ocean in rest was dominating the geography, and in its crystalline waters there were little tiny creatures swimming with big emulation. They looked like little persons very similar to the fairies. I was sure we were getting to Eisenbaum.

If the heavens were on Earth, they would be in Eisenbaum, I thought with admiration. The sublime beauty of the place suddenly woke up my fascination and an inexplicable happiness took possession of my being. Mariana pointed out to a group of excessively white unicorns that was running extended by a dazzling plain. They were beautiful animals with long and silky hair floating in a rhythmic movement, almost ethereal, produced for the breeze, granting them a subtle, mystical and supernatural aspect. On a foreland, some dwarfs and fairies noticed our presence and shouted phrases that I could not understand. Their expression was indefinable; therefore I could not tell if they were friendly or pretentious. The fairies group approached us flying and this was an unfortunate occurrence since Bartolomeo became nervous and began to move and the carpet lost stability. While the carpet was staggering with a hammock swaying, I could discern in the peak of one

THE TWO BOOKS OF SAINT ANDRE

of the mountains, a medieval structure towards which the carpet seemed to address inevitably and against we would smash irremediably, of maintaining the current trajectory. The sudden drafts were inciting Beatrice's sharp screams, and Mariana was helping with theirs, little accustomed as they were to the rough movements of such a weak transport. I closed my eyes and prayed that the impact were not very strong.

6 – THE ARRIVAL TO EISENBAUM

Eisenbaum was a land of magicians and witches. Geographically speaking, was a set of plains and hills borne by the sea. From the top, the plantations seemed gigantic woody blankets populated by the little heads of disarranged trees, and the natural springs and crystal clear

streams ran zigzagged toward the serene Lake Zoromix, with waters so placid and calm that appeared detained in time.

The birches reached unimaginable heights of more than fifty meters with their whitish crust resembling to the most exquisite ivory and dense disheveled pines scratched the celestial sphere at the movement of the wind. The acacias also scratched the humid swampy surface with their roots such as fingers coming out of the ground, long, curved and corny. Beautiful and exuberant vegetation! Wonder of the nature! Different arboreal species assembled under the same sky under the spell of the magic of Eisenbaum; species impossible to be assembled in one biome on the well-known ground, where coexisting eternal in a harmonious brotherly dance, without disturbances. Beyond the green vales there were two big mountains rising the arms to the skies: The North White Bear named this way by the rounded silhouette of the peak that bathed in snow resemble to the face of a polar bear looking towards the plains and The South Green Bear Mountain, where there was the world's most powerful establishment of magicians and wizards: The Ciudadela.

Between the countries and the sea was a village inhabited of magic and mythological beings, as diverse as the flora and fauna of the kingdom. They were sensitive creatures that lived in perfect communion with the ground and cultivated vegetables and fruits in a very rudimentary way. Their houses were made of materials obtained from the environment: lime stones, trunks, shrubs and a special clay that acted like glue, of which they also designed kitchen tools and ornamental vessels. Nothing in their ambience represented a threat to the environment. They loved the ground and were interacting with it as if it was a living being. The small elf population was placed in the skirts of the North White Bear Mountain, governed by Alaris, Chief of the region. The rest of the territory of goblin and gnomes was divided between the shores of the Lake Zoronix, ruled by Ducrán, and the exuberant exotic forests of the fairies, ruled by Xanatrix, sharing habitat with the winged unicorns. It was not that they were restricted exclusively to those areas, but every race had selected the best environment for its species. At the pinnacle of The Ciudadela, The Fortaleza was an imposing and unassailable structure, with walls of one meter and a half thickness of the purest ashlar that were found in the region. A steep wall was bordering on the construction protecting it from the marine winds that bounced against the building, turning into solitary rustles moved along the intricate corridors of the castle, scaring the apprentices, which were not familiar with that peculiar sound. The East side ended in a cliff in whose skirts broke, frothy, the waves.

From The Fortaleza, the Supreme Magician, Americus, noble and stately

elder, magician of pure lineage, master of the Alexandrine Brotherhood and Rector of the Elders of Time, governed. He was a wise and just leader who used to meet with the chiefs of the regions to solve the small domestic conflicts that were caused in the kingdom. Sometimes he had to go out to the world of men to accomplish tasks related to his magic duties.

That night two men were conversing in the Barbican, the elder, Americus, of subtle features and beard scantily inhabited, was saying to his son:

-There are indications throughout. The ring is in the world again. The shades are preparing themselves to go out!

The young man, magician also, looked at him wonderingly. It was difficult for him to understand how after all the efforts of the Brotherhood to extract the shades from the men's world; they had still to keep on fighting against the old bogeys.

-How can it be possible? - He answered - I thought that Zoroastro would nevertread on the face of this land again.

The elder rubbed his chin and, with the compassionate tone of those who know the world's secrets, answered:

-The shades never rest, always prepared to slide for the most minimal chink. It is the interminable, infinite and endless struggle of the good against the evil! They have been here before our birth and they will keep on being after we are gone!

The dashing of the wind was stirring their garbs and disturbing their hairs. It was getting dark. Then, Leonardo, with resignation asked:

-What did they use this time?

Americus took his time to answer. Although his body was along with his son, his thoughts were flying very far from The Ciudadela up to the small town of Saint Andre, where the Book and the ring had been found.

-A young woman! - He said finally - The bearer has the book of the darkness that the Magician Abramelin delivered to the Enchantress Zarnia, many years ago. It is a good opportunity to locate the volume and to extract it from the men's world.

-And how would you do that?

Americus laughed in a jocular tone. In the last years, Leonardo, had had a more active participation in the trailing of the evil books. The Supreme Magician was feeling tired, perhaps, it was already being time to meet his deceased wife Bela and that his son took the government of the reins of Eisenbaum. He had been preparing Leonardo secretly; delegating him small tasks derived from the position and to the date, there was very little what he had left for learning.

-Me? Oh, no, no, not me. You are the one that has "to do it", but you

must have patience, boy, great patience – Stressed Americus - Everything will be revealed at its time.

The young man did not know how long he would have to wait for the revelation but did not ask out for consideration for his father. He knew enough as to know that when the time comes, he would say it.

The night began to fall down on the noise of a deafening wind that was roaring and muffling their voices. The fog was spreading behind them. The cold began to shiver the flesh and bones.

-It will be better that we enter – mentioned Leonardo - you must be lucid for tomorrow's meeting.

-You are so right! – Americus answered dragging the steps - I am not as agile as I used to be. Did you know that in my good times I was known as the “Rabbit Americus”? – He said resting his arm on the boy's shoulder.

-I would never have guessed! I hope because of your skills for velocity and not for the procreation!

-Brave! Leonardo! It must be my lucky day! – He proclaimed - Very few times I listen to you joking; which it is a sorrow since the good mood is like the good wine that improves the flavor of the meals and makes the life bearable!

-Very well! But do not get accustomed to!

-Is all ready for the celebration?

-Quite ready and everything is in order, father! - He answered solemnly. The Summer Solstice celebration was a festivity commemorated the third week of July. The opening ceremony will be launched the following morning and the most prestigious magicians and enchantresses of the world had already come. The Lounge of the Moon was conditioned: its domed roof of beveled glazing was an engineering wonder, its thin walls reflected the exterior light with the same resplendence of the stars, white marble monoliths were adorning the corners and, on them, some copper receptacles would receive the gifts of incense and myrrh that would perfume the ambience. Several carpets and metallic ornaments were adorning the walls. The moon took its place in the firmament and a hundred of stars dispersed on the dark vault of the night.

When the light of the day appeared, the guests began to crowd in the gallery that presided to the Lounge, waiting for Americus' arrival to start the great event. Also attended the region's chiefs, Alaris, Ducran and Xanatrix, but were separated from the group since they were not feeling very comfortable in the presence of men, although these were magicians. Leonardo and his fiancée, Duprina, were standing at the door, of side to the banners. Duprina, was, as always, hung by Leonardo's arm as was her custom in all the meetings at which they

were present. The girl was attractive, no doubt, her long hair landed in her waist and her brown eyes looked at all with mistrust. She dressed a tight lilac tunic that was highlighting and showing all her attributes with excessive audacity.

After a little while, Leonardo, seeing that his father was not there, decided to open the door of the lounge to allow the entry. Enormous large windows were given sight to the immensity of the ocean. The young man looked at the clock again. Americus was slowed down, which was unusual in him. When he was preparing to look for him, observed across the large window an unusual figure in the sky that received completely his attention. At first he thought it was an eagle gliding in the firmament, but as it was approaching, the diffuse characters of the animal were delineated in the figures of a few girls and a dog mounted on a carpet, who were shouting with the same effusiveness as a castaway in view of a ship. The carpet was coming straight towards him and was uncontrolled, surely it would crash. A few seconds later, it entered the sill of the window; flying over the heads and two very tall wizards had to bend not to be decapitated. It avoided for centimeters the lamp in the shape of the chandelier that was suspended in the center of the lounge and began bouncing against the walls, knocking down to its step some iron and tin ornaments placed on the ceremonial furniture and that were falling down one to one, dropping a metallic sound while smashed against the floor. The candles of the table candelabrum, which had been prepared one month earlier for the occasion, with paraffin, miscellany extracts and musk, fell down, and began to set fire to the tablecloth. An incipient drowsiness of whitish smoke rose promising to reach major protrusion. At once, and to extinguish the fire, a fat enchantress who was dressing a blue tunic similar to a circus tent, used her sharp-pointed wand. At first, the wand threw a few shy water droplets but soon it transformed into a big stream that reached also another two sorcerers, very tall, which were close. These, in countermeasure, began to wet the fat enchantress with their magical instruments; and in seconds everybody was wetting everybody while we were scattered in the lounge seeing amazed the Dantesque scene. I did not think for a minute that the denigrating spectacle had been caused on our fault. Bewildered, disconcerted and swaying for the impact, I stood up under the furious looks of the upset faces that approached me with an aggressive attitude. A big clamor scattered in the whole place. I looked for my sisters with my eyes, found them in my backs, getting up also, with Bartolomeo, which perceiving the stir was trying to hide under the carpet that was lying unfolded in one of the corners. With the rebound, Batam-Al-Bur went out shot off and hit the rim of one of the tables that was supporting a lamp that rested on the

floor for the collision. While he was getting up was distributing complaints:

-Since the day I met you, the lumps abound in my head! - He said in a pitiful Persian tone, touching the lump with his two hands.

A magician, with eyes as blue as the ocean we had just crossed and the graceful physiognomy of a royalty prince, was standing in front of the whole group. He was dressing the typical magician outfit: a black topcoat that covered his body up to the knees, exceeding the topcoat one could see the handles of an excessively white shirt, adorned with a shiny material similar to diamonds. Boots polished up to the exaggeration and a hat of wing, also black, was covering partially his face, leaving alone the indigo, icy and atrocious eyes. The situation was extremely delicate; the expressions of the concourse, as I have already indicated, were fierce only comparable with the canine aggressions of a bulldog to who someone were snatching its food. Certainly, such an attitude did not presage anything good. And this way, when more bewildered I was, I listened to the authoritarian and sonorous voice of the young that was claiming the presence of the guard. Dominated by a strange excitement I understood that somehow I had to try to appease the warmed fortitudes. Making use of my histrionic skills, my words began to go out with a tone of modesty that was improper on me, without many inflections, given a touch of extreme humility to the monotonous character of my voice. For major dramatics, I inclined the head towards the floors, lowered the shoulders and calmed the look down in sample of an entire submission. Completed the act, the words went out with the meek intonation of an infant:

- Please forgive the inconveniences of our pompous arrival. We had a minuscule problem with our transport! In any case, we did not want to interrupt. The true thing is that it is of supreme urgency that I see a magician with sufficient power to finish with curses, charms and all that kind of that stuff! Is there anyone somewhere here?

It happened that my words did not have the effect that I was expecting and the crowd, far from calming down with the ointment of my speech, continued fearless, stabbing me with its canine looks. The young man kept on calling with insistence the guard, looking at me without answering my question, what began bothering me since he was behaving as if we were insubordinate statues not worthy of spending the beautiful minutes of a conversation. After all the inconveniences that we spent to come there, such an attitude was inconsiderate. We were not delinquents but girls of good presence, which landed without permission, that's true, but that in nothing represented a threat to their safety. And for as "good presence" refers, this assumption did not last very much, but up to the moment in which I saw my image reflected in

one of the mirrors of two bodies that were abounding in the lounge.

-Oh, for God sake! - I thought.

The figure, which was me, had the hairs in a mess and tangled in a thick layer of ground; a green mud was covering my body and shoes, making impossible to know where it was beginning one and where it was finishing the other. My self-esteem fell down up to the subsoil and there it remained the rest of the time, while I was looking for the precise words that abated a little the terrible impact that my new beggar effigy was given me.

-Will it be that they do not speak English? – Beatrice asked giving me a poke while shaking part of the ground anchored in her shoes that was landing in abundance on the costly white marble floor, under the astonished look of the magician who was looking at us with repulsion.

-Ma-gi-ci-an - I insisted, the faces scrutinized me, furious and expectant.

-Chief? – I gesticulated with the hands, on the verge of already losing the scarce patience I had.

Finally the young man spoke:

-This is not a bar! You have popped in at a private event which is only and exclusively for magicians and enchantresses, and as I can see: you are not! - He promulgated rudely.

I tried, once again, to contain the puff of voice that began to shout in my interior, and with the whole fragility of a Little Red Riding Hood before the claws of a wolf, I modulated my voice:

-No, we are not! – I said even preserving certain humility tone – but I came here in a matter of extreme urgency, of life or death, and since it is a question of my life and my death, the matter is of supreme importance for me. You will have to forgive my impulsiveness, but I only want to see a magician who takes away from me this convicted ring - I shouted already shaken lifting my hand and showing the jewel to the presents.

–So IF THERE IS SOME MANAGER, I WANT TO SEE HIM HERE AND NOW – I articulated tapping the floor with my foot. At this point, any humility drop that I might have evaporated. Beatrice took me by the arm in an attempt of calming me down. Mariana sloped her head in a shame feeling while was embracing Bartolomeo, and the Genie, shielding himself in his cowardice, once again, hid in its bottle as soon as he felt the tension of the situation.

Suddenly there was a tremendous agitation, two sheets of an immensely large oak door opened wide and a group of warlike soldiers, dressed in red jackets, golden galleons and black pants opened step among the wizards and following the orders of the young man, came up to where we were. One of them was located behind me and took me by the waist with his muscular arms while other, less tall, kneeled down to take me

by the feet. I struggled trying to escape, and in the action pieces of mud and mosses were getting rid of my outfit, but it was useless, these guards seemed to have the superhuman Hercules force and they lifted us as if we were feathers. I saw my sisters received the same treatment that they were giving me; Beatrice was shouting and grunting like an animal as an assaulted bull to which the horns were being grasped, but nevertheless her animal efforts were fruitless, as I could see across the leaf stalk of my eye.

They extracted us without many considerations of the lounge, raised as unusable bales to be deposited in the dark attic of the oblivion. Over a long corridor that culminated in a straight, narrow passage which descended down to a dark room, the torches glow lit by the guards revealed what would be our downstairs room: a three meter cell for three, with a small rectangle as window, gray stone floor and a small stool, also of stone, leaned to a side of the wall. The window was so small that only the weak and stylized figure of Bartolomeo might slide between its bars. One of the guards had a bunch of keys tied to the belt. Loosened the girdle and took the corresponding and opening the door trellis, we were placed on the floor abruptly. Bartolomeo, who has been dogging us in procession, entered at his own free will. Fortunately Mariana could take the Genie bottle before we were reaching the heights. Nevertheless my rucksack was not that lucky.

-Cowards! – I shouted with impotence clinging to the bars, with the knuckles bleached by the pressure and rage.

One of the guards stationed at a table and was seeing us with indifference as staring down to a few skinny circus animals.

-Don't you have a tongue? – Beatrice asked.

-Yes - the young man answered - but I keep it for special occasions.

-And what occasions are those?

-One in which the human beings are not present - answered with scorn.

-Human beings? And who are you? Superhuman?

-We are magical beings! - He said proudly.

-But you are human also, aren't you? You are human that knows magic, and the magic knowing does not take you out of the human kingdom. It is as if a monkey identified itself as mammalian, but not for being a mammal, it stops being a monkey. What I think if that all of you are very bad-mannered beings!

While my sister was becoming absorbed in a monologue with the guard who stopped answering, Mariana and I were investigating the cell hoping to find something that allows us to escape. Looked out the window and noticed that we were at the same level as the ground. In the distance one could see a tier of gray stone houses, further away the comb of some trees, and much further, the purple hills melted with the

horizon. With the necessary tools we might enlarge the gap and escape. I took the bottle and called Batam-Al-Bur, who with his regulatory fog spectacle appeared in the cell.

-Can you get us out of here? – I asked.

My question remained in the air because in this moment the Magician Leonardo was going down the stairs and he was precisely the one who answered:

-No! He cannot! - Walked up to staying opposite to the door of the cell. The haughty face looked at me once again with scorn.

-The Genie is not in his jurisdiction – He said - therefore he has no permission to exercise the magic here, and if he does can be judged and deprived of all his powers forever.

- Oh! What a fear! - The Genie said running to hide again in his bottle.

I approached the magician the most I could, considering that there was a grill between us, to yell in his face the unjust procedure and the rudeness of his manners:

- We have done nothing wrong at all! You do not have the right to retain us here against our will! This is an injustice! - I said.

Beatrice and Mariana remained quiet. The Magician was imposing; his words denoted authority and his manners reflected the assuredness granted by the knowledge that his will were always obeyed. For my part, I was not afraid of him, when death is chasing one's steps, the barriers of prudence collapse and we assault the most risky or banal acts without fear of the consequences. The young man continued with the same constant nagging:

-You entered Eisenbaum without permission, popped in by force in The Fortaleza, that is a felony, caused a fire, which is damage to the property and almost took the head from some of my guests; which is an attempt of murder.

I tried to defend myself from the unjust charges. Nothing of what he was opposing was true.

-But it was an accident!

The young man ignored my comment and kept on rushing forward at us:

-The worst tragedies of the humanity always seek protection after the name of the accidents. The fact that they are accidents does not acquit them of its responsibility - the magician looked at us without reacting and, with an indifferent gesture in his glacial face, continued:

-There will be a hearing in a few minutes to decide what kind of punishment you will have. For your fault we have had to suspend our celebration. When everything is ready, a guard will take you up to the judge - and saying this went out and we had not time to refute. We remained with the words of our mouths trying to understand what was

happening.

A few minutes later some guards came. As if they were taking me to the gallows, this way I felt when moved from the cell to the place of the hearing. The slandered witches of Salem should have felt the same way when going to be cooked under the ardent embers of the bonfire, so the witches of Castile, discovered by the lustful inquisitors, moved to the platform without any possibility of reply. They let us walk, and not risen to the heights like lambs, along a narrow corridor ended in a wide room that was already crammed with people when we came in. Sitting at the dock, opposite to the multitude for major derision, this way began such a boasted judgment. At a side the most wrinkled elder I've ever seen, sitting behind a table, was looking at me over his glasses that were straightening up suspended in the top of his nose. My sisters were separated from me and rode up to the cedar furniture located next to a large window. As for delinquency, I should seem very dangerous to them, since located me at a prudent distance of the hearing and the judges. As soon as I was sitting, the elder began to martyr me with questions:

-How did you deceive the safety control measures to enter our kingdom?

-What were you doing with the Book of the Enchantress Zarnia?

-Why were you practicing the magic without a license?

-Who are your accomplices?

-Were you practicing the dark arts?

The screaming and monotonous voice resounded in my ears and was doing echo in the caverns of my mind. He did not even give me time to answer, when I was preparing my response to the first question, the second one was coming at once and then the third in a mad rush. Finally I could say:

-The magic came in camel – I recited to the group of magicians and enchantresses, headed for Lato, the inquiring magician. At once there was a hurly-burly of disapproval promulgated by those narrow minds unable to decipher the melodious metaphor of my words.

-That is impossible! The magic does not come in camel! - A weak little old man said with inquisitive face.

I knew that I had to realize a more forceful effort to do that my words were extensively understood. The fists lifted into the air with delight reflected the anger of their bearers.

-Very well, I spoke in a figurative sense. That's it! – I continued - I have nothing to do with the magic of the enchantress Zarnia. My contact with the magic came from the East, in the person of Batam-Al-Bur, a Genie originated from the deserts of Persia, that has been in my service for the last two days and who has taught me everything I know about

magic. And that's a saying because he cannot even control his powers himself, much less teaching anyone the mysteries of magic. Of the enchantress Zarnia, I only have the book and that is because I found it buried in a forest – I considered suitable saving for myself some details of the finding that might contribute to my perjury. For reproaches, I had already sufficiently with those that the Magicians' Court of Eisenbaum was endorsing me and I did not want they knew that I had irruption precedents in other residences!

-And I have not practiced any kind of spells!

-How did you deceive the guards of the forest Zoromix? – The weak, ailing and deranged little old man asked.

A tingling of impotence was beginning to spawn in my interior.

-Perhaps because we came in by flying? I do not know! I do not know what forest you are talking about! We came here in a magic carpet, so if it was a forest, maybe we passed it over - I said already without patience.

-You have perverted the values of the magic – declared a woman of bulging eyes who was raising her fist in high from the tribunes - and must pay for it!

Seeing the enormous and disproportionate expression of the enchantress I could not avoid remembering Mrs. Tula from Saint Andre. At that moment I could not say who was crueller and more infamous, if Mrs. Tula or her. The young man to whose feet we landed was observing the scene with scorn, without agreeing or contradicting any of the assertions that were discussed against me. Beatrice and Mariana tried to intervene occasionally to defend me, but the deafening pother was muffling their voices, and the guards next to them did not allow them to get up. The Genie was not seen on any part, since in the clamor of the trajectory the bottle had escaped.

-I have not perverted anything! I was only looking for a solution for the Death's Ring curse - I shouted out loud showing them the jewel that was sparkling in my finger - Thought that I might find a magician here who wanted to help me. I thought that you were obliging and generous beings. I thought that you were the treasurers of the purest and lofty values of humanity, but everything I have found is a fistful of arrogant magicians, too concentrated on their own importance as to help a neighbor! Shame on you! Shame should you have to be called themselves magicians! - I censured.

More murmur and pother.

The magician's fiancée was looking at me from a small theater box with more presumption and pride than a princess in a plebeian party.

-But what arrogance! Come to insult us here! In our own house! - Duprina commented to Leonardo's ear.

For my part, I did not understand this witch hunt that had neither feet

nor head. Every time I concluded my answers, the clamor of the room propagated with major intensity under the screams of magicians and enchantresses who were condemning my speech.

-If I cannot speak here, then where? Is not here where there most brilliant and privileged minds of the magic world are? What hope do we have, then? If we, mortal, cannot get an impartial judgment. In this Supreme Court, I have been already judged and sentenced, with no right to defend my point of view!

- You have entered Eisenbaum without permission! You do not belong here! This is magicians land! - Shouted violently the crazy little old man that was acting as a judge, showing the three teeth that he still had left.

I continued my defense without fear.

-Where does it say that Eisenbaum is only magicians land? Show me the document that grants you the property of these lands, then, I will plead guilty! What a bizarre mania of all men, mortal or magicians, of taking possession of the grounds that God granted to all of us for our enjoyment, splitting them as if they belonged to them, denying the right to others to enjoy the same marvels. Shame should you have for the theft of the celestial resources!

-If we had allowed the mortal ones to settle in these grounds, these will be destroyed already, as the grounds of your own world are.

-My World? That's all semantic. The world is the one and only! Why do you continue with the habit of dividing the indivisible thing?

The man made a nuisance gesture. Suddenly, a strong noise came from a door and the accusing faces turned towards the place from which the sound was coming. The majestic figure of an elder was insinuated at the door, his hairs were falling down in cascades up to his shoulders, his beard was opened to show the track of an incipient smile, his luxury tunic spun with gleaming fibers reflecting twinkles to his gait and he carried the same intense navy blue look of the young magician, but with the warmth and docility of an evening in the tropic. Next to him Batam-Al-Bur was coming. The elder without paying attention to the concourse was straight up to where I was.

-Dear little girl! But what clamor you have armed! - He said with the sweet tone of the bee honey.

The concourse silenced as showing respect.

-It seems that my boy is not treating you well at all – He said in a recriminatory tone speaking to the magician Leonardo.

-Do you know her? – The young man that was looking at me with scorn asked.

-She is the bearer of the book. Don't you remember? We were speaking about her yesterday! – He said winking an eye to me.

His comment did not cause me grace. What might two magicians have

been speaking about me? Would it be that they possessed a divinatory gift that had warned them of my presence? Batam-Al-Bur came with him and was staying very quiet. The Genie was more comfortable in its oriental environments, with its sand of thick and white hot grains, with the strong, deep, penetrating smell of the camels that were transporting enormous goods bundles across the endless dunes of the desert, with the merchants who were competing under the big and heavy tents eaten away by the sun and the steams of the desert.

The elder man that I later knew was called Americus, approached up to the chair where I was and taking my hands did that I got up. The warmth of his hands evoked the clear memory of my grandpa Gennaro.

-Let's speak! – He said.

And speaking to the magician;

-You also, Leonardo. Come with me!

When he saw that Duprina was enlisted to follow him, he hurried to say:

-Just Leonardo!

If the eyes could kill, at that precise moment I would be shepherding for the heaven paths; the hate look catapulted by Duprina furrowed the vast space that was separating us, to settle, spiteful, on the innate shield of my indifference. I, like someone before the sight of a poisonous animal, was observing her between entertaining and frightened. At this moment, the cardinal sin of the jealousy was eating away Duprina's entrails, with the same ferocity and cruelty that a flame incited by the wind. The girl had a few exotic features but, at the risk of seeming slightly modest, I have to say it, she was not as nice as I was. She had the bulging eyes of the parrots when they romp on the crooked swamps of the sandy flatcars of the sea, the long and narrow extremities of a curved flamingo and the speaking, that was one of the worst things that I had never heard, squeezed, as if the words were fleeing filled towards the freedom, dropped in a Spanish accent that one did not know if it was real or fake. This vision started a smile on my lips that Duprina interpreted as a buffoonery on my part.

Considering that I had not been hanged, punished, or submitted to one of the habitual eternal anguish awarded to the profaners of the law, the persons were leaving the lounge, disappointed by the happy ending. Alone we remained Americus, Leonardo, Duprina, my sisters, the Genie and me.

I threw a glance to Leonardo, who had placed himself next to Americus and was advancing towards the exit. He was handsome, his features kept perfect symmetry, his manners were noble and bold and if it wasn't for the roughness of his treatment, I might consider him nice. This significant character flaw was spoiling in the whole rest of his attributes. I was so lost in my considerations that I forgot briefly my sisters and the

motive that had taken me even there. This eloquent examination that I did to the magician happened unnoticed neither for Duprina, nor for my sisters. When we were in the chink of the door, Americus seemed to remember the other two visitors; therefore he turned round and gave instructions to his assistants so that they showed my sisters the surroundings, which they accepted with big rejoicing. The Genie was looking at me doubtfully without knowing where to go. I did sign for him so that he followed us. The trip up to the meeting lounge was full with agreeable surprises. Americus, who was an excellent host exuded in attentions, was describing with details as we were advancing, the peculiarities of the objects that we were finding to our step. I saw many things that I liked: stylized sculptures, coloring paintings with sceneries of the region and ceramic ornaments carved by expert hands, considering the beauty of its forms.

We ended in an open corridor on the first floor. I observed astonished how a wide lounge was spreading, magnificently decorated and of proportions so big that it seemed like a park, the illuminated little lantern were resembling soldiers in perfect formation who were covering at regular intervals the projecting shore between the lattice and the garden. There was greatly hurly-burly and movement. Leonardo was taking the face of a few friends and I began imagining that this was his habitual expression. We walked a few meters and penetrated into another circular room. A big table of white marble dominated the stay and through the window without glasses one could observe the diffuse violet line and ocher of the horizon, a warm sea breeze was filtering through the open space and was granted to my skin a lightly sticky and viscous texture. Americus sat down in a wide easy chair that yielded a little at his weight, and rolling a similar chair brought it closer up to his side and made me signs to sitting down. The young man remained standing along the window, very close to the Genie, directing each other mutually and antipathetic look without blinking at least.

The elder Americus had the same consoling eyes of my grandfather, the quiet speaking of the philosophers who have already conquered the ardors of the youth and the composure of the souls that know their place in the universe. If someone had a conjuration to resist the charm of the ring, he had to be this elder. In a deployment of his habitual amiability, Americus asked about my history. I began narrating him, saving neither verbs nor adjectives, on the primitive years of my infancy, flowing of the home-loving life in the city with my father in the head, where an army of caregivers commanded by the affable hand of my mother was craving to condense our most insignificant desires.

I talked about the generosity and tenderness of the grandfather Gennaro, who after the death of our parents accepted the load that

supposed taking charge of three girls in school age, with the subsequent obligations and responsibilities. I described with big detail the days of joyful coexistence in his company; and with a dark rustle, the days inhabited in the shade of Gertrude Zinc in *The Borrascosa*. I culminated with the history of the finding of the ring in the house of the enchantress Zarnia, saving myself some sultry details, like that of the desecration of the chocolate cake, among other things. The elder looked at me with the obliging expression that older people use when they evoke scraps of his youth, as if the memory was dyed of an accomplice understanding.

-So you are not new in the matter of irrupting in residences - He joked with a short laugh and I feared for a moment that he had discovered the dark passages of my behavior. Leonardo, on the other hand, evoked it like the infantile escapade of a bad-mannered girl.

-Only a fool might have done something like that! - Was his sarcastic comment.

My annoyance was on the increase and I could not already contain it. There my admiration for him vanished! There my thought of him as the most adorable creature of the planet vanished and also vanished my education and good manners! If he wanted war, then, war would be!

Americus went forward with the answer:

-Don't be so hard with the girl, Leonardo - He suppressed him - I am sure that nothing of what she has done has been with the intention of hurting somebody, right young girl?

I looked at the young man with the condescension of the one who has an ally in the spheres of power.

-Surely not! Only an idiot might think that! - I returned the comment trying to enclose a major load of sarcasm than the one that he had given to me. I was not ready to allow me to crush for an applicant magician. At that moment I did not know that he was one of the most prestigious personages of the Brotherhood. After a few minutes of conversation under the inhospitable look of Leonardo, Americus, finally, extracted from a drawer the Book of the enchantress, which had gotten away from my rucksack at the moment of my apprehension. The elder observed it attentively, abstracted in his contemplation, as one would look at an object that is known as dangerous. Leonardo, bitten by curiosity, approached also, intrigued by the strange history of the volume. He knew it was one of the Master Evil books. This copy especially had been dedicated to Zarnia for the proper Magician Abramelim, and it was one of five volumes that were still patrolling for the men's world with its harmful load of pain and sorrow.

The Brotherhood had managed to withdraw some of the books and had kept them in custody under the secret wine vaults of *The Fortaleza*.

After a while, considering that nobody was dropping a word, finally I risked asking:

-What are you thinking? Do you believe that there is some hope for me?

Americus remained thoughtful, looked at me, smiled slightly and said:

-There are always hopes for all of us. Impossible things are just the term that some people use when do not want to make the effort to go beyond the well-known things - And he continued with his meticulous work of investigating the sly pages of the volume, while I was still waiting with desperation for a more convincing answer.

Then, he said:

-I am going to tell you a book story. Not this one that I am supporting in my hands, which it is an abomination for the world and which only bears to sorrows and perdition, but another, much more distinguished and glorious.

The sky was getting dark and the sun was delivering its custody. Americus took his time to get up and drag his steps up to a table that was at the bottom of the room and that was not glimpsed because it was hidden between penumbras. He checked a pile of papers from here and there and finally seemed to find what he was looking for. Took some parchments between his hands and on the way back up to the chair where I was, said:

- Take them and read!

Slowly I took them; I had the impression of being receiving a very important document. I untied the red wine ribbon that was keeping the papers captive and began to read as indicated:

“Valencia, September 5, 1478.

Dear friend:

These are hard times! The Papal bull authorized the torture as a resource to extirpate the sorcery in his territory. The inquisitor settled for one week in the central Plaza of San Sebastian. From there he has promulgated orders to chase the heresy suspects. This practice has spread like gunpowder over the provinces of Cotaluña, Castile and Valerma. It is just a question of time that the tormentors touch to my door. The book that is attached should be preserved at all cost. I have taken all the necessary measures to do so. I am grateful for your help, my good friend”.

At the end of the letter a stamp and an unintelligible signature were coming. Another parchment was written:

“The monk looked around him, the tiny room was scarcely illuminated by the sheen of a candle, and books spread by all corners were projecting their silhouettes enlarged on the ungraceful stucco of the clay walls, silent witnesses of the thousands of minutes that the clergyman had dedicated to the study of the magic. The thought that the books

had to be destroyed filled him with deep sadness; it was the consideration of this possibility what led him to transcribing months ago a compilation of the individual copies.

The task was already concluded; the red velvet cover creaked under the warm caress, missing only to fit the title. This should seem harmless in order to escape the prosecution view of the ecclesiastical authorities and survive to the action of the fire to which it would be condemned if its essential nature was discovered. He went to his prayer spot; a frayed mat placed next to the bed and kneeled down opposite to the figure of a crucified Christ on a wooden table. There, he prayed, asking for more days to complete the writing of the Book, and prayed much more, so that the Book was saved from the senselessness of men, asked for the message to be spilled in the conscience of the souls prepared to receive it, asked for knowledge, for peace and redemption; and while he was praying his requests were melting with the tears that sliding from his face were going to smash against the stone pavement. Every word, every prayer, every request was adhering to the delicate fibers of the volume, drawing it a soul that would tie it forever in the world of men. After the catharsis of the spirit he emerged with an infinite calmness. The sound of a few steps outside the room confirmed to him that the fatality had already found him. Scarcely, however he had time to scribble the title of the Book: "The Keys of the Kingdom".

I stopped reading and looked at the old man with interrogative look. He looked at me back and asked:

-And well?

He was studying my face trying to find out if the reading had woken up some trace of an answer or revelation in me. Nevertheless, my mind was all white and pawned in retaining its valued findings, if there was any, I did not understand it!

Leonardo also was looking at me with exasperation.

-For a magician – I thought - he had very little patience.

-Do you see any coincidence between your story and that of the monk?

Under pressure my mind blacked out and it was not capable of producing not even the most tasteless of the thoughts. All the eyes were ending with me and a strange bitterness began to flood through my gullet. I had to say something or they all would think that I was a fool. But the more efforts I made, the more the answer was not deigning to present itself. At the end I did not have any more remedy but to answer:

-To tell the truth, no, I do not see anything.

-Are you sure?

For a long time I remained thoughtful. I could listen to the sighs of Leonardo's exasperation, what was making me more nervous. I read the last lines again "the fatality had already found him ...", this was a phrase

with which I could identify and this way I confessed it to the elder.

-Do you want to know a secret? – He said.

I agreed timidly with a light head inclination hoping to listen to the mystery hidden between the pages that I had read. Leonardo kept on looking at me with frowning.

- The clergyman was saved! - He said in rustles.

Was that the big secret? I did not understand. Would it be that the magicians were speaking some other language not understood by us, poor mortal, that although they were using the same letters and sounds of our alphabet, its significance was slipping for the walls of our humanity? I contemplated him with the confused expression of a child who in expectation of a toy what he receives is a cent. And something of my stupor should have been reflected in my face, which indicated to the Big Magician that a clarification was needed:

-The Inquisition was chasing him! – And seeing still in my face the stupid expression of the one who does not know what they are talking about, he dropped:

-Whatever it is that he had done to be saved, the secret is in that book!

Finally, what I was hoping to hear. A light hope was lighting the way. Another Book was the answer as the Genie had suggested it. He looked at me with the expression of “I said it to you”. A good Book against another Evil Book! The eternal struggle from the beginning of times. Who would say that I was going to be involved in such an ancestral struggle? Very deep, the circumstance was granted to me a certain touch of intensification and distinction, like that of those heroines of my infancy that were turning out to be immersed in the most improbable situations, to go out unharmed, triumphant at the end of the story, when the good guys always won.

-And where can I find it?

-The book is in Saint Andre! - He reported.

I expressed my astonishment and observed the elder with incredulity. What strange irony of fate! That's the starting site was precisely the point of arrival.

-In Saint Andre? But if I came from there! In what part?

Leonardo had gone to have a short rest on one of the chairs that was removed from the table, giving samples of which he was not interested in what we were speaking. The Genie was still standing next to the window, listening to our conversation but without intervening for anything. Americus threw a comprehensive look at me:

-I do not know it exactly. You are the bearer, its presence will only be revealed to you. You must be attentive and to be in Saint Andre, of course!

The simplicity of the answer was filling my soul with anxiety and

suspense. Would only one book save me from the plans of that other? Would it be sufficient? I was waiting for a more deifying solution, after all, we were treated with magic, and magic had to be something supernatural, out of the series, very distant to the normal parameters of expression.

-And if I do not find it?

He contemplated me patiently as if it knew the doubts that were impeding my heart.

-You will find it, if you begin looking for it as soon as possible! Failing is not an option, right? Tomorrow you will return to your village. The cycle was opened there and it is there where it must close. I will give you all the help that you need but your salvation will depend only on you. Studying the Book is the only thing that can save you from the shades. Look for the guards and hear its advices!

A fierce fear began freezing my bones. Now I had to return to Saint Andre and look for a Book that who knows where it was. The small town was looking like a big giant to me. I had lost one day and I did not even know where I had to begin looking for.

-Who are the guards? Where do I find them?

His voice acquired a serene and harmonious tone.

-They are beings of the magical world that protect objects, animals or persons. When you find the Book, you will find also the guards.

The search was continuing and the responsibility of the ending was falling down again on my shoulders. Apprehensive I asked:

-Wouldn't it be easier if you mention where exactly in Saint Andre the book is located? So I do not lose time searching for it.

-My dear girl the only thing that I can give you is tracks. I do not even know myself the exact place in which it is. You should look in those places where the ensign of the lion appears with the open jaws, it is an ancient emblem of a wizards' community that was placed many years ago there, at the head of the magician Abramelin. This brotherhood was the one that stole "The Keys of the Kingdom". Regrettably, due to the wild use of the dark arts the community became extinct, but traces of its existence must still stay. Leonardo will go with you to help you to look for, since he is an expert in the search of Books of the Brotherhood. In spite of his sudden manners, he is a good boy. Do not let yourself to be cheated by the appearances!

Leonardo who had been entertained in other business, having heard his name, approached his father and, proving to be reticent, answered:

- I do not believe that I am the person indicated to realize the work, father.

The old man embittered the expression of his face and with a guttural voice that was not accepting denial added:

-You will go!

Leonardo should have understood that he didn't have a chance to refuse since he went out of the enclosure without expressing a word.

For my part, I was not much in agreement with the description of the Magician that his father had outlined. My estimation was precisely the opposite: arrogant, antipathetic, biting and bad-tempered. There were not precisely sweet days those that I was glimpsing in the horizon.

-You must be patient with him, girl – He said.

-There is no one better than he on this kind of stuff! You will set off tomorrow morning since today we will have a celebration and you are invited.

-I am not thinking about having fortitudes for a holiday! - I whispered with sadness seeing that the possibilities of survival were becoming closer. Americus, understanding my discouragement, answered:

-The solution to our problems comes always with the serenity of a lake at rest, never with the maelstrom of a curled sea. Go to the celebration and calm the spirit. Tomorrow you will see things with another perspective.

In spite of his attractive features, Leonardo's manners were frankly coarse and hostile. His speaking denoted the refinement of long study hours, good for the expansion of the culture, for social conventions or for some other motives that were not coming to the case. Nevertheless in his dealing he was proud and contemptible, as usual in the persons of quite well-off position. Intrigued for knowing more of this peculiar personage and considering the fact that I would have to support his presence in the future days, I decided to obtain information from the cleanliness personnel. I waited some minutes that the maintenance staff finished the cleanliness of the room that had been assigned to us for tonight, and seeing that my sisters still had not returned of their walk, I approached to one of the servants with the firm intention of investigating for the past of the magician. I feigned interest to know the details of the life in Eisenbaum, later, with dissimulation, asked about Leonardo. I did not have to insist very much, because Diana, the servant, was quite ready to the gathering, what facilitated to a great extent the investigatory process.

-How long have the Magician lived here? – I asked.

-Americus? – She answered back.

-No! - I corrected - I referred to Leonardo.

The girl realized my interest in the boy and pointed out with mischievousness:

-Oh! Yes! He was born here! The kingdom celebrated with rejoicing the arrival of the first-born. Americus and his wife Bela had never been

happier. The child was round, clean and flesh-colored cheeks. The festivities of the birth lasted one month, where neither meal nor drink was missing and the fireworks lit more than the stars. It was clear that I did not attend the celebration, but I was told by my mother.

She made a break and looked at me undecided like calibrating my interest in the story, so to motivate her, I kept on asking:

-And has he always been in Eisenbaum?

The aforesaid one denied by the head.

-The first years were quiet and calm. The infant was not showing signs that the magic was residing in his soul. It was on his eighth birthday when the first indications emerged with overwhelming clarity. At once, the arrangements were done so that the boy was present at the prestigious school of magic of Ettonguess in Denmark. As parents, Americus and Bela were overwhelmed by the imminent separation from his only son; like magicians, they knew too well the importance of educating the powers and although this resolution was extremely painful for them, knew that it was necessary. Many springs and winters happened to the sweet complexion of the infant turned into the fiery features of the adolescent. As young he was graceful. Neither the power nor the wealth prevented him from studying two careers simultaneously: architecture and art history, and later literature. He learned Latin, Sanskrit, Aramaic and other dialects to be able to read the magical texts in its original language. He got enthusiastic so much with the books of magic that later he integrated the search group of the sacred books of the Alexandrine Brotherhood. In little time, Leonardo was performing the position of Regent Magician, one of the most distinguished positions of the organization, being the youngest member in occupying the above mentioned status – She said proudly.

I was surprised by the comments of the servant. She was speaking about him with consideration and respect. Seemingly he was loved by his people although I did not understand why. I made use of the break to go to sitting in a small couch that had been already shaken properly. As I was hearing the story more I wanted to know about the experiences and events that had forged him the character. I was intrigued with the fact that a person so graced with the commendation of love and fortune, made so forceful efforts to become antipathetic and vile.

Diana gave a turn to extend the sheets of the bed and continued the story.

-In his university days, he lived with another lad, Dorian Parr, who, like himself, had left his family in the ancient city of Sarton, another settlement of magicians but of less importance than The Ciudadela, to go in search of the knowledge. He was much lower and burly, not so handsome like our gentleman, but had the deceitful fluency of the

snakes. They became friends immediately and shared many moments of free time and diversion. Nevertheless, there was an incident that provoked the rupture of their friendly bonds and it would mark forever Leonardo's character.

I half-closed the eyes and prepared my ears to receive the information that I was hoping to hear. I supposed that at this point of the story it would be absurd to hide my fascination for him and Diana understood it because she began to chat, proving to be more concise.

-He fell in love with a young woman, Aurora, with normal parents without any association with the magic. Her beauty was ethereal, of those that seem to come from another world, with golden curls swirled about the celestial eyes like those that carry the china dolls. She was a daughter of merchants who possessed a bakery very close to the University. There the students' whirlpools met in search of pastries and chocolate. Soon, Leonardo turned into a habitual client. It took to him two months to assemble the sufficient courage to ask the girl to go out with him – She stopped for a break, then continued:

-Dorian was embellished with the beauty of the girl too, and behind the back of his friend, tried to obtain her favors. Shortly after, Leonardo and Aurora were boyfriends and the love between them was filled as the sails of a boat. Soon they were already talking about marriage.

The servant accommodated the quilted pillows in its place and kept on dusting the furniture. A complicity expression showed in her face when she continued the story:

-Leonardo had to stay away from Ettonguess for three months, after the illness that took the life of his dear mother kept him posted to her side until she died. When he returned, sooner than expected, he found his fiancé lying in the arms of the infamous Dorian. He did not even make the attempt of explaining his dirty trick ... and Leonardo was too much hurt as to ask him for a clarification of his extravagant behavior. By this betrayal the entire human race is paying as Leonardo now considered them inferior beings, unable to control their emotions, conflicting and consequently destructive. During those days Americus feared by the health of the young magician. Every day he was thinner and paler. Sometimes, he cried with sweeping crudeness. I believe that the treachery joined to the grief of the loss of his mother was very much pain in the shoulders of only one person. Americus tried to cheer him up but it was not much what he could do.

-So that was the reason of so much bitterness – I thought - Now I knew the motive for which the magician was looking at us with so much hate. Exceeded the dike of my curiosity, I began to ask without indulgence:

-What happened to Dorian?

The other servants had already finished their tasks and had left the

room; just Diana remained under the meticulous scrutiny of my interrogations. She took a seat on the same couch where I was and with the entertaining tone that the servitude members usually use when ventilating the dirty secrets of the owners, dropped:

-Both, Leonardo and Dorian, belong to the same social circle, so they had no other choice than seeing each other at reunions and parties. When their ways crossed, the scoundrel was contented with the rough indifference with which now was treated by his ancient friend and crossed words only when it was definitely indispensable. And of Aurora, just a light sigh remained, since as soon as she collapsed in his arms, Dorian lost interest in her.

-And what about Duprina? – I articulated.

The expression of the young woman changed. I knew by intuition that the fiancée of the magician was not much appreciated, what was expected considering the pretensions and the nobility conceits that were outcropping her person at first sight.

-Duprina came later. This woman is a nuisance, she takes offense for smallness and becomes mad when one does not treat her as she believes she deserves. She is capricious and conceited. Leonardo knew her in one of the activities in which he embarked after graduating, promoting the secular texts among the population. At first, the magician was not paying attention to her. She had a too noisy and exotic beauty for his taste. But the girl persevered in appropriating his favors, which obtained more for her insistence and determination than for the predisposition of the magician towards her. This relation is not approved by Americus. The girl has an absorbent and tenacious character. Her recurrent outbursts of jealousy are already beginning to annoy my lord. I am sure that Leonardo's intentions with her are not serious.

When I was going to formulate the following question, my sisters entered with big rejoicing and Diana had to move back with resignation, with the promise to keep on conversing in some other opportunity. I did not have time to tell her that we would be leaving on the following day.

Very close to there, in one of the contiguous rooms, Americus also was thinking about Leonardo. He was worried about his son. In spite of all the academic and professional achievements and his emulation to acquire knowledge, his character had forged cold and calculating, with very little tolerance for human weaknesses. In the last months the boy had been confined voluntarily in The Fortaleza limiting himself to the exclusive dealing with magical beings. Taking advantage of the contingency of the arrival of the Montero girls, his intention was to throw Leonardo back to the world of men, or should he say “world of women”? -Thought smiling.

The beauty of the Eisenbaum environment was something never seen. And the fact was that everything in Eisenbaum was of an infinite exquisiteness, its cobbled streets, its houses with sight to the sea, its wavy hillsides, its greenish avenues, its splendid sceneries, its rainbow-colored twilights, its wavy little streams, its complaisant lake, its irreverent ocean, everything seemed molded by the meticulous hands of a God who polished much especially the day of its creation. I appeared in the window to contemplate the wonderful twilight that was outlined behind the sea. A couple discussing in one of the courtyards got my attention. When I perfected the sight I recognized the Magician and his fiancée, Duprina. The woman was speaking and gesticulating roughly. My fecund imagination daydreamed about the motive of similar discussion: Would it be that the absorbent woman was not in agreement with the allocation that Americus had given to Leonardo of accompanying us back to Saint Andre? With the proper dissimulation of women, being these children, girls, or oldsters, I extended lightly part of my body towards out, in a perfect angle of forty five grades, with the secret intention of extending my visual and auditory field, but still with my newly acquired athlete's agility, could neither discern the words nor translate the gestures. Once again I covered myself of admiration for Mrs. Tula, whose efforts in this art of the investigation of the foreign adversity seemed to bloom of a vocation inherited from her ancestors, adhered to her person from the moment of her birth, and in this way, without very much determination or emulation, she appropriated of the human melodramas to promulgate them in all its extension, such as a decree, for the populous streets of town. And it is that in this art of the investigation, as in any other art, it is needed the refining of certain skills and special workmanship, only provided by the expertise of an exclusive dedication.

In a more forceful attempt of appropriating me of the foreign words, I extracted half a body in the window, what made me slide imprudently and boisterously and some little stones went to smash noisily against the floor. When I looked again to the couple, I received the fulminant gaze of Duprina as the flight of one thousand spears flyers, then, she took Leonardo by the arm and moved him away from my view. Thanks to God, the Magician was back and was not aware of my strange and shameful position. I moved back with a bitter sensation in my gullet. It was not good to have from the enemy a witch – I thought. And while the duo was moving away, I concentrated again on the arrangements of the holiday.

What fascinating inebriation impregnates the soul and the hearts in the closeness of a celebration! It seems that the problems flee, frightened,

terrified, by the deafening noise of the scandalous music and the brazen laughter of those who have been invited to with flamboyance, devouring bottles and bottles of champagne and succulent mussels on toasted buns. Thus, the problems disappeared with their load of spite and sorrow going to hide, in a hurry, in any room where the noise is damped and not heard. There, they remain quiet, at least until the celebration ends, to run feverish again up to descending on the unfortunate shoulders of the one they fled from.

In this fascinating inebriation I was lost, savoring the nectar borrowed from happiness. At least on that night, I would try not to think about anything. In the small room improvised for our use by Azucena, a kind little fairy that Americus had put at our disposal, my sisters and I were gathered. The Genie was cloistered in his bottle and Bartolomeo was nibbling a cookie on one of the red wine chairs that adorned the stay, foreign to the surrounding noise, focusing all of its canine attention on the only deserving object of its interest at that moment: the cookie and the crumbs that were jumping like lost fleas around. Also excited was Beatrice but for very different causes. Azucena had the gift of making appeared out of nothing the most beautiful garments that the textile industry could ever imagine; not even Versace in his best times could have designed so elegant and pompous, simple and stately, coloring or monochrome, conservative or showy, opaque or brilliant, long or short garments which such delicacy and pledge! In other words there were no limits that the creative and textile magic of Azucena could not cover, in terms of textures and designs. Impetuous, to take advantage of this amazing ability, Beatrice had required the instantaneous dressmaking of three exclusive models to select between them the one that better suited her ways and forms. The three were lying deflated on the bed while she was deciding which to be proved first.

-Do you want to come with us to Saint Andre? - Asked vehemently Beatrice - you would be a whole success there and the shopping centers would go away broke!

Mariana was euphoric. That evening in particular she was not of fortitude as to support Beatrice's frivolities.

-In Saint Andre there are no shopping centers – she said.

Beatrice looked at her infuriated, she did not like being contradicted, much less in the presence of strangers, and much less in the presence of magic strangers, in whose case, the index of her indignation was bigger than the habitual thing.

-I know it, I was referring to the city – Answered Beatrice unable to recognize her mistake - In a few days Camila will be eighteen and all of us will return to our city house. So don't you ever think of dying – She said speaking to me - because I would kill you. Also, I do not know why

you are so worried and concerned about the cursed ring. I am sure nothing is going to happen!

The little fairy was not speaking, everything what she did was laughing with a touchy and nasal snigger and produced dresses and more dresses. -What would you think of this one? – Beatrice said at the summit of her arrogance, turning to show us the model she had selected, at the time that was calibrating her image in a mirror and spinning.

Mariana studied her for a few seconds. She considered her sister's conduct to be improper. It was reprehensible that in this world infested with unspeakable needs, one will spend so much time in so stupid and silly things. She selected, from her wide repertoire, the words that more mortification throw on the inflated self-esteem of the pretentious Beatrice and declared without mufflers:

-You turn out to be beautiful although you look like a big cream Chantilly batter!

These words were enough so that three models were rejected at once and turned again to the little fairy requesting for three more garments. Meanwhile, Mariana, leaving aside the flippancy, was plunged into the feminine pleasure of choosing an outfit for the holiday. She discarded of a glance the pompous garments of taffeta, successive layers of lining, lace, taffeta, more fit, more taffeta, more lining. She considered it difficult to walk with so many layers of tulle and laces nibbling her ankles. She selected a white, smooth, simple garment, without adornments, preferred to sacrifice beauty for serviceability. For my part I selected also a simple and vaporous garment, with a subtle elegance and without pretensions. I walked towards the mirror and extracting Beatrice to pokes of the small space, measured my dress over my clothes under the admiring looks of Mariana:

-Oh! Camila! You should dress this way more often, you might take the Beatrice position like the most beautiful of us.

Beatrice gave a sovereign strike to Mariana's head, in the beauty matters only she was the queen. Nevertheless, leaving aside the hostilities, she added maliciously:

-I believe that this time the magician will have to look at you.

I turned wonderingly. So obvious had been my interest that had not happened unnoticed before my sisters? And what about Duprina? Would she have found out also? Before the doubt, I decided on the denial.

-I do not understand what you refer.

But Beatrice was not dumb and much less in the matters of the heart.

-I believe that you do – she finished off with mischievousness.

7 - THE REVENGE OF DUPRINA

So angry was Duprina for the latest events of that evening that when she went to her room to make herself comfortable for the festivities of that night, she had already decided to do an enchantment to remove the girl of this world. She closed the door with special care and knocked down her black and conical hat on a couch. Then, she walked toward the flaky furniture that was semi-hidden at the bottom of the room and pulled the rusty door knocker of one of the drawers which showed without shyness its content.

From the interior she extracted a relatively big chest that placed on the polished surface of a little table of three paws that was next to her, and with a key and a light "click", the lid rose to show a bunch of fresh and squeezed grasses. She separated a little displeased by the penetrating aroma, the exuberant smell of the fresh grasses had always disliked her as they awoke her allergy and if that was not sufficient, they detached its unpleasant steams impregnating the ambience with a smell of mellow and rotten fat; she preferred the dehydrated ones that had a light fragrance but were also powerful. From a shelf near to the grass furniture, she looked for a tiny bottle that the Magician Abramelin had delivered to her the last time she went to the Black Magic Market, which was the place to acquire magic ingredients prohibited by the Brotherhood. She found it labeled with its mortuary tag in the shape of the skull and its resinous watery content, which was next to the disturbing sleeping philter. It is not that she was an expert in the use of the dark arts, but she was beginning to penetrate secretly into that dangerous world, at the expense of being discovered and exiling permanently from The Ciudadela, at the expense of losing Leonardo forever.

Even the first enchantments had had catastrophic results, taking to death to some of the bewitched ones, but she was ready to use any kind of magic, white, black or whatever, to erase any well-known obstacle which might intervene between her and the magician. At her favor was the fact that Camila had already on the curse of the ring, which meant that in four days she would be out of the life of her fiancé. But there was something that was worrying her, Americus was very wise and powerful and, with enough time, was capable of finding a counter-conjuration that would snatch the girl from the claws of the death, so she had to insure herself that such an event should not happen.

When she assembled all the magical elements on the table, scraped a match that lit her beveled eyes. Carefully she lit a small sail which flamed, unsteady in principle and some seconds later began to stagger up to gaining height and conviction and was then when she placed on it a metallic structure that was supporting the portable boiler. Duprina dismembered the grasses with the hands, little by little, and they were falling down slowly swinging like snowflakes on the receptacle. Minutes later, the shift came to the caravel philter bottle, which spilled on the thick concoction began to throw sickening bubbles for the sides, other implements were added carelessly, without many ceremonies. With a wooden spoon she stirred the jumble with delight and left that the ingredients were cooked.

When the first steams of the mixture impregnated the room, she looked in the conjurations book and located the one she needed. Then raised the arms and began to recite it with the monotonous tone of a litany. She invoked to the dark forces of Zoroastro, the Enchantress Zarnia and the Magician Abramelim, summoned to their marvelous and perverse powers so that the potion lull the senses of the young woman and preventing her to locate the counter-conjuration, maintaining her in a dreaming state, at least until the five days had passed and the demons arrive. While she was reciting, the concoction was turning darker and darker, and watery and watery. Already finished the coven and when he was preparing to gather the tools, suddenly, an enormous black cat entered the window. At once she recognized the baneful look of the enchantress ally.

- I believe that we know each other already, Frosenblack to serve you! – The beast said with solemnity - My mistress sends me with a message: You must not worry about anything. Everything is prepared to take the girl in four days.

She looked at him suspiciously. Far from her thought the idea of sitting down to wait, unpolluted, for the normal course of the events. Nothing like little magic covens to force the fake in her favor.

- I know, but I do not want that errors happen. Americus is with her

and I fear he might obtain the remedy on time.

The cat marauded a little for the room and having a short rest on the couch that was supporting the hat, displaced it saying:

-Nobody has ever escaped of the curse of the ring! Anyway, how would you make her taste the concoction?

Surprised that her acts were known by the animal, Duprina answered:

-Tonight! At the celebration, I will find the occasion to spill it in her meal or drink.

-Good luck, then!

Duprina was nervous. The Frosenblack's words had not left the awaited calm she hoped. She wanted to insure that there was no way out for the girl. No matter how many conjurations she would have to do, she will make sure Camila was not saved. Leonardo confirmed to her he was going on that journey against his will, but she anticipated that Americus had secret motives behind the request of sending his fiancé with Camila to Saint Andre. Frosenblack, of a jump, settled again in the window, and after saying goodbye, disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Already in the solitude of her room, the enchantress decided to put an end to her bellicose activities for that night and to begin to dress up for the celebration. She did not want to be late.

The music chords greeted us from the Lounge while we were lowering the wide stairs. Mariana slid from them as if of a toboggan, filled with enthusiasm by the pompousness of what she was observing. Beatrice did modulate the steps and took more time than needed in her descent, in emulation to exhibit herself like a spongy peacock and capturing the biggest quantity of looks from the young gentlemen. The holiday had already begun. A band was playing a melody to waltz rhythm. The hall was illuminated by hundreds of small lanterns and its tenuous flames were competing with the gigantic light of a lamp that was rocking in the way of the roof. The tables adorned with soft salmon-colored tablecloths were dispersed along, making the center free for the dance floor. Some couples were already dancing. At the foot of the stairs, Americus went out to receive us. Very diverse outfits were adorning the assistants; very similar to those that one hopes to find in the celebrations of the carnival holidays, fascinating masks were accompanied with grace to the exotic hats in a sweeping deployment of textures and colors. Mariana placed her eyes on a big table that was exhibiting the most exquisite delicacies ever seen. There were creamy fruit cakes, syrupy glazed threads with tangerine and honey, shiny puddings of chocolate and shortbread, tremulous cream gelatin that seemed to dance also to the rhythm of the waltz, in other words, the whole confectioner world inviting to the palates to the exaltation of the most glorious of the senses, the taste. An invitation that Mariana did not

do recur twice, for courteousness or for gormandizing, the true thing was that she was unable to refuse. Decisive she walked up to the place, took a plate of the battery stored in one of the ends and being walked by gluttony she took two strawberry small fruit tarts, a chocolate cake, a profiterole and one of the tremulous cream caramel gelatin.

Americus encouraged us to sit down at his table, which was a blessing since Mariana was doing juggling with her shipment and was afraid that at any moment her delicacies were going to smash against the shining white marble of the floor. Leonardo got up off the table with cold courteousness and helped to move the chairs to make space for us, then he returned to his place without the intention of maintaining a conversation with somebody. With Americus we did maintain an agreeable and entertaining conference exchanging affable phrases and information about the peculiarities of the climate; in reciprocity to his kind manners, I praised the lounge and the meal and asked some superficial questions that demonstrated my interest and courteousness. A young magician who was in one of the adjacent tables approached to invite me to dance. Unexpectedly Americus indicated that I had promised the first dance to Leonardo. The face of stupefaction and surprise with which the magician looked at me was equaled by mine, and before the disinclination showed by him and my desire to avoid the humiliation of a rejection for the sake of saving my pride, I babbled some excuses phrases that sprouted introverted and shy from my lips, like a cocoon that risks to find for the first time with the golden ribbons of the sun.

With flushing, I refused by arguing, not being familiar with the pace that was playing, attributing also to my trip a nonexistent weariness, but Americus that was as stubborn as convincing, and possessed the intellectual wisdom of the geniuses, and in consequence, was immune to the fictitious excuses, raided into our spirits with the rhetoric of reason and in seconds both, the magician and I, were dancing under the harmonic notes of a sweetened melody. Immersed in the warmth of his arms that were surrounding me, I broke:

-You did not have to do it I had already refused! - Said to him with the same coldness tone he was using when talking to me.

-The desires of Americus are orders for me – He answered in his habitual tone although seemed to be more relaxed and entertaining.

In dancing, he was skillful, his movements were agile and punctual, undoubtedly, an excellent dancer. Looked for Duprina with my eyes, the girl was not in the Lounge, therefore I surmised that this was the unquestionable reason why I was in the arms of the Magician in that moment. I tried to seem absent-minded when I asked him:

-In such a case; will I have to speak with him so that he orders you to be

more respectful and cordial with me?

Leonardo opened the first smile that I had seen on him since my arrival. Nevertheless, that was not a friendly smile, like those that furrowed in the face of the one who expresses it invite with joy to the intimacy of a secret, but of that other, which by its irony load is ballasted by the steams of the suspicion.

- So, how is that you want me to be respectful and cordial with you?

It was a wily question I did not want to answer myself. I had to be extremely cautious in my answer, not to discover any more of my feelings than it was absolutely necessary. In the end I decided to maraud for the ways of the superficiality and answer with the most insipid of the phrases:

-Well, we are going to be a time together, like that... That I thought ... that the best thing was that we were on good terms.

The smile became wider like that of an inverse rainbow. He looked at me with intelligence. Would he know anything of my inclinations? The light presumption of which the Magician could know about my fidelities, embarrass me enormously. I did not want to be an object of mockery or disappointments. Nothing in his behavior had given signs that he had discovered my secret, but he was a Magician, and they are supposed to be experts in the human nature. Nevertheless, his answer calmed me down.

-That is not necessary! It will be enough that we do not bother each other.

When I was going to refute, the agreeable young man who had approached the table at the beginning, requested again the honor of dancing with me. His features were subtle and friendly. His elegant black suit denoted a strong and compact musculature; Leonardo did not doubt for a second to put me in the arms of the stranger, even without asking me whether or not I accepted the request for dancing, and without looking back, once again he went back to the table.

A few times I had been the subject of a snub so tenaciously; even the shenanigans of Gertrude had not resulted in an anger so overwhelming, so dark, so brutal, as the one produced by Leonardo. I thought of following him and claiming his conduct but the figure of the young boy with the widespread hand was eclipsing the way; so controlling my impetuses of stained maiden, I rolled up my garment and concentrated on the dance.

The band began to play a soft melody and the young man surrounded my waist with the arms. While he was dancing he began to speak:

-Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Dorian. I cannot avoid noticing you are very beautiful!

After the snub of the Magician, the pompous and over-sweet words of

Dorian refreshed a little my injured pride. The young man was not as high as the magician, to tell the truth, he was equal in height as me, did not even have either the indigo look or the elegant and powerful freightage, or the elegance of Leonardo's movements. No! Dorian was charming but with the vulgar delight granted by the learned gestures, that for fictitious, they are proclaiming to the screams its falsity and discrediting the one who carries them. Nevertheless the flattery of his sweet talk found a fertile area in my stained self-esteem.

-My name is Camila.

-I know it, an angel name really! – He said depositing a tenuous kiss on my hand. The young boy felt an irremediable attraction towards feminine beauty. He always sought to surround himself with women in every occasion and it was precisely this hobby which had won him the fame of womanizer.

The rhythm turned to one more violent. We immediately won the revelry. The crowd, went wild to the cries and the jumps of a samba whose drums were heard to the edge of the obstinacy, the audience flocked, as a single body, in the center of the track. I joined also to this sort of collective madness that is the dance, and it was at this point that I ran away of class, good taste and good manners. I danced excessively, as would have danced an African woman hypnotized by the cadenza of a drum, I got rid of my shoes first, later the bracelets and the necklaces, the hair was escaping to the jumping up to remaining free and heavy because of the perspiration. Without noticing, we danced more than five pieces. When we finished the last one, I returned to the table, with the flesh-colored cheeks and absence of breath. Americus looked at me with pleasure highlighting enthusiastically his admiration for my workmanship and fortitude for the tropical rhythms and offered me a refreshing fruit drink that I took with exaggerated pleasure of only one gulp. I reached the napkins of a plate to fan myself since the heat was excessive and my heart was beating as if the samba was still traveling inside of me. On the dancing spot, I observed Beatrice who was dancing energetically turning round and round like in a circus carousel. In one of these rounds she approached the table doing winks to me; I understood she wanted me to take the opportunity to converse with the magician, but I did not pay attention to her. Mariana for her part was doing the proper thing; she carried to extremes her amiability and modulated her shyness in an emulation to connect a conversation with Leonardo and me included. With her, he behaved particularly pleasantly, answering her questions with geniality and friendliness, fact that confirmed me that his distaste was directed exclusively to my person. Alarmed by the behavior of my sisters and realizing their tricks, I tried to dominate my disturbance and continue the party denying the

importance of the matter. Later I would have the chance to arrange accounts with them when the occasion appears.

Duprina came in at that moment and hung by Leonardo's arm like a chimpanzee. She protested with an over-sweet voice that she still had not danced. The Magician ignored her comment and concentrated on the main course of his dinner, cutting with big precision the smoked little pieces of the roast, all in perfect squares angled in ninety grades, irreproachable, lying half-closed on the plate, without being mixed very much with the other appetizers. Minutes later, my dance accompanist settled in the seat that corresponded to Beatrice and devoted to court me without hiding the admiration that for me he was feeling. Flattered by his praises, the more because they were spoken in front of Leonardo, I focused my attention exclusively on his person, and to his sugary poet phrases I reciprocated with the enforced courtesy of my deference. For his part, Leonardo hauling the blue eyes from time to time sent a sarcastic look accompanied by the smile such as the one of an accomplice who carries a secret he doesn't want to share.

Nevertheless, Duprina was unusually amiable. She took good care that all of us were well provided both in meal and in drink, without releasing Leonardo's arm, of course. Apart from this event, and the fact that Americus was truly hungry and thirsty since he was appropriating of all my appetizers and gobbling them with special satisfaction, and later, apologizing, went away to fulfill me with others that he was bringing himself straight from the inn; everything else flew as to correspond in this type of events.

The rest of the night Leonardo danced neither with me, nor with Duprina, and the few comments he expressed were in relation to the meal. The night became dawn and little by little the persons were disappearing off the dance floor. Beatrice wanted to continue with the party and was as fresh as the first moment we arrived, only a few slight bruises on her dress denoted the disorders that the hectic rhythms had been imposed upon her. Americus dismissed us with the promise to see us in the morning. The Magician and Duprina disappeared behind a large door, after a cold "good night".

It had been a memorable party, undoubtedly. I turned towards Beatrice, took her by the arm and with difficulty I managed to take her up to the room. Mariana left earlier the party and was sleeping placidly on the cozy bed adorned with comforters and laces. We plummeted rendered by the tiredness of the dance and the agitation of the last events of the day.

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8 – BACK TO SAINT ANDRE

To the dawns of the day we met Americus and Leonardo on the patio located at the highest point of the building, sight to the sea, following the instructions that Diana had communicated to us after the breakfast. The warm marine wind was striking strongly on our faces but the spectacular panoramic sight of three hundred sixty grades, with the ocean on the one hand and, the mountain of the North White Bear, for the other, together with the wide countryside spread horizontally as infinite blankets, abated to a great extent any type of inconvenience that we may be suffering. Azucena had provided us with trip outfits, so we did not have to pass through the shame of using again the ridiculous pledges given by the Genie. Seconds later, Duprina and Dorian appeared, they joined Americus in the expression of the familiar phrases of farewells, hugs, more phrases of farewell and more hugs. How do we go to the mansion of the enchantress Zarnia? It was a mystery that the magician refused to reveal.

I recall only a mild in a drowsiness that lasted a second and a half, and when we opened the eyes, by an act of magic, we were on the porch of the residence of the sorceress Zarnia.

Pleasantly surprised by his skills in the art of magic, I took the chance to express to him, in an attempt for encouraging the solid threads of an incipient friendship and showing my excellent manners, the following:

- Your magic is much more powerful than my carpet. It took us the whole night to go to Eisenbaum but you brought us here in a second!

Leonardo looked at me without answering, impermeable to my good will advances. He opened the door of the house and entered the hall. I remained some minutes at the door. Behind me, Mariana and Beatrice commented:

-Listen! Do you believe it is a good idea to be in this house? The last time you went out with a bewitched ring, what if, for bad luck, we managed to find now, the necklace or the bracelet that matches your ring? Or some another pledge predisposed by the witch to damage?

I made a break after which I said:

-This time we have a magician! – At the time I followed Leonardo, who was advancing so quickly that it was making it impossible to maintain the step. I knew by intuition that he was so displeased by my presence that was trying to put distance between us.

The Genie, who also had traveled with us and Bartolomeo remained on the veranda. Beatrice and Mariana continued behind me. For every question which I did, I got no answer from him. In the end, after so much indifference and releasing the calipers that courtesy imposes, I yelled at him, holding his arm:

- Look! It is not my fault that Americus has ordered you to take care of me. What have I done to bother you so much?

The Magician did not answer a word and continued walking up to the entry of the basement. There, he stopped, opportunity that I took to speak to him again:

-Don't you teach good manners to magicians? Because it is very discourteous not to respond when someone is asking you a question!

Beatrice and Mariana stopped a few steps from me. The first one took me by the arm and separated me a little about the group, whispered in my ear:

- Camila, please stop harassing him, what you are going to obtain is that he walks away and do not help you at all!

-I think he is tender! – Mariana said with a sigh.

Leonardo's thoughts were very far. The Magician was pondering about the reasons why Americus had sent him to protect the youngsters. Duprina had remained with a hysterical attack, did not understand neither why the elder sent him to “babysit” those girls. Although his fiancée had the tendency to exaggerate and a taste exacerbated by dramatics, in this occasion Leonardo had to agree with her appreciations. This task was far from the activities of his status and accepted only because his father had demanded it, but the dealing did not include that he had to be kind with the girls. The problem was that there was no way of keeping Camila silent. Since she arrived she had not stopped talking, barely had been with her a few minutes and was already extremely dazed. He even thought to use one of the spells of the first years of study to remove the voice. That was one of the first spells that he learned in the magic school and very popular among the boys who entertained themselves silencing mutually. Even the teachers used it to placate the bustle of certain classes. Nevertheless, he did not believe that

Americus approved it, for which he abstained.

-.... You were already quite rude in the castle, I wanted that they sent another magician, more affable, like Dorian. It was not my fault that Americus selected you. I had preferred other!

-There is no other, miss – He said finally - I am the best!

He opened the door of one room and entered without waiting for us. Also I entered with the intention of continuing with the dialogue.

-Well, you are not modest, aren't you? The best at what?

The expression of his face became severe and with clear rudeness he declared:

-I do not try to get hooked up in a diatribe with you. The more you remain quiet the better. I do not like the dealing with not magical beings. They are the most difficult beings to understand in this planet. They think a thing and say another! What they say is not always what they do! And what they do not always is what they feel! Who understands them? It is too exhausting to deal with you and one needs a keenness of exceptional discernment to crumble what your heads hide! And if these heads belong to the feminine genre, it is much worse! And if this head supports itself on the shoulders of Camila Montero? I think there is nothing worse than could happen to a human being! You speak very much!, Too much!, Very, very much!

-I have not spoken anything – protested Mariana, realizing the unjustness of the claim.

-Me neither – said Beatrice hurt in her pride.

Taking into account that the warmed expressions of the magician were directed only and exclusively to my person, I concluded:

-As you want! - I shouted infuriated -help me look for the Book and let's finish this consortium! From here on I will not pronounce words!

-Ok! That's it! – Was all he yelled at me.

After that, we begin to look for the book in silence for the whole room and in every corner appearing to our eyes. We checked the rooms on the top floor but did not find anything; then, the studio and the kitchen, and found nothing. Just when I was about to get lost in the ways of the desperation, I remembered having seen the image of the lion with the open jaws in another place: in our basement in The Borrascosa, that by chance also was full of books, dust and vermin. Perhaps “The Keys of the Kingdom” might be there - I thought much convinced about my intuition and with the fortitude ready to shout to the four winds the scopes of my discovery.

But, Ouch!, considering the silence promise that I pronounced minutes earlier and not wanting to be the first one in breaking the sacred vote, on penalty of receiving major derision, I decided to look for a way to communicate my thoughts without the help of the words that

tormented the Magician. There it was when the mimicry, way of universal expression, came to my help. I tried with some soft movements of my hands, but the perplexed faces of my sisters confirmed that they did not understand my message. Beatrice thought that I was a victim of some cramp and Mariana of some stomach unpreparedness. With major determination, I continued with a few studied contortions that in nothing were adapting themselves to the pristine intention of my message. In the end, the Magician, with his habitual gesture of exasperation and raising his hands towards the sky, freed me from the vote with an indifferent gesture and finally I could speak:

-In the basement of The Borrascosa I saw an emblem of the lion with the open jaws and I believe that there we can find the book – the words went out of me abruptly, like a shot at a pressure of a cauldron.

Beatrice and Mariana confirmed my affirmation. Leonardo, then, mentioned that the search had to be continued there. He stepped down the stairs quickly and behind him we did the same. In the veranda the Genie and Bartolomeo joined and we left for The Borrascosa, leaving the carpet in the home of the enchantress as it was too heavy to carry.

Leonardo's eyes were bluer than the Eisenbaum Sea but they looked harder than the Gibraltar's rock, his inexpressive face was making impossible for me to foresee his thoughts and that was something that exasperated me the most. Only the bitter comments that once in a while was throwing allowed me to make out the disposition that he had with all this matter of the curse.

I came to think that if it were up to him, I would have been thrown to the marbles of the burning hell, ravaging my flesh with a sharp rake to make more infamous my pain.

Sometimes I captured him looking out of the corner of his eye at the ring in my hand, but as soon as he realized I was looking back he turned the sight away and kept us walking as if we were cattle.

-Wait a minute! – I pronounced - we cannot go to The Borrascosa with you. We do not have a way of explaining your presence!

The magician stopped also and, very offended, answered:

-By no means I would expect to live together with you in that house! - He said as if it was the worst thing that might happen to him – If the Book is in your house, you can look for it at your account. It's your house, for God sake! What dangers can you possibly find there? Zoroastro will not come even in three days. I will stay at the hotel in town meanwhile!

-In town? – I asked incredulous.

-Yes, I will be close, just in case you need something.

-But you could stay in the basement - said Mariana - with Bartolomeo

and Filomena!

A light smile showed in my face on having imagined to a distinguished magician as Leonardo, seated on Filomena's pink plush mattress.

-That will not be necessary - He answered in a bad mood – As I said I will be at the Grand Prince hotel.

-What if the shades look for me? How could you protect me being that far?

Armed with patience the Magician answered:

- I already told you that Zoroastro demons will not come until the fifth day and if something goes so far as to happen earlier, I will know it!

I looked at him with anxiety as most of my hopes were relying on him; I could not let him go. Finding the book would be much easier with him since he had a lot of experience in the search of the sacred books and that was scarcely my first incursion into the field. In some inexplicable way, his presence gave me courage.

-Please stay! How can I be sure that you will be here if I need you?

He modulated the tone. Perhaps the exteriorization of my anxiety resounded in some sensitive fibers of his soul.

-You cannot! You will have to trust me! - That was all what he said.

His words far from calming me down infuriated me crowding the anger in my cheeks.

-Why should I trust in a person who hates me? - I shouted at him.

He observed me with surprise.

-Let's say that you have no choice left, right? - And then he kept on walking putting an end to the chat.

On having arrived on the verge of The Borrascosa, the Magician disappeared so silently as if he had never existed.

- I have to get accustomed to this thing of magic - I thought to myself.

ANOTHER BOOK AND THE GUARDS

The Book was observing fascinated by the young woman. It was not unusual that the inhabitants of the house climbed down into the depths of the lugubrious cellar to unload the frets; or that any member of the servitude appeared in person trying to organize the parade of boxes and trunks bruised and imprisoned under the moldy dust made after long years of enclosure.

The Borrascosa cellar was a cemetery of useless things and memories cloistered in pasteboard coffins wrapped up in naphthalene clouds under the dust layers which insisted on hiding the true color of the forms, granting to all of them a uniform grayish coloration. Neither was the first time that The Book was observing her. Months earlier a few hurried steps alerted it of the presence of the girl in the heavy oak door that was sealing the entrance to the place. The young woman approached up to the shelves replete with books piled up in a variety of forms and colors that the moisture had already begun to mutilate. She selected a copy among the hundreds that

were placed on a gnawed pine table that once presided at the gathering of the family; with difficulty brought a chair closer and sat down comfortably to inspect it. She studied it with curiosity at first, later patiently, read the title several times as if she wanted to record in her memory the familiar letters for a later meeting, kept on leafing through the content of its discolored pages at random until the soft natural light was darkening little by little.

She closed the volume and took her road on returning to the place she was sharing with her sisters. Some days later she came back with a plain toolbox that put on the table to tackle an incipient restoration work; a worn-out brush with soft bristles, a few faded plush cloths, probably clipped from an old carpet and a bag with diverse crinolines completed the squalid set for the marvelous task.

The book anxiously awaited its turn. The frayed adorned hard front in vivid red velvet color and the diffuse golden letters did not receive the human caress since long time ago, just dust and shades populated its kingdom. Nevertheless this was not a common book; its humble dimensions disguised its nobility. It was a book for which many men would kill, a book looked by magicians and enchantresses in the annals of time, which disappeared from the world during the dark epochs of humanity and whose tenancy had meant a death sentence for its holder. Its fragile pages trembled smiling before the imminent event that it knew would happen that day. Cirila, a tiny fairy, of ethereal and sweet features and abundant golden hair, whose delicate and translucent wings were fluttering to a side of the loin tickling it, had already begun to withdraw the dust that was covering its magic pages. Petrarco, a grumpy gnome, very bad-dressed with singular apple green pants, fuchsia boots with yellow vest splashed with purple circles was striving to push the book up to the shore of the shelf so that it was the first thing that the young girl saw on coming and finally, Drefno, an American elf of exquisite manners and sumptuous gait, was dealing with removing the creeping vermin that could maraud for the area.

The wood grunted down the firm footprint that went straight where the volume was settled; the Book felt the warmth of a few fingers covering its velvety front and a light blast shook the ground of its weak sheets. Seconds later, he felt curled up by two delicate arms that rocked it up to the place that he had been longing per months from its secret storage. The young woman lit a kerosene lamp she was using in order not to wake up her sisters; a peculiar smell flooded the suffocated enclosure and began to melt with the local moribund aromas. One by one the tiny dust particles were undressing the set of letters that were lying concealed after the dirtiness. Neither the smelly dirtiness nor the erosion of time could have spoiled the majesty of the title: "The Keys of the Kingdom"

The indelible mitigation sensation that flooded me the moment in which I supported the valuable book between my hands, was only comparable to that of the reprobate, which is condoned of the death penalty in the last moment. I had achieved it, and without the help of the Magician. This incredible finding was communicated immediately to my sisters, who, sharing my happiness and rejoicing, danced frantically

around me shutting myself up in a circle. What agreeable sensation provides the fragrance of the victory and the attainment of the successful goal! How happy I was to know that soon I would get rid of that cursed ring. In the basement, the bold face Salome also was dancing and sharing our happiness.

The morning rose with its shining sun of golden flashes and the fresh breeze of life returning to me. We snuggled all on one of the mattresses and already sitting I placed the book on my lap with the intention to thoroughly review its pages in search of the long awaited remedy.

The joy lasted a little, right up to the moment that I realized that it was written in an unknown language to me. After all, it seemed that I would be requiring the magician help after all.

Filomena was a very valued member in our family. So dear and so loved like any other member. But the fact was that to belong to our family one did not need much, it was enough a light splash of love showed without simulations on any of us and already, we were running, astonished, to shelter them under our appreciations. But our considerations did not shelter the scourge of discrimination, neither of gender nor race, neither of persons nor animals. Though, our family was wide as the margins of a river and cover not only to the blood members of the family but to all those who by affinity wished to do so.

Oh!, Grandpa Gennaro, if you could see us ...! We have an eclectic and a singular family now! Sure you must be laughing there in the heights of the heavens while tasting your celestial blood sausages! Filomena in reciprocity to our affections clucked hers for the dusty paths of the basement with much calmness and without many emotions.

One day, it was the wish of the adversity that, in our absence, just before the breakfast hour, Filomena saw the half-open door of the basement and touched by her adventurous spirit and at the risk of her own safety; she jumped the gangway up to ending to the wide corridor that was leading to the hall. Even there, everything was okay. She looked at the objects accumulated along the stay with curiosity; one especially got her attention, the imitation of a Van Gogh work, "First Steps", which was hanging on the wall. Perhaps the greenish and yellowish tones of the painting, which reflected a portrait of a rural scene, evoked in the depths of her mind the longing of previous times, or perhaps, she liked the chromatic composition of the subtle tones. We'll never know.

The true thing was that Filomena, to her fatality, after contemplating for a long time the painting, walked up to the top floor towards Leticia's room, without thinking about the tragic consequences of so rash action. Leticia was opposite to the hairdresser admiring the image reflected in

the mirror, when she saw the gallinaceous figure with a bugle necklace and scarlet hoofs. She must have thought that it was a creature from hell that was coming after her to purge her sins. Up to the kitchen were heard the screams of Leticia and the cackling of Filomena. Later, just silence.

We came first into the room, behind us, Ño Josefina, and very much behind, some members of the servitude. Leticia was still lying on the bed with a shock attack, with the perpetrator weapon in the hands and a missed look, and Filomena lying on the carpet with the glassy look and the half-open beak, the only signs showing that life was escaping from her. Petrified I stayed before the door but not Mariana, making her way between the bodies, walked up to where the unhappy bird was lying, untied the knot of her scarf and wrapped it around the bird with the same care as if it was asleep instead of deceased. She went out of the room and behind her, we did the same. Ño Josefina continued reviving Leticia and extracting her of the dizziness, then informed her that the animal should have been a hen escaped of the corral, days ago, saving our responsibility in the matter.

Already in the basement, we reported the decease to the bold face Salome and to Batam-Al-Bur who started to cry with feeling. In contrast to us, the sadness of Mariana was controlled, only the thread of a tear was rolling occasionally to get lost in the thick plumage of the bird that was rocking between her arms. She placed the bundle on the table and smoothed the thin feathers. Looked for its plush carpet and its belongings and began to pile them up in a wooden box that was thinking to use as a coffin.

We would go to the forest and in the most beautiful skylight, would bury Filomena. On our way out, Beatrice took of Gertrude's garden, two beautiful tulips and three geraniums and penetrated disconsolate into the dense grove.

The funeral procession was composed by Beatrice, Mariana, the bold face Salome, Batam-Al-Bur, Bartolomeo and me. The trip was loaded with melancholies and sadnesses. No bird had ever been more loved and wept than Filomena in Saint Andre. We saved her from the vegetables and the cilantro but we could not save her from Leticia's killer hand. The slow and apologetic crying of Mariana was tearing my heart apart, impotent pain born by the incomprehension of the death of an innocent which had filled with happiness the days of our lives.

We reached a soft hill where a tenuous breeze was rocking the thin grass that covered a big extension. In the distance, The Minimas were seen. The rumor of a runnel was listened very closely, divine melody that would accompany the eternal sleep of our friend. Time ago, an araguaney tree had inserted its roots in the place to whose flowery shade

Filomena would remain sheltered. The Genie began to dig; the spade was hurting the ground and displacing it in slices to the side until a crack was done to receive the unexpected coffin. Sharing our sadness there was the sky which put on a cloak with its black clouds clothing on the verge of releasing the tears of the rain.

-Holy Water! - Said Mariana – We need holy water, otherwise, she won't go to heaven!

I imagined poor Filomena clucking for the sulfurous paths of hell. So much care we took to save her from the earthly fires and now she was going to perish in the infernal hot embers. No! We would not allow it! If holy water was quite what was needed, holy water we would get to assure the eternal rest of our hen. One of us would have to go to the church and try to get the blessed liquid, so I exclaimed:

-I will go to the village! I won't take long! Meanwhile you may pray a rosary. I will be back in forty minutes.

Beatrice extracted from her makeup purse a little perfume bottle and got rid of the liquid and brought it over to me.

-Take it! – She said - Bring the water here.

At once the Genie joined. Released the spade and the ground shook off. He wanted to help. Everything what he had done until now had gone out badly. So he decided to offer as volunteer to look for the holy water at town and this way to vindicate himself before our eyes.

-No! – He said – I am the one going to town. You may stay praying.

-Are you sure? – I asked at the time I delivered the little bottle to him.

-Yes! I will move much faster. I will use magic!

-Very well – I said – but be careful with your magic. You already know that you do not always obtain the awaited results.

Then he faded away under a cloud of blue fog. We put the small wooden box in the hole and with our own hands brought the small ground hillocks previously removed by the Genie on the coffin. At that point, we placed the tulips, the geraniums and a small cross that we did with two branches of a flowery tree. Kneeled down, opposite of the humble cross, we began to recite the prayers with very much fervor. On our heads, the dark thunderclouds were becoming denser.

Minutes later, the Genie was on the verge of the Church with the little bottle tied to his belt. The heavy large doors were half-open. The mass still seemed not to have begun. Hinted timidly the head, there was no one around. Smiled. The stain glass window were coloring the saints and virgins tunics, given them a look like members of the same race. The altar was rising to the bottom, dressed with white and purple tablecloth and a thin lace gilded in the shores. Aside, an immense white candle was burning and some golden ornaments had been placed meticulously on the surface of the table for the ceremony of the day.

Along, from side to side, there were the polished mahogany stools which very soon would be receiving the parishioners.

A strong smell of burned wax was impregnating the enclosure, to right hand he saw a twisted structure in wrought iron that was supporting the sails that the believers had lit like gift requesting the celestial favors or paying promises for the received ones. In the margin of the altar, he saw what he was looking for, the small font with the celestial shipment. On tiptoe he walked, little by little, being careful not to make noise, hiding among the non-existing spaces behind the columns that were supporting the roof of the temple. There were five of them up to the holy water battery. Sitting in the first bench was Mrs. Tula. She was always of the first ones in presenting to the church to insure the best position. Batam-Al-Bur had not seen her since the shade of Saint Cipriano was so thick that concealed the squalid figure of the woman, but Tula did see him and was asking herself intrigued what so slovenly young man was doing in a place as sacred as the temple. Already in the last column, the Genie skipped to the fountain and extracting the little bottle, began filling it with delight, looking at all sides, hoping not to be seen.

Mrs. Tula got flustered. How was that possible? And in the proper chapel? She already knew that thieves were swarming for the town, but in the church? What a foolishly act! And Father Tobias was not even seen by the surroundings. Thanks God and the Providence she was there, of present body, to solve that matter. She took the umbrella and approached surreptitiously in a way of staying to the backs of the thief, there she lifted the sun shade and at the time she was giving the first blow to him, shouted:

- Heretic! Thief!

With the thump and the surprise, the Genie released the little bottle that had already closed, which went to swirl in the calm waters of the baptism. With the second one, he had time to take it and keep it in the pocket before turning round to observe the energetic woman who with so much force was giving him sovereign thumps. He found a little oldster with the frown and the tight lips of a hyena that was already preparing herself to give the following blow. He scarcely had time to cover seconds before the lady fan the third impact and ran away.

The dark thunderclouds had moved away and with them the rain promise. Batam-Al-Bur came exhausted just when the colors of the west began to crown the bluish peak of the Monte Glaslo. He gave me the little bottle and spilled a quantity in the hollow of my hand and interspersed them for the four sides of the ground that now was a cemetery.

-Here lies Filomena, partner and faithful friend! – I said - Now, she will

cluck for the heaven's paths! There she goes, grandpa Gennaro – I continued looking at the heights - Now it is your turn to watch for her! Soon we will meet!

I pronounced the words shutting up the desire of which my phrases were true. That “soon we will meet” went out from my soul, considering the fact that instead of the heavens, the circumstances were taking me in the opposite direction. If I could not get away of this curse, very probably I would not see neither my grandpa nor Filomena again.

After this simple ceremony, we returned to The Borrascosa dragging the steps with an indelible gap sensation.

After the burial, far from the looks and the indiscreet ears of the inhabitants of the house, we met in the courtyard. A sadness aura was reflected in our tired faces. The unexpected meeting has the intention to outline the most believable of the excuses which allow me to leave the house away in such a late hour of the night. I needed to go to the Grand Prince hotel to deliver the mythical book to the Magician. Three days had passed, and with them, the chances of my survival were gone away, diluted. I had to meet the Magician. By much antipathy that my presence will inspire him, I was sure that would continue at the foot of the letter the indications of his father. Americus had said that the Book would reveal its secrets to me, but, or I was dull, or the Book was mute, because I had spent hours looking at it and had not perceived even the lightest clue of a secret. And of the guards, I had not had the most minimal evidence of their existence either.

Dinner time came and the banshee cries of Ño Josefina stopped at the rear door which fronted the courtyard, with the wet hands squeezing the stuffy apron, called us, for what we had to interrupt our conspiratorial conference. Anyway, the famine had already begun to blind us the understanding, ratifying the expressed in the old saying that stated: “Full Belly, satisfied heart”. It is my humble thinking that this axiom should be modified to “Full Belly, clarity of thoughts”.

Arriving at the dining room, Ño Josefina started to hum, together with the bold face Salome, a melancholic southern melody and I got goosebumps, as if a strange premonition was lengthening its ominous shade up to the present to muddy my last days of happiness on these lands. They, ignored of the stir that their musicality was producing in me, kept on accommodating the plates on the decorated table to the sound of the nostalgic chords. To my backs, I could listen to the Mariana's voice repeating as entreaty:

-Please, not oats! Not oats!, Please, please...

On having entered, her eyes illuminated: a salver of newly baked buns was resting placidly on the table, spreading an agreeable aroma of honey

and cinnamon that was doing water my mouth, a few slices of yellow cheese and pink ham were resting on every plate, a refreshing Californian orange juice completed the succulent dinner. We rushed forward without caution towards the served bowls and began to devour the exquisiteness variety. A few small fruit tarts of cream and strawberries were served to us like dessert.

-Ño Josefina, why are we receiving this dinner so special? – Asked Mariana suspiciously with a thick milk mustache on the lips and chewing still the remains of a cake.

The mulatto looked at her perplexed as trying to decide if she had to reveal what Gertrude had informed her. This doubtful state scarcely lasted a few seconds, she did not like the injustices and thought that the best thing for us was we knew as soon as possible the truth, at once she said:

-Tonight we will have the visit of Prefect Farfan in the mansion. Mrs. Gertrude turned instructions so that you were well fed and dressed, at nine o'clock exactly.

I looked at the clock, it was seven. The last thing I wanted was to receive visits, and less when I was thinking to slink to meet Leonardo.

-But what this gentleman has to do with us? - I asked.

The mulatto thought for a moment her answer, she had strong suspicions of what the madam was planning but until not having enough confirmation, she did not want to disrupt our lives with simple conjectures.

-I do not know. Mrs. Gertrude and Leticia are waiting for you at the studio to speak with more details.

I got up off the table without finishing the dessert. This sudden amiability was extremely unusual and untimely. Never, in the last six months, Gertrude had had a cordial gesture or an affectionate word for us. On the contrary, she had not stopped reproaching and repeating that we were a load, an abomination and that the expenses of our maintenance were exorbitant and that she had had to resort to bank loans to compensate the deficit. The certain thing was that she, far from standing out for her skills like administrator, was excelling for her skills like compulsive spender as Leticia, therefore the financial health of the family, was turning out to be seriously affected at regular intervals, coming to the point of not having money to pay the wages of the scarce domestic personnel that still existed in the house.

Meetings in the hall or in the studio of The Borrascosa did not have a good reputation in our sisterhood circle. Whenever we were called by Gertrude it was to claim something, to discover something or to force us to do something. Nevertheless, having no option we went as little lambs to the studio where a very kind Gertrude invited us to enter and

take seats.

The woman was a bunch of nerves. This sharp observation was evident by the agitation of her hands, the remote and ambivalent expression of her visage and the undecided steps that were banging the floor with rudeness. She walked the room like hunting the words, to begin with good skill her exhibition. We looked at her wondering what was that so important that needed such an effort of her concentration. She stopped and then sat down behind the mahogany table, which had brought my grandfather in one of his many trips to Europe. Finally, seeing that she could not keep on retaining the words any longer, said:

-There is a very important matter that I want to discuss with you! A matter so crucial that it will change the destiny of this family - on having said this, rose and rambled up to the window which was opposite to her, provoking a hollow sound whenever the cane was hitting the creaking wooden floor. She fitted her glasses and continued:

-Tonight, an eminence will visit our humble residence.

Later, without waiting for a reaction on our part, released it:

-Perfect Farfan has shown his intention of asking for Beatrice's hand in marriage.

The impact of the news delayed a few minutes in being processed by our naive and incredulous brains. At first, I thought I did not understand well the meaning of the sentence expressed by the vile mouth; had she said marriage? Could it be that the echoes shut up in the solid walls had prevaricated her words, and I, a victim of an auditory hallucination, was confusing the words pronounced by the slanderous lips?

Afterwards I thought that it was a question of a bad taste prank, but the severe face and the fateful look of the oldster were contradicting my assumption. The woman remained unmovable next to the window. On having verified the seriousness of the statement, I exploded:

-What? – I shouted – Has you gone crazy? Beatrice does not have to marry anybody. And if some day she does, it will be for love and not for fitting to your mean interests! In addition, we will soon go away from here and will not have to support any more your idiocies!

Beatrice opposite to her temperament, had remained without speech, her generally white complexion had turned scarlet, with the flushes of the anger crowding in the cheeks. From all the news she had expected to hear, the idea of her marriage was the last thing she could have ever imagined in the present circumstances. Mariana also was astonished with the frozen expression of a museum statue. For my part, I was not going to tolerate that the old woman stood in the way of Beatrice's destiny as if a chess piece would be with Gertrude in charge of the moves, accommodating her farmhands on the board of life, to her best

expediency.

The old woman shielded herself with the proper devastating attitude of the dictators when an insubordination sprout arises between his lines. She shouted, she threatened and in a flash of madness, she even lifted the cane up to the heights as a last resource to intimidation.

-That's enough! I will not tolerate this class of behavior in my own house. In two days you will go away, but as for your sisters refer, they will remain in my care to fulfill the adulthood, since I still will keep on being their tutor. I'll make sure that you'll never see them again during the time they are under my care! - The oldster shouted.

A blind anger took possession of all my senses. We had supported all kinds of vexations and maltreatments, but this was the height of the heights. To arrange the marriage of my sister to fit for her mean interests! If so much she was longing for Farfan money, why was not Leticia the one who marrying him? Or Gertrude? These words I shouted them to her face, along with other truths that I had been containing by prudence in some distant corner of my mind, waiting not at all more the moment to outcrop and to unload the attack.

-I will not tolerate you sell my sisters for your excessive ambition. They will go away with me!

-They are age minors, darling, and you are not their tutor! Without my permission you will not be able to even see them.

-I will never allow this marriage, do you understand me? Never!

Beatrice began to laugh hysterically, and so much, that Gertrude and I turned over intrigued, ignorant of the reason of similar conduct. So brave and enthusiast was that laugh that at once it infected to Mariana.

Later, almost breathless, she pronounced as she could the following words:

-Forgive me! – More guffaws - but it is very funny to observe how you are fighting like dogs and cats for a matter in which you do not have even a voice or vote!

In this moment, Leticia's voice resounded in the room. It was seated in another armchair under the protection of the half-light, reason why we did not see her when entered. She had remained hidden, like rats do, and only now she was appearing scattering poisonous judgments in her mouth:

-You have not right to speak this way to my grandmother after everything she had done for you and your sisters, orphans beggars!

If she only would have said "orphans" she had been excused, it was an irrefutable fact that we were lacking parents, which made us orphans in the most strict sense of the word, but beggars? Indeed, that I would not excuse! Especially when our patrimony was precisely the one that was supporting the family, precisely the one they were wasting and precisely

the one they were stealing from us! Beggar herself!

-And what has Gertrude done, Ah? Ah? To throw us in a smelly basement where not even the cockroaches dare to enter? To feed us on the scraps of her table? To give us rags that you do not want to use? That's why I must be grateful, ah? Never, hear it well, I will never leave my sister marry that unlucky person. And the beggar is you!

I was altered and had begun to speak loudly. Gertrude had remained dauntless, of course offended by the vile adjective that I was giving her. A vein of her front seemed to twinkle and a dense purple tonality began to outcrop in the rabid surface of her face. In an unexpected fury attack, Leticia rushed forward towards me. We began to roll around the hard floor, she was pulling my hair and in countermeasure I began to pull hers, a bunch of her hair stayed in my hand, I released it and kept on adhering until I got another bunch. Before the powerlessness, Leticia concentrated her attacks on my arms, which was the only part of my body that was uncovered, and like a feline began to scratch me skillfully. From her mouth were going out the most coarse insults, which she could not finish since were cut off by force with my blows. What vigor and resistance that of Leticia's! What quality of scratches and thumps! Ah! But I had more vigor and much more resistance! And the quality of my scratches was overcoming fully those of her! By living with two sisters, I had become polished in the quarrelsome art common to all fraternities of finishing the discussions by force of steep punches, giving the blows in the places that better correspond, in defense of the honor, the properties or the sisters. And of not being for Gertrude's unfortunate intervention, I had turned out to be victorious for wide margin and Leticia's defeat would have been much more crushing and dishonorable.

While I was maintaining the girl immobilized, her mouth to the floor with the rigor of all my weight seated on her back supporting her hands interlaced at the height of her coccyx, observed her mouth and bloody hair. I was contemplating with fear the result of my work when an acute pain crossed me for a side, as if a dagger had embedded itself between my fleshes. I lifted the sight and found the furious look of my tutor with the clutched cane, stoking my ribs.

My sisters made the attempt of helping me but at once she lifted the shining weapon against them. I got up as I could, liberating the injured Leticia who stood up tearful looking for refuge behind the furniture and in search of a mirror to calibrate the damage; and I intervened in the trajectory between the cane and my sisters, the cane smashed against my forearm and in an enormous fury attack she kept on banging until I already did not feel anything. A light drowsiness was invading me while I listened in the distance Beatrice's and Mariana's screams. Then, I hear

no more.

Very much later I found out what happened in that room. Beatrice agreed to see Prefect Farfan, in exchange of having me moved to one of the rooms and getting medical attention. Gertrude, skillful and calculating woman, agreed with that request and at once called the family doctor, Dr. Asdrubal, and indicated that he would be in the residence in a few minutes.

At the same time, very far, in his office, Elias Farfan was designing the strategy to approach Beatrice. He needed a showy wife to exhibit in the social meetings at which he was often present. Peeling off as was his political career, he should disclose the image of honest and responsible man, spotted recently by some comments of unhealthy people opposed to his mandate and that had been given the task of investigating with muffled up dexterity the interiorities of his business.

His late wife did not give him children and was disgusted by the idea of leaving this world without heirs who will continue his lineage. Beatrice fulfilled all the requirements to be the wife of a Prefect; she was beautiful, of moderate intelligence and acceptable education. He had already asked for hearing with Gertrude to do the matrimonial proposition and this one wasn't showing signs of alarm, on the contrary, had treated him courteously and extended an invitation to take a gulp with them tonight.

He looked at the clock. It was early. Had sufficient time to eat and pass for his house to clothing before the meeting. At exactly nine o'clock of that night, at the same moment in which Dr. Asdrubal was leaving the residence, he was touching the doors of The Borrascosa. Beatrice and Mariana were calmer after the doctor made sure I would recover. Earlier Mariana and the bold face Salome were standing at the window trying to watch the pretender at the moment of his arrival. Very astonished they stayed on having seen the fat figure of the Prefect appear, with the half-moon bald patch, dressed in his Sunday sports shirt and wide boot pants, getting out of the official vehicle that was parked dangerously close to the orchard garden. On having entered the room, a costly colony aroma flooded the whole place. Beatrice was sitting in one of the armchairs in the room and Gertrude indicated the space where the Prefect had to sit down.

-Take a seat please, mister Farfan – She said. He made himself comfortable in the couch close to the girl who until now had not opened the mouth for anything. She was leafing through a book and scarcely raised the look when he entered. Farfan trusted that the grandmother would have put her on notice on the motive of his visit for avoiding the shame of a negative answer to his proposition. He tried to read the signs on her face which gave him some indication of what

her answer would be, but her cherubic face only was reflecting an overwhelming calmness and a glacial expression that made him think that perhaps his proposal was not well received.

Gertrude, oblivious to what was expected, mentioned that she would leave them alone to converse while she finished the final touches on a cake that would accompany the drinks. As if she has ever cooked!

Already alone, the gentleman took the word:

-Beatrice - he began - I trust that you know the motive of my visit – He took a break.

The girl agreed with the head, at the time that closing the book and placing it on a robust little table which was near the couch, dedicated all of her attention to him. Farfan was giving samples of an intense nervousness, the more nervous he was, the most he accommodated the knot of the tie stripe, smoothed his mustache with a thin silk shawl that clarified the drops of the perspiration that were sprouting from his front covering his cheeks up to stopping, tangled, in the thin threads of the mustache. Finally he was sufficiently sure to speak. He preferred to go straight to the point:

-I came to talk about a marriage proposal. Although we do not know each other very well, I have the certainty this union will be beneficial for both. My financial position is stable. Every inhabitant of Saint Andre can give an account of this fact. I have commercial dealings abroad, as well as properties and goods that will provide the class of life and luxuries that you deserve. I can take you from this peasant's life that you have.

Beatrice was listening thoughtfully, making some comments once in a while in order to give the impression that was interested. Mariana and the bold face Salome remained hidden, piled behind the door trying to rescue the words of the gentleman that heard mutilated and incomplete. The Prefect kept on speaking about the benefits she would enjoy if she postulated like future missis Farfan.

-Of course, if you accept my proposal my lawyers would prepare the documents of the pre-wedding arrangement; after all you do not have goods to be contributed to the marriage.

Beatrice fanned her sensual eyelashes seeing the opportunity to explain things:

-I believe you have been informed badly. Cash commodities, do you say? No, I do not have them in this moment, but yes I possess them and in abundance, and they will be in my power with my adulthood age. But perhaps: Is not my beauty an intangible value? You offer goods but certainly not beauty; I offer beauty and the goods of my familiar heredity. I would say that we would be even. Don't you think so? You do not know me; therefore it is impossible that you could be in love

with me. It is the exterior what attracts you and this exterior can attract you many benefits.

Mr. Farfan remained quiet. Perhaps he had underestimated the girl's intelligence. Much idiot was feeling now of having considered the proposal of the pre-wedding arrangement, considering that the young girl was so charming that her presence alone would be more than sufficient compensation for the contribution of his goods. The girl kept on speaking:

-I would say I would be contributing to the marriage values and workmanship equivalent to the total of your properties, therefore I will never accept a proposal that implies a pre-matrimonial arrangement: did you understand me? – She continued angrily.

- I understood perfectly – the Prefect answered.

-Well, think about it! - Stressed the girl - I will forget the conversation that we have just had and if in one month period you still want to marry me, submit your proposal again, respecting my terms, of course.

Farfan thinned his mustache. The city girl had put him in his place, demonstrating she was not fooled, showed him the fingernails, and he, scratched and reminded, had stayed hypnotized by this feature of Beatrice's personality. Much more convinced that was the suitable woman, he decided to hope for the stated term and return in one month with his proposal. To insist on the matter of the current moments had been seen like desperation.

-Very well! That's it. In one month we will speak.

At that moment, Gertrude entered bringing rolls and gulps that then the group drank mildly. The rest of the night passed with boring conversations about trivial topics. Two hours later the Prefect left and Mariana and the bold face went out hurriedly to meet Beatrice alone.

-What a horrible man, Beatrice! – Murmured - I guess you didn't think of marrying him seriously, right?

The enigmatic expression of Beatrice seemed to express many things, nevertheless she did not say very much:

-I do not know! – Was all her answer - If this way it is written, that should be! - Indicated giving turned and getting lost in the bottom of the corridor.

9 – THE APPEARANCE OF ZOROASTRO

I woke up with the bitter impression of being observed. Found myself alone in a vast room furnished with antique pieces, on a hard bed of large columns with a filmy white mosquito net descending from the top. It had to be one of the bedrooms on the third floor, to which the servitude did not have access because it was covered in dust throughout. Some pieces of furniture were covered by sheets stained with the colors of the abandonment. I wanted to move but the pain made me turned pale.

To my shoulders, a puncture wound sprouted a watery liquid that should be blood and was sticking to my clothes. My arms reflected the reddish wires from the nails of Leticia, scratched, burned as if two hot irons were melting into my skin. With supreme care, I sat down at the edge of the bed hoping that the light sickness I was feeling pass. After some minutes, I got up and walked swaying up to the door. Wanted to open it, but it was closed. A noise similar to a soft flapping of a bird alerted me. I was not alone; turned round and raised the sight. The silence was reigning again. The wrinkled sheets kept on covering some furniture and the pieces that were discovered kept on preserving its population of dust and ground. But, perfecting a little the sight, in one of the corners, sheltered by the shades, I distinguished the figure of a man covered with a strange dark tunic who was observing me. He had no hair and the darkness was preventing me from seeing his features. All I saw was the sketch of an indefinite face. But I did recognize Frozenblack, which was in the pivot hole of the window purring and watching me.

I gave a step backwards and the door caught me. Arming myself with value I asked.

-Who are you? – The fear took the place of the pain. The appearance left the corner and sliding surreptitiously in my direction, stood firm next to me. His icy breath reached me at the time that he answered:

-My name is Zoroastro and I imagine that the magicians with whom you walk already must have put you on notice of who I am. You would be right in learning my name since very soon you will be in my kingdom!

He tried to take my hand but with a rapid movement I could separate and ran to move away from him and hid behind a screen. I extracted lightly the head to see if he had followed me. In the distance I looked again at that inexpressive face. The place where the eyes should be was occupied by two big black holes that seemed to spread up to the infinite; his hands were rough and bony like those of a walking skull. He approached to me and remained observing me with the satisfaction of the one who checks a gift for a long time expected. Just when I was having the certainty that he would take me, he faded away. A bombastic noise extracted me of my ponderings, later I realized that it was my own heart the one that was ordering the insistent palpitations. With a mitigation sigh I slackened the tension of my joints.

-I must go out of here! – I thought - Must help Beatrice! Nevertheless, the pain recovered again my body and the sensation of being falling down in a dark hole, impeded me. Then, I fainted.

When I retrieved the vision, I found myself in a very elegant room. It was early morning because the sun shone through the diffuse and gauzy curtains which were separating, modest, as to make room for the golden bands. Turned the head and started to detail the objects that surrounded me. The white walls were supporting elegant paintings of rural sceneries that invited to relax and rest. The bed was muffled up of white cushions and a heavy imposing comforter speckled in rose was covering a good part of my body. The pain had gone away. Two dry blows indicated me that someone was touching the door. This opened and there entered Leonardo, who, after greeting me with extreme delicacy, informed me that I was in the Grand Prince hotel. He approached. I saw his eyes and the heart gave me signs of alert. What surprising fragility assaults the aggrieved heart, which nude of any falsity covers itself into a shelter after the banal mask of the indifference hurt it by the inclemency of a not corresponded love! And it was this indifference the one that allowed me to remain unscathed before his closeness. He came closer and took my pulse. His worried eyes rose up to the height of my front and there he placed his hand to test my temperature. His eyes were stunning like a flamboyant summer sea, like the colors of a sunset melted into the purple tones of an agonizing horizon. While he was auscultating me, I could see the definite line of his profile, and my look, eavesdropper rose investigating the features of this perfect face that was waking up my

fascination. I felt the calm rhythm of his respiration, warm and serene, like a soft autumn breeze fluttering in my hair. His soft hands, like the texture of velvet, caressed my cheeks in a compassionate gesture.

Then, while I was admiring his face, thought:

-Who, besides me, have seen your sadness air, that desolation that outcrops in your thoughtful eyes and which nobody seemed to notice? Who, besides me, will be able to decipher the confused messages of your soul and read between the lines your silent request of love? Yes, I do read you, Leonardo, I can, long before yourself, I can see the sacred wishes of your heart, but, Oh! Misfortune! Because as well as I read you, I also admit that I am not the chosen of your eyes. And if something of satisfaction shelters my soul, it is the recognition that Duprina does not occupy that sacred space in your feelings either. If we had known each other in other circumstances, would you show the same irate treatment that you show me? Or, on the contrary, you would treat me with the warmth and the affable fellowship saved for a few friends. Finally I spoke to go out of the enchantment:

- I must return to The Borrascosa. My sisters are there! – I begged - Also I obtained the book! I must go for it!

Leonardo retained me, with a big act of will, achieved the control of my emotions.

- Your sisters are outside, as well as the housekeeper and your Genie. I will go for them they have been quite disturbed by what happened and brought in the book. We'll talk about the incident later.

Already at the door, he stopped and turning commented:

-My behavior has been censurable and I hope you could one day excuse me. What happened it was my fault.

I could appreciate by the tone of his voice the sincerity of his words. With a smile I indicated him that everything would be well. If a thousand pardons were precise, a thousand pardons I would give him, only for the pleasure of listening again the bloomed phrases with so agreeable tones.

THE RIOT

“The Keys of the Kingdom” was a very valued book in the magic world. Its guards were apologetic because the Book had disappeared during the night. Caught in the depths of a cold and lugubrious cellar, they did not know where to begin to look for it and it was imperative that they located it as soon as possible. For centuries they had protected the sacred volumes of the Alexandrine Brotherhood and in all this time they had never lost not even one of the books.

-We must get out of this place! – Cirila said with her subtle voice.

- I am sorry to confirm that you do not lack reason! I am sure the young woman took it, but we do not even know where she is - scolded Petrarco - we have always worked

with magicians, I do not understand why this time had to be different – said shrinking of shoulders.

–This young woman does not have the most minimal idea of what means to be the bearer of the Book and to take it this way to the exterior world without its guards. Very bad idea: What a senseless girl! Very bad idea!

-Do not speak this way about the lady – Declared Drefno - it is not correct. Also, it was not her who took the Book. It was the other little man of slovenly manners.

-It is not correct? – Repeated Petrarco imitating the elf - what it's not correct is that the Book has been taken without us. There is already enough of kitsch, let get to work. We are the guards of the volume and a girl without experience, who does not know anything about magic, stole it from us without our knowledge. How could this be possible? Neither the trolls, nor the gnomes, nor fairies, nor the harridans have been capable of getting carried away a book and this time we did not even realize when she removed it! – Said scratching his belly.

- I told you already that it was the little man who took it. It was an unfortunate event – recited the elf - nevertheless of easy solution.

-Nevertheless of easy solution – kept Petrarco imitating the elf.

While the gnome and the elf were discussing, Cirila had advanced towards the stairs that was near the corridor; given her small size she could slide for the groove that existed between the door and the floor without difficulty, and from there she began to call her partners so they joined her exploit. Petrarco and Drefno stopped discussing and walked without problem up to the threshold, where it was clear to them that the protuberant belly of the gnome would be an obstacle for his step towards the other side. Started by lying back, while Drefno pushed on his belly for the reduced space, at the same time Cirila pushed out his arm from the other side. Some minutes later, they realized that this method was not going to work. Then tried to pass Petrarco aside, but the wide back collided with the edge of the tailgate, making unsuccessful all their attempts.

- Sufficient – Shouted the grumpy gnome – I am tired of so much handling - Said getting up extracting the dust that had settled in his slovenly clothes. He sat down on the last step of the gangway, with the elbows on the knees and the hands supporting the jawbone.

-I have the foreboding that this work is going to be very complicated. I do not understand why the custodian is not a Magician. The first thing that a Magician would have done was to look for its guards. This girl does not have the most minimal idea of what is happening.

-Don't be so impertinent, Petrarco – Protested already annoying Drefno – our work is not to question the decisions of the Book, but to take care of its integrity, thing in what till now, we have failed.

-Do you remember our last mission? The one in Berlin, Bebelplatz Square - on May 10, 1933, the bigger holocaust of books in the history of humanity, we managed to save it by minutes before the fire began.

-How to forget it? I had never seen a bigger bonfire, except in the fire of

Alexandria's books. This mission will not be the exception. We will succeed! - Declared Drefno - So soon we must think about how to get out of here.

-Think the unthinkable, adversity partners! – Declared Petrarco

-Cirila, since you are out please try to quarrel if the Book continues in the house – Suggested Drefno

-We'll try to find a window or chink that allows us to go out from here. We'll find you above.

After a long time, Petrarco and Drefno slunk for a small crack exhibited in one of the external walls of the cellar. The orifice scarcely perceptible was glimpsed at the moment when a rodent was escaping for the cavity towards the courtyard. Already in the exterior, Petrarco shook the dust off his clothes again, complaining about the penuries and displeasures that supposed to work with human beings.

-We must design a plan – He was saying - Must think the unthinkable!

-Do not think the unthinkable! Run! – Drefno shouted at the time that pointed out to an immense black cat that was going straight towards them with terribly aggressive attitude. The Elf ran at great speed but the bulging belly of the gnome swinging rhythmically from east to west retained his steps making him easy prey of the insistent feline. Only at the last moment he managed to protect himself in one of the armchairs of the veranda; where unable to pronounce word was doing supernatural efforts to recover the breath.

-How could you leave me? – Repeated Petrarco - I could have died!

-Don't be melodramatic! Gnomes do not die like that! – Responded Drefno.

-Either the elves and that did not prevent you from running! – He said.

Cirila appeared at the door of the house.

-Come on! – Whispered - I still have not checked the rooms of the high part but in the first floor there is nothing.

They all entered and went to the top.

- This house is horrible – said Petrarco – and to think that in this very moment I might be sunning my pants in a beautiful France's beach!

In the eternal combat between good and evil, Mrs. Tula was a staunch opponent; even more so when the signals from the advent of the next apocalypse were springing up all over the "dusted" streets of Saint Andre. She was very convinced that this hecatomb had begun with the arrival of Gertrude's girls. After that, everything else came: the pumpkins, the drug dealers, the cats, the slovenly visitors, the wizards, all evil entities in search of the innocent souls of the unprepared inhabitants of the village. To her understanding, Father Tobias was not being sufficiently strong in his struggle against these calamities. It was quite a while when her black eyes had noticed the unusual movement of the visitors who were staying at the Grand Prince hotel. The previous day, for example, at sixteen after twelve a wizard registered at the hotel, a young man without baggage, and Tula thought he was a wizard,

because at early hours of the morning she surprised him in the company of the Montero sisters at the residence of the Enchantress Zarnia. In that hour she accustomed to walk along the depths of the forest in search of eatable fungi. At two o'clock, at four o'clock and at six o'clock in the afternoon, The Executioner had been seen marauding in the area. And later still, Gertrude's girls entered also the hotel, without any objection of what this act might do to their already injured reputation, knowing that decent misses do not stroll under the night, in places so discredited like that one. Who knows what they would be inventing. In this way, overwhelmed in her own and deep calamitous reflections, long moment remained thoughtful on digging in other life matters.

The noise of a few steps presided at the entry of my sisters to the room, where I was stretched on a cotton comforter. Jubilantly they skipped on the bed and embraced me so loudly up to leaving me at the edge of suffocation. No Josefina, the bold face Salome and Batam-Al-Bur were coming behind and greeted me as warmly as my delicate situation was allowing it. After mutually professing our fondness, we began with mutual interrogations:

-Camila, we were so concerned about you – said Beatrice caressing my indomitable hair – Gertrude did not have the right to treat you how she did. Do you feel good?

Mariana was sitting down at my feet and answering to the pathetic question of Beatrice responded:

-How is she going to feel good if she was beaten to death?

For my part I was very much intrigued for knowing how they had come and what had happened to the Book. After all, the book was my only hope for salvation.

-What happened? Where is the Book?

-Do not worry about the Book! The Genie rescued it! It is already in Leonardo's hands! - Beatrice answered.

-How did I come so far? I do not remember anything.

Beatrice prepared herself to answer, conscious that all the looks were converging in on her. Being the center of attraction was one of her biggest pleasures and the one that more satisfaction was providing her. Commenting on the events assured her some minutes of deference on the part of the small hearing.

-When you were down on the floor turning round and round with Leticia's hair in your hands – She said gesticulating - the rucksack came undone and the bottle went out rolling until smashing in one of the paws of the Luis XV table which was placed against the bottom wall. Batam went out shot off but Gertrude was so concentrated on you she did not realize his presence. At first, the Genie was surprised, saw what was happening but did not know what to do. I approached and asked

him to go for help. After this, he reacted and left towards the door!

Then Mariana continued:

-And he went out running to look for Leonardo. Was so scared that did not even take the carpet! Walked along by his own means without using the magic at all! He was very brave since it was late at night and the forest was as dark as the mouth of a wolf.

I threw him a grateful look and the boy lowered the eyes shyly. It was seen he was not used to receiving compliments.

-When Gertrude saw that you were lying on the floor, was very much afraid and Beatrice demanded you should be taken to one of the rooms to receive medical care. At that point she called Dr. Asdrubal but when he came first took care of Leticia. You were taken to one of the top rooms. So soon Gertrude and Leticia went to bed, we returned to the room to look for you but you were already gone – Mariana said.

Then she expressed with a romantic tone:

-Later we knew that Batam had found Leonardo and immediately came to rescue you from that tower, as a prince would rescue his princess – Said filling the room with more sighs.

I looked for Leonardo with my eyes, found him watching through the window, had remained apart not to interrupt the familiar meeting. Relieved I verified that he had not listened to the last words of my sister with the romantic insinuations she was suggesting. This would have provoked a deep attack of shame on me; considering I did not want to undress my non-corresponded feeling in front of the eyes of strange persons, for very dear that they were, propitiating the class of gossips of which I had fled all my life. A little more relaxed I began to do the memory of the last impressions lived in the godforsaken room.

-In that room there was a man – I began reporting them - he was dressing a black tunic and had the most sinister look that I had ever seen; told me I will be with him soon. Was tall, his head had no ears, his complexion was as white as the face of the moon and with the same craters. The hands that were standing out under his tunic resembled the claws of a hawk, or at least this way they seemed to me. Although this vision could have been propitiated by the extreme horror I felt at that moment. He slid more than walked and called himself Zoroastro. Frozenblack had also been in the room. That stupid cat is always treading to me on the heels. How pleasant would be to give some poisoned mice to that ugly cat!

Leonardo moved away from his site in the window, intrigued by what I had just said. For myself I thought that if he had heard the latter, perhaps he had heard the other thing too and, of chivalry, had been done the disengaged. The blush of shame began to swing in my cheeks.

-Are you sure about your words? – He asked worriedly.

He had approached and was speaking standing from the low rail, the only available free space around the bed.

-Did he say his name was Zoroastro?

-That's him! The one and only! – I agreed with a light head movement.

They all were contemplating Leonardo. It was clear he was worried, and of course, I was sure he knew something that did not want to share with us and that “something” probably was “something bad, serious or without remedy”. The persistence of this thought began to add more torment to the long list of mortifications that in my existence had popped in lately.

-Zoroastro? – The Magician repeated. Unsteadily he passed towards the door.

-I must get in touch with Americus immediately. Zoroastro never realizes the work of his demons. He would not have appeared if it were not something truly important. In addition, it is very unusual that you've seen him when even the five days have not passed. I will stay away a few minutes, I will be back as soon as possible - And saying this went out of the room.

The fact that Zoroastro was distinguishing me with the honor of his presence was nothing I was grateful with in any way. Quite to the contrary, was making me more bothersome of the suspense of the future days.

No Josefina took a little space that my sisters had cleared and sat down on the edge of the bed which sank significantly with her weight, by her side the bold Salome also sat embraced on her lap.

Mariana made use of the moment to speak about a worry that was tormenting her soul:

-You must speak with Beatrice, Camila – Said - she is thinking of marrying seriously this Prefect Farfan!

The aforesaid avoided my eyes.

-What? – I mumbled and talking to Beatrice – Seriously? You do not know him. Don't hurry up to take decisions of which you may repent later. Then, was my fight in vain? You should have told me that in advance so I could have saved myself the spectacle. I cannot believe that you are considering this proposition!

Beatrice ignored my comment, gave a few slow steps towards the window to later answer absently:

-I have not said that I will do it – She said waving the curtains and looking outside - I am only thinking of it. He is very rich!

I could not believe the senselessness I was listening to.

- Don't do it for money, Beatrice, no! Shortly we will be able to leave town and I will take you with me even if I have to kidnap you!

Exasperated by my claims, turned around and confronted me:

-And what if you die, Camila? What will happen if you die?

Beatrice shook her hands as a sign of impotence. In advance she knew that we would never understand the sensible reasons that bear the decisions of her life. Pragmatism and idealism never walk together by the hand, neither in families nor in wars. Then she added:

-You are a dreamer, Camila. You believe in love and romanticism. These things do not go with me. I want to provide myself a full existence. Life is a deal and what Prefect Farfan proposes to me is as beneficial for him as it is for me. Even this union would be convenient for all of you. He offers me an economic stability not enviable at all and a high social status; I do not see why I should not accept it if it is everything what I have always wished!

All in that room remained dauntless listening to that difficult dialogue, without daring to express judgment in favor or against any of the parts.

-And where does love stay? – Asked Mariana.

Beatrice breathed deeply, knew she was being scrutinized. She was trying to shut up in words the thoughts that would explain her behavior and life philosophy. She would have liked being provided with our comprehension and assent, after all we were her only family, and only because of it she considered to share the concepts that were sustaining her position, knowing, in advance, that we would consider it to be unacceptable due to the proper nature of our characters. But the more she was speaking, the more she was sinking, to our eyes, in the recondite garden of frivolities.

- People give too much importance to love – Recited - An old saying says “love with famine, does not last” and I am entirely in agreement with this declaration. Trips, garments, jewels are very good substitutes of love. Some persons were not born but for money and I do not see a reason why we are judged badly because we are cleared on what are the priorities of our life. From a very early age, I knew that I would never be happy if I was not rich. Love is an obstacle if it prevents you of the enjoyment of the pleasures of life and I am completely sure that God does not want us to sink in sacrifices and sorrows at the cost of an affection.

So many blasphemies said by only one mouth. Mariana and I looked at each other and Beatrice became convinced that whatever words she uses to explain her arguments, she would never be understood, so the whole thing was a waste of time.

-Stop feeling bad for me! I would be very unhappy if I lived immersed in poverty through the fault of love! Also I am already in love and my only love is money!

The door was opened interrupting the conversation and to my surprise the elder Americus appeared, dressing a few faded jeans, a streaked shirt

and a dark gray wing hat, simulating a suburban cowboy. Before my astonishment, he exclaimed with the whole facetiousness that was possible:

-Do not look at me that way. Magicians always adapt to the times and fashion!

I did not have the courage to tell him that his clothing would be fashionable, perhaps, in some distant western, but that in Saint Andre, it was so out of place as if he had come dressed in his traditional blue tunic. The elder embraced me ardently and all my bones thundered. Behind Leonardo was coming also, for my grief, Duprina. She looked at me with her characteristic and hypocritical smile, lengthening the arms about my neck and rubbing a deceitful kiss on my cheeks, as a greeting.

-Girl! – Continued Americus in an affectionate tone, seeing my purpled arms - But where have you been? It seemed my boy has not been taking care of you properly.

Leonardo threw a reproach look to me but abstained from making any comment. The flushes rose to my face; I would have done anything for avoiding him the paternal scolding!

In the distance I began listening to a choir of impassioned voices. As time was passing, the screams were listened more and more closely, until they turned in a deafening hurly-burly that seemed to come from the street and parked on the verge of the prestigious hotel.

-What is this noise? – I asked with mistrust.

Leonardo approached the window and sliding the immaculate curtain, tilted a little the head for a better observation. A multitude was crowded at the hotel door. In the top of the gathering an oldster with raised fists and the missed expression of madness, was fanning the long and black sleeves of her blouse as a raven on the verge of detaching in flight. The crowded street was filling more and more of inhabitants intrigued by the hysterical screams of Mrs. Tula.

- Heretics!, Heretics! - She was shouting with the whole aggravation of her liberated fanaticism - Get out of this town! Bruges! Get out! Return to the caves of Hell!

While this way she was shouting, her face was acquiring the bluish expression of those who lack air in its lungs for the effort that the promulgation of the excessive howls supposed for a person of so long age. Anyone attending the scene would have thought that the said witch was she.

-Heeereetiics, Get Out! – So she was saying lengthening the syllables in ancient English that no one has heard of and the peasants who constituted her only public acclaimed with effusiveness her sardonic declamations.

Father Tobias was not late in appearing in person helped up by the devout women who ran up to the vestry to communicate the bold action of Tula. Interrupted of the pleasures of his lunch, the clergyman walked without any delay towards the main street, maintaining still in his palate the delicate sweetness of half-chewed banana slice. He was thinking that Tula was taking attributions that corresponded to him. Later there would be enough time to take the pertinent measures and to put her in her place. In the matters of the church, there was no place for the schizophrenia. So, in an attempt for recovering the role that God had granted him, of shepherding of the lost souls of his herd, and having come to the place of the concentration and verified that the assertions of the devout women were true, he occupied his place at the head, pushing Tula with his elbow superficially backwards, in an attempt for taking the leading role of the woman and granting to the gathering a religious character.

Nevertheless, badly the priest could be provided with the submission of Tula, who rushed forward at him in a tenacious battle of elbows and words, to be located again in the forefront that was corresponding to him, with the subsequent reply of elbows and words on the part of Father Tobias.

As if this scene wasn't enough, also arrived at the place of the events the venerable Prefect Farfan, whom this type of situations was displeasing enormously, the more because in this one there was involved her future fiancée, accused, also, of serious charges by practices of magic and sorcery. Certainly, those were not the best attributes for a prefect to look in a wife. Neither was he allowed to get scared for adverse circumstances, existing account of the beauty and intelligence of Beatrice. At that point, he had to stop Mrs. Tula, later there would be time to arrange the reputation of the girl. But it was useless that Farfan would strain in separating Tula from Father Tobias, everything what he obtained was an additional ration of elbows and words. While being in this bizarre situation, Leonardo was observing them, between cautious and entertaining, confirming once again his irrefutable conviction that the human madness was evident in the most unusual situations. Rescued from his abstraction for the persistency of Duprina's voice, he dropped:
 - It seems that we have a riot on our hands! They are accusing us of heresy and sorcery! - Later he corrected - well, not to "us" but you! - Said referring to me and my sisters.

I opened disproportionately my eyes. The only thing we were lacking:
 A riot against us!

-Why? What do we have to do with that? – I asked.

In this opportunity it was Ño Josefina who answered:

-Many things have happened since you came: the reconstruction of the

witch house, the enormous pumpkins that flooded the gardens, the camel running for town, The Executioner. Mrs. Tula blames you for all these calamities and do not cease to repeat it to any place she goes and to those who want to hear her. The inhabitants, of course, ignorant and superstitious, have begun to believe her!

They all were piled up about the bed, with the exception of Leonardo who was lying still at the window.

-But we have nothing to do with these actions. We are innocent! - I defended myself.

No Josefina informed she would return to Gertrude's house with the bold face Salome, to keep track of the actions of my political family. I agreed. The mulatto took Salome by an arm, and against her will, took her to trails.

Duprina had not stopped observing me from the moment in which she trod on the enclosure. Her look was so insistent that the matter was already beginning to be annoying. Sure I was her intention was to locate my least favoring features to comment on them later, heightened, with the magician, though using the ancient resource of defamation with the only purpose of disfavoring me before his eyes; I decided to face her, also with dissimulation.

- Do you want to observe me more closely? – She realized I had noticed her action and tried to ignore my question then, murmuring a few brief apologizing words, went out in search of refreshment. After she left, Leonardo approached for me to find out how I was feeling, doing his best effort to talk with me courteously, at least in the presence of his father, or just because as my end was near he tried to throw at me the pity of the moribund.

-Those people hate us – Said Beatrice - we cannot remain here. They might lynch us and that would ruin my garment and my fingernails enamel!

Americus rose from the chair where he was, walked towards the open window and began to observe the multitude. He remembered the fiery days of his youth, the days of magic and those of the first love, Bela, his Bela. There was a time when he ran along the streets of the world fleeing crowds similar to that, packed into an exaggerated fanaticism against the magicians, and sorcerers, which were only seeking places where they could gather for the celebration of the rituals of their profession. It was due to the relentless persecution that Eisenbaum came into existence: a place where all the members of the magical world could profess their tasks without restriction.

-We must go out as soon as possible! – Said Americus observing the heating of the fortitudes of the native ones - We cannot return to Eisenbaum since we have tasks to be realized here! I think a good place

to hide is the house of the enchantress Zarnia!

And on having spoken this way, I thought he was joking, how we were going to stay precisely to the infamous causative house of my adversity?

-But they think I am a witch, Zarnia's house will be the first place where they will look for me!

Americus answered:

-I do not believe it! They are afraid of the powers of the enchantress Zarnia. Let's use this fact in our favor! Even if they knew you were there, they will not go! Anyway, Zoroastro will find you be wherever you are, in Eisenbaum, Saint Andre, or some other site. Where the ring is, he will be!

At the end of the exhortation, nodded without being very much convinced; a demon from hell was treading on the heels, an uncontrolled mob was screaming out for my head, The Executioner also was following my steps. Is there anybody in this world that does not want to kill me?

The Genie sheltered in his bottle. Duprina came and adhered to Leonardo. The rest, included Bartolomeo, were gathering together in the center of the room and it was Americus, this time, which did the honors of the transportation. To the following minute we all were opposite to the house of the fearsome witch. The residence was silent but sported a sinister touch that I had overlooked the first time I was in the vicinity. It was straightening up even more unlucky, more diabolical and more baneful than when I saw it at the full light of the day.

Beatrice and Mariana were playing on the veranda with Bartolomeo; Americus had entered the house in search of a comfortable room which I could use to stay. Leonardo and Duprina were waiting to lead me to the interior.

To the Americus screams pointing out that he had located what he was looking for I walked towards the stairs. I noticed that the furniture were still polished and intact, as well as the rest of the objects.

An unexpected indicative vision undressed the truth of the continuity of life after my absence and this irrevocable fact filled me with a strange and glacial feeling, very similar to sorrow combined with anger. The life would continue without me! Without me! Which I have not lived yet! Without me! I refuted to the idea that everything would continue imperturbable although I should not exist! In just hours, my sisters and friends would speak about me in past tense. The perspective was sad! At the beginning they would be very altered, I have no doubt; but with the passage of time, the letters of my name will fade away, the defining features of my person would be evoked by the diffuse help of the memory, and my silhouette would no longer resound in the crowded streets of life, and this way blurred in the cloak of forgetfulness, I would

get lost forever in the days, in the months and in the years, up to being only a memory named in afternoon conversations with the accompaniment of a cup of coffee with French pastry. How do I want to be remembered? I still did not know it and the worst thing was I already had no time to find it out!

The last of my sunrises approached and I was feeling weak. An immense knot started forming in my throat. I judged myself sentimental and ridiculous, sad and insignificant. When I started to climb the steps, my footprint hesitated, and for a moment I thought I would bump against the cutting angle of the ladder. And this would have happened if the powerful hand of Leonardo had not supported me at the last moment. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the furious look of Duprina, who interpreted my evanescence as a feminine device to take possession of the attentions of her fiancé, and I, for my part could not avoid the naughty little genie of the flippancy that was advising me to take the opportunity to torment the young woman, who so antipathetic was proven to me. So I lifted my arms as a heroine in search of salvation and placed them around the Magician's neck. My gesture took him by surprise. Currently, I would never have the nerve to try such a maneuver, but on the verge of death I really don't mind. In a brief moment our eyes met absorbed in our mutual stupor then, he helped me to raise the rest of the trajectory, with his arms swirled in my waist. Surely, I delayed the trip as much as I could. I liked Leonardo's closeness: his strong and vigorous musculature, his aura of ethereal personage and his indigo eyes such as the seas of Eisenbaum. On having come at the end of the stairs, he released me softly and for a moment, there was an awkward silence between us, which was broken by the insistent Duprina:

-Very well, since Camila turns out to be much better, I believe that we can go to town, small villages have always fascinated me – She said rising quickly up to the stairs and being hung on Leonardo's arm like a constrictive python.

But the little genie kept on sending me impertinent messages and I did not want to give her the satisfaction of taking Leonardo away from me, so I decided to continue with my convincing act of the Lady of The Camellias and murmured in complaining tone:

-I do not feel quite well! – Argued with the face of the most helpless victim of the planet and sticking to the other free arm of the Magician.

-I need Leonardo with me! – I said - His sorceress's talent is exceptional and his healing hands are the God's prodigy that relieves all my pains. I would not last the night without his miraculous care. Also, Americus put me in his hands since he is the best!

Duprina was not giving up before my indolent advances either.

-All right, it would be only a moment – She said already raising the tone of her voice and pulling Leonardo towards her.

- I am sure you wouldn't care! He has been attached to your skirts for two days. Don't you believe that you are being very egoistic? He is pale, needs a little rest!

Leonardo was in the way with a confused expression, pulled by two women who were disputing his attention and without knowing what to do. I was sure that he had never been in a similar situation.

-First of all, I do not use skirts, so the magician could not be attached to a garment that I do not dress. Secondly, if what he needs is rest, he should not be walking along the Saint Andre street, which by the way it has nothing to be seen! – So I said pressing harder the magician's arm – just old houses, a plaza, four streets, a prefecture, four streets, a church and four streets! It is the same as any other little town! And above all full of peasants who do not like anybody!

And by saying these words I uplifted my right hand to Leonardo's chin, then to his cheek:

-I do not see him so pale; I would say he has good color!

There Duprina exploited, the class left her and regurgitated all kinds of insults of those that one could never imagine, shouted with the whole pomp of her shining jealousy:

-You! Stupid! You! Ungrateful! You have no idea of what my fiancé needs!

And on this matter she was right. I knew nothing about Leonardo's needs. Her hysterical howls attracted my sisters who immediately went up the stairs and Americus which went out, hurriedly, of one of the rooms:

-Enough! - Shouted Americus – What is all about? It is not a discussion moment, Duprina! - And speaking also to her said - Your presence here is no longer needed!

The woman was silenced by the fury and after a few seconds she made an attempt for answering:

-But it is that..... - She was going to refute when Leonardo's look kept her silent. The little intelligence that was residing in Duprina's brain sends her a message to stay calm down and advised that the best action at that moment was to leave the house; therefore she reflected on her answer and said:

-All right! I will leave! After all in just one day I will recover my fiancé – And then she told me – In one day you will be one of Zoroastro's slaves!

-Duprina! - The Magician shouted - You must apologize for your words!

-I will not do it! She began everything! I will see you in Eisenbaum in

two days – And on having said goodbye, she kissed Leonardo on the lips, before disappearing.

Nevertheless, the words of the witch left a worry.

-What did she mean which I will be one of Zoroastro's slaves? As far as I know I would die and that's all.

Americus walked towards me and taking by my arm said:

-I am not going to lie to you – Answered Americus – being in the shadows is worse than death. It is like living in in a dark world at Zoroastro's service. If you have a pure soul, and this is what more attracts him, he will do everything in his power to corrupting you. He will use all kinds of tricks to achieve his assignment. But you cannot surrender! You have to fight!

- And will that be sufficient?

-It will depend on you. Everything in life is an election, you know? Even with your fatidic destination, you can still say "not".

- And will that be sufficient? I do not believe I will be saved by just saying "no": I have an ancestral conjuration, a damned ring and demons waiting for me and they are very real. I saw them with my own eyes.

-Life can be a comedy ... or a tragedy! The only one who decides which will be is you! Everything what you see is only the elements of a big stage! A magician learns how to play with these elements and becomes its teacher instead of its slave! You must see further away! You are following the reports of your own script! Listen and ponder on it. Who writes the script?

I had to conclude that magicians are very strange persons and with a very bizarre way of expressing themselves. Later he concluded:

-The power that Zoroastro has on you, you are giving it to him yourself! I came to the room where I would shelter this night. I sat down at the edge of the bed and distended the savannas, side and side. Beatrice and Mariana also sat down. Leonardo and Americus remained standing. The magician stepped towards the window and of a rapid movement he opened it:

- Camila, here are three little persons I would like to introduce to you. They are the book's guards.

Three tiny figures entered and fluttering went to settle on the "The Keys of the Kingdom" book which was on one of the night tables in the room, placed there minutes earlier by Americus.

-Guards? – I repeated stunned.

Americus answered:

-Yes, every book has their guardians, whether they are from the shadows or light. The important books have more than one guardian; the one you owned have three, so that can give you an idea of its importance.

- Books of shades also have guards?

-Yes, they do. But they are very skillful and one cannot see them. Only appear when they have some diabolical motive to be executed and never in the presence of magicians or mortals. The kindling fairy detached from the book front and went to settle on my open hand, introducing herself as Cirila. A big-bellied gnome that was trying to brush with the hands the curls of his hair was located next to Cirila and said this name was Petrarco. Finally, Drefno, an elf with king's freightage did a reverence to me.

-They will help you, together with Leonardo, to decrypt the secret passages to see if you can get the against-sorcery you are looking for.

The guards after introducing themselves ran to be located on the hard lid of the volume. I stood up and walked up to them. I took the volume and the guards jumped off the side. I knew it was a transcendent moment for me. With the copy in my hands I delivered the volume to Leonardo and asseverated:

-It seems that my destiny is now in your hands – I said to him with the whole clamor of my sincerity - I would be grateful for any help possible. He looked at me with melancholy as knowing that his answer was not going to be understood.

-You are so wrong - He answered - Your destiny has always been and will be in your hands: but I will do my best to help you, if this is what you want.

The three guards agreed and immediately left for the contiguous room to begin with the careful work of poking page for page. It was the last night that we had to scrape the secrets of the book.

10 – THE ENDING

In the twilight, under the shadow of a candle, Petrarco, Drefno and Cirila surrounded the book "The Keys of the Kingdom" in search of a spell. Had been reading and rereading each of the pages, taking turns together with Leonardo. The prodigious task had been fruitless so far. However, the first rays of the sun began to dawn on the ledge outside the window and still they did not have the answer to Camila's prayer. The girl was so young and beautiful, did not deserve a destination so nefarious.

-This book has the key! Why cannot we see it? – Cirila said with a melancholic and impotent air.

-Will it be that we are losing faculties? – Scolded Petrarco - the heart breaks me whenever I think that we cannot help her.

Leonardo was listening to them in silence. Finally he spoke with powerlessness airs:

-All this is in vain. The mysteries of this Book will be unveiled just to her but she does not have enough faith on her ability to decipher it!

The gnome agreed:

-Let's keep on working. Let's not give up!

Flittering around my bed was installed the insomnia. Calmed down my gaze by the glittering of the wallpaper's blue little flowers and roses covering the wall opposite the bed, I got distracted by the sequence of fluffy sheep that I was counting to attract the sleeping. Useless and vain task that of the insomniacs! I counted one, and the little flowers distracted me ... I counted two ... and the little flowers appeared again, gaining my attention... I counted three ... and again the little flowers... I left the fourth sheep tangled in the subconscious, unable to jump for the visual pother of the little blue flowers and the roses.

Unable to sleep, the morning found me in one of the corridors of the

mansion. In the distance the golden bands of the sun were appearing timidly behind the bluish summit of the Monte Glaslo. The reverberating beams of light were filling with life the surrounded grove of cedars and acacias. A choir of two-color little birds that was chattering in its own language was populating of harmonic sounds the wide and green space. It was traveling also over a hollow trunk a small brown-colored ant, a few meters from which I was. The little ant was striving not to lose the balance as was transporting on its shoulder a tiny green leaflet which was seen as if it was dressing a thick tuft for a hat. What significance do small details cover when we have not left time to live! What a beautiful moment the present is! Abstracted in the timelessness of the moment, I did not listen to Leonardo. He reached by me and for the first time I saw him approaching humbly.

-Beautiful, right? – He said contemplating the same dawn that I had seen seconds earlier.

The smell of wet ground came to us transported in a warm breeze.

-Splendid - I said without facing his look - I would like to go out to enjoy it before turning into a zombie - Declared laughing.

-How can you speak this way? – He replied - what is going to happen is quite serious.

I looked in his eyes and found them comprehensive. He was sweetening the phrases with the condescension extended to those who are prompt to be deceased. If I did not have his love, I would not want his pity either. I preferred him irately and vile, this way I knew how to handle him.

-I know better than anybody how serious this is. Do you think that I have not thought about it these latter days? If all I have left are just a few hours, don't you believe that I must go out to enjoy them? There are so many things I will leave undone – I said with a sigh that was concentrating all my wishes.

The forest remained infected of the solar happiness. In this moment a terrible urgency assaulted me of running up to staying without breath. And obeying this sudden impulse, I jumped the veranda rail and got lost in the green thickness that was the forest without saying any word. I galloped up to a soft hill filled with golden ears, which in the distance was fanning its sprouts to the insistence of the wind. On it I sat down, a few seconds later the magician joined me remaining perplexed for my flight. In the distance, you could see the little red roofing of the village's hovels and further away the figure of a few pines pecking the leafy clouds that the wind was dragging fast. I inhaled a deep puff of air which oxygenated my lungs entirely.

Life was awakened around me and the revitalizing breath of nature was sowing in my spirit the seed and the peace of resignation. An extended

sparrow-hawk furrowed the blue curtain in a frantic dance. Only the one who has seen the stateliness of a sparrow-hawk in full flight can understand the delinquency of maintaining to a bird in captivity. The firm, uniform, rhythmic flight, from the obtuse hillsides mending the bluish summits, thinly at first, then extending, energetically, the fabulous ailerons allowing him to glide on the tiny greenish heads of the trees and the transparent threads of the rivers, similar to the hair of a woman lifted to the wind. The low world, the lower one, which its vision fuses in green and brown spots, contrasts enormously with the immensity of the top world of infinite blue and white foam clouds.

Below a gale of multicolored butterflies was dispersing in all the directions of the area. Dark tail squirrels were fluttering on the juicy earthy cloak. They were running all over, then approached us and on having seen us, went out shot to go back to the shadow of a few lazy cedars that were sheltering them with their arms. Impregnated with that wild ground whose aromas I was breathing fed my soul with that life's plenitude that the nature was radiating in a variety of forms and colors. That crowd of fresh air that inhaled was dropping me the conviction of the achievement of impossible things; made me submerge in that divine stage of the creation and the renascence then I grew with the determination to face Zoroastro no matter what the circumstances were.

A leaf quake denounced the presence of a bird of singular plumage. I looked at it with attention. The purples and celestial blue feather were joined in an unusual wings contrast under the splashed crimson of the breast. Long moment I contemplated the improbable coloration of the animal and its vaporous movements in increases swaying and lowered on the irregular branches of the tree. Minutes later, rescued of the abstraction for the subtle calling of Leonardo pronouncing my name, I turned and found him with his blue eyes. I have very little to tell about what then happened, it could be that pushed by the newly acquired courage for the exaltation of the spirit, or that the cowardice, weary of dwell under my reverie, decide to dress up for the first time under the guise of the fearlessness and venturing in full for the distant roads of the audacity, the truth is that without thinking about it, I kissed him. Oh! Duprina, if you had been present you would have rolled about in the deep marshland of your jealousy. If you had attended the passion with which I took possession of his lips, gained motives you would have to hate me and to despise me. But you were not there and your eyes did not see. And in your absence, I took possession of the nectars of your orchard. In his defense, I can only say that in his uncertainty I found the way cleared for my adventurousness. Completed the kiss, there slipped the bravery, like a naughty girl who flees to protect herself from the

punishment. Though it was me who ran, back to the safety of the house, and he had no time to react to my rise. Satisfied but exhausted I came up to the house. Americus and the guards were waiting on the veranda. My sisters had already had breakfast and were waiting for me also. Leonardo came behind me but he did not mention the incident. Nothing in his behavior denoted taste or displeasure for the kiss.

Americus directed a complaisant look to me. I had the conviction that he was foreseeing my thoughts. Beatrice threw a crafty glimpse to me too. We met in the room, Americus added:

-We must prepare ourselves for the attack. From now on you must not be alone - He said speaking to me.

Of course, I agreed with a light head inclination.

- I will not go away without fighting – I exclaimed aloud.

- I am glad that you have recovered your fortitude – Were the affectionate words of the old man.

The rest of the evening I amused myself with the guards and the Book looking in between the yellowish and undermined pages the indolent passages for the conjuration that so hard was hiding to my attention. The time was passing and our actions were not turning out to be crowned with the success. When I was getting tired of looking in the Book, I passed it to the guards and when the guards were tired they passed to Leonardo, who kept on looking, frantically, with equal ardor the wished spell.

Fast like a gazelle came the night. Some candles were ignited in the room where we were gathered. The tenuous light of the ambience was inviting to the secrecy. Leonardo addressed me to a couch and helped me to sit. Nothing had changed in his conduct from the “stolen kiss”. Livening up the party was Batam-Al-Bur reporting stories of his ancient Persia and exalting the natural beauties of his place of origin. For Americus invitation there came later the masters of the region, Alaris, Ducran and Xanatrix. I knew that their visit was not of courteousness but were preparing for the next meeting that should happen with Zoroastro.

The accomplice night was hiding the winged bodies and the clandestine faces of oblique look and bitter sneer, which were emerging from the depths of the calamitous forest, accomplice also, of the demons which pouring out from its womb had begun to stain the ground of malignancies; the Lord of the shadows already was ruling the land. His subjects nettled by the open pores of the pasty smelly mud that opened to let out the reprobates.

I figured it out that the battle for the custody of my soul would develop in the mansion of the enchantress Zarnia. This way I was reflecting,

sitting in the gangway of the veranda doing picture drawings on the ground with a thin broken branch of a shrub, with the only intention of removing the dark thoughts from my mind, when a few thick gray thunderclouds become alienated from the top of the Belt of the Devil and roofed in the night dome. They concealed completely the silver threads of the moon and put into mourning with a dark mist the twinkling of the abundant stars.

The night was cool and nothing to suggest that an army of strange creatures was directing toward the residence under the dark night cover. Mariana and Beatrice were next to me. They took a fistful of little stones from the surroundings and placing them on their laps enjoyed throwing them towards the weeds. Time seemed to slide with deliberate slowness. Both Americus and Leonardo waited seated on the wicker easy chairs and were rocking in a soft and rhythmic movement that was expressing a light crack in its swaying.

Scattered across the wide corridor were the region masters, the guards and the Genie. The last one could not conceal his nervousness, walking up and down with undecided and intensive steps with his hands hidden in his strange pants and exhibiting pouches after a long night without sleeping. He did not stop watching towards the bushes, from which he was hoping to see appearing at any moment the macerated faces of the demons, monsters and devilish creatures.

It was late when a thunderous noise in one of the rooms on the top floor alerted us of the presence of someone in the house. Beatrice's arms and Mariana's swirled in my neck. Their numb cold hands returned the goosebump to me. Minutes earlier, Mariana had had the good skill of hiding Bartolomeo in one of the cabinets from the kitchen, and the dog, as if he knew what was approaching, had remained very calm, like a newborn lamb, in its unexpected refuge of four walls. With the explosion of the din we all stood up. With signs, Leonardo indicated to the masters of the region that should walk up to the large door and protect the main entry of the residence, he ordered us to hide behind the colossal wicker easy chairs, which we did without delay, as Batam and the guards. Pushes began to go and come because the space was not sufficient to hide so many people and, consequently, the unsteady easy chairs threatened to collapse any minute now, until the guards chose to shelter under the leafy branches of a nearby fern. Americus and Leonardo waited in the entry of the main door that which was given to the hall.

A few stout steps were heard from the interior of the house.

-There is no doubt. There is someone inside - Recited Americus.

- And they are not us -The complaining Genie indicated after counting us with the fingers and realizing that we all were out. His eyes reflected

the terror that was experimenting, nevertheless he did not flee. He stayed unscathed like the rest of the group although enduring light fright quakes and teeth creaking.

An intense and indescribable emotion shook me. Would my last moment be really this? I remembered gone episodes of my life; they were rising, segmented, in scraps. A collage of futile fights and conciliations, of laughs and crying, of promises and certainties, all tinted with the tenuous tone of the nostalgia, juxtaposed in a compact piece, as wishing to monopolize the last minutes of my conscience.

Beatrice planted herself next to me in the purpose of not letting anybody will lead me to the evil fields. She claimed for herself the exclusive right to be the only cause of my mortifications and would face everything that would steal that privilege from her. Mariana had come to the understanding that she did not want the life if I was not in it, and it would fight also until the end against the creatures, infernal or not. I contained my tears on having verified the magnitude of the sacrifice that my defense was imposing on them. What bighead I felt, then! And what bighead I feel now! Americus and Leonardo! The guards and Batam-Al-Bur! Heap of friends ready to fight until the end against the dark forces in order to gain me the salvation! I wished God could provide me the right to correspond in opportune occasion for the profusion of such affections. That I wished.

On the way two silhouettes were approaching. We saw them coming with drowsiness as if the feet were sinking in the mud and would find it hard to drag the steps. On having come closer, they were gaining height and bluntness and it became easy to elucidate the features of their faces.

-Here they come! - Shouted Xanax minutes earlier, getting ready for the fight.

I must say that Americus possessed an exceptional sight since from the distance he looked and recognized to the bellicose figures that were approaching the large door.

-It is The Executioner – Said Americus aloud - and of course, his inseparable friend Frozenblack. A glacial cold began slipping in between my bones and the same happened to my sisters and Batam, considering the rattling of his teeth.

In the distance, close to the The Cowgirl puddles and the Belt of the Devil, I saw like the darkest cloud I've ever seen began to form, becoming denser and denser, swelling up in volume and monstrosity. When it had a prominent size it began sliding towards us. To the step of the cloud, the singed forest was falling down, trees were crackling on having rushed forward, died, at the soil. The shrubs, emaciated and evaporated by the fury of the roaring fire, were supplanted by an enormous black, ashen and sterile spot that was distilling the gray

streams of destruction.

While it was approaching, we could hear the howls of the wood carbonizing and exploding in agony. Under the cloud, and skipping on the remains of the arboreal corpses, were Zoroastro's demons: a few small monstrous beings which I recognized by intuition. They were not tall but possessed a great agility in its movements, resembling gargoyles with marked humps, curved hands and bat wings. Its aspect was frankly disgusting and repulsive. We perceived them when they were descending the slope of the narrow path that ended at the verge of the mansion. Before this sight the Genie chose to hide behind us. At the same time, Leonardo was undressing his layer to throw it in our heads to protect us and save us from the atrocious spectacle. We had to fight for the layer since Batam was claiming it for himself. Americus shouted the guards.

-Protect the Book! – He ordered.

At once, Cirila, Petrarco and Drefno jumped like shot by a supernatural force and took hold of one of the adjacent creepers which climbed until the room I used the previous night and where the Book was. They rose with the agility of a wild cat and of a jumping entered the open window. On the bed they found two volumes; that of the enchantress Zarnia shaking in grotesque movements, seemed to be coming alive, its hard mask was writhing with the undulating flows of an ocean wave. "The Keys of the Kingdom" was remaining impassive before such an abomination.

- Beams and Flashes! What the hell is happening here? – Petrarco asked and with another jump he took the book of the light and went out running with Cirila and Drefno after his steps. When they were enlisting to climb down the stairs, a horrifying woman was waiting for them at the base. The spongy hair of a vibrant black, resembling that of the Jellyfish, the most frightening of the Gorgonas, the angry expression and the citrine face confirmed to them what they were afraid of, the woman was the enchantress Zarnia. The Witch, with the proper slowness of the bogeys and adorned with a Machiavellian smile, began to raise the steps.

-I believe you have something for me, don't you dear? - Said with a bulging perverse ultra-graves voice.

The guards were contemplating her as she was climbing, paralyzed by panic.

I believe that we don't!!! – Shouted Petrarco stepping back to the last moment and stumbling over Cirila and over Drefno, who fell down at his feet but stood up with the speed of a beam. They ran looking for refuge, trying to open the rooms' doors of the corridor as they were advancing towards the bottom to move away from the horrifying

woman, but all the doors were closed. On the verge of being reached, they discerned a gangway that was leading to a door that they supposed was the attic. Hurriedly, they walked the stair squeezing and tried to open it, but Petrarco was so nervous that the knob slipped from his hands as he did not want to release the Book for fear of it falling down. At the same time, Drefno, seeing the difficulty of the gnome, was trying to help pulling also the knob; and between shouting and shoving neither Petrarco nor Drefno managed to open it. At the last moment, Cirila stood between them and opened it with difficulty slipping away quickly with the witch on the heels.

Zarnia's cavernous voice resounded in the narrow corridor murmuring the strange words of a conjuration to do that the small door was opened. Meanwhile, the alarmed guards were looking throughout for an exit before the eyesore was entering the enclosure.

-Some idea? Someone? – Was shouting Petrarco in the crammed place infested with useless objects.

Simultaneously, in another place of the house, Zoroastro was making his appearance in the room. He was dressed in black, his gloved hands supported a strange support staff at whose end was incusted the image of a lion with the open jaw. The image had movement and the beast was roaring like the snoring of a storm.

I observed it from the angle of the window. Had heard about the ugliness of the infernal beings, and even I had been myself a witness of this truth in my first meeting with Zoroastro, but the boy who was in the room with nothing compared to that other that had appeared before me in *The Borrascosa*. This one had a very short, neatly cut black hair, with the partially hooded head, the extremely white complexion and the greenish eyes as the leaves of a coffee plantation. About the hands I had to say nothing since they were covered by a few thin black gloves. Intrigued by the new presence of the demon, I could only infer that it possessed the strange skill of changing his "front" at will and with this new appearance he was only trying to convince me of accompanying him voluntarily.

Americus and Leonardo were blocking the door that was the only obstacle that was intervening between Zoroastro and me. The first one was giving instructions to his son before the imminent attack; the second listened attentively and did not stop observing the displacement of the black magician.

-Do not separate from them! – Arranged Americus.

The wind was blowing cold; something sinister was floating in the ambience. For their part, the masters of the region blocked the way to *The Executioner* who had come from the path and was trying to reach up to the house. The ally of the witch approached with unconcerned

attitude, put a hand in the right pocket of his pants and extracted a tobacco that unrolled with self-assurance and began to chew it as if it was chimo. At once his teeth were dyed of a brown coloration granting them a dirty appearance.

-You are on private property! - Said with sarcasm - I must ask them to leave the mansion.

Xanatrix, Ducran and Alaris had placed themselves piled up at the entrance. The Executioner had no space where to slide the body, but Frosenblack, to whom the earthly obstacles were not stopping, it had jumped the fence and was running towards the house to meet its mistress, and the masters could do nothing to stop it.

-We know that this house belongs to the enchantress Zarnia. But any way we will not go away, unless you leave the girl alone! – Replied Ducran.

The Executioner sank his feet in the ground unwillingly. He made a break to straighten up, then, chewing the end of a tobacco, spat at the feet of Alaris who, disgusted, was observing the bagasse expectorated by the man. Seeing the disgusted expression of the elf, he answered with a guffaw:

-In this case, let's wait for Zarnia. I want to see how she extracts them to the kicks!

The masters of the region did not react. They turned the look towards Leonardo who made signs so they were maintaining their positions and remained distended like enormous steep rocks. Without offering resistance, The Executioner bent the head and stayed aside of the half-open large door, chewing tobacco and spitting with sarcasm on the ground. He would not go away. The enchantress would not be late in coming, if she had not arrived yet.

From the Belt of the Devil the diabolical Zoroastro army was approaching, from half a kilometer one could feel the stinking smell of the faucets and the dark shade that was furrowing the airs consuming everything to its step.

Meanwhile in the room, the black and threatening figure of Zoroastro, defying the powers of the Supreme Magician, paced towards the door and stopped. Americus was eclipsing him the step. With an odious and glacial voice he confronted him pressing to delivering the girl or succumbing up to the death.

-I just want what belongs to me. Do not interfere in my matters. Deliver her to me and I will go away without causing problems.

The elder stood firm putting up resistance and with an authoritarian voice, which I had not heard of till then, invoked the powers of the Brotherhood and demanded that he returned to the caves of his world.

-The young woman does not want to go away! – He added - a lot of

interest I have in knowing why you are so interested in her. You have never done the work of your demons! Why now is it different?

Zoroastro looked at him with certainty, did not have intentions of revealing the secret. He opened the layer and took out the macabre support staff to use it against the elder.

-Don't make me lose any more time! – He shouted - She has the ring! That turns her into my belonging! And I do not have intentions of going away without taking what corresponds to me. Americus was not scared. Threw a deadly look and, passing ahead, he urged him to stepping back.

- I said that she will not go away with you – Americus answered peacefully.

There they were, while negotiating my destination, I, at first row, watched the confrontation between the two titans, as if in a film scene is concerned. The personages were shouting and grunting, and measured themselves to the look and assaulting again. It was an unreal time in which the minutes seemed as long as hours. The shrieks of the beasts fighting against the masters of the region were coming to me from a distance, as muffled by the beats of my own heart.

The demon began to show impatience tracks; his greenish eyes, now reddish by the blood that pumped by the anger, began to accumulate in his orbits, purple circles appeared like pouches.

-We will see that! - And with these words he disappeared off the site.

Great intrigue caused me the comment of Americus about the cause of the interest of the demon in my person. I had not even thought there was a cause!

The mysterious sky was getting black and hostile while Americus and Leonardo watched over me, looking in all directions where the unexpected attack might come. Very soon appeared Zoroastro with the image I saw the first time we met; he stood firm at the front of the house and at his back a few horrifying creatures. They had flown through the airs and landed on the sunflowers squashing the yellow toasting of their petals.

-You are very old to conquer me, so step aside and allow me to do my work! - He said to Americus that still continued at the entrance door. Leonardo passed at the head and located in front of him.

-He won't fight against you, I will – He answered.

Beatrice exhaled a mitigation sigh, it is not that she had no faith in the renowned powers of the big Supreme Magician but she thought he was too old and had no chance of winning in a confrontation against that robust boy. The appearance fixed the look on him at the time that the dark cloud was coming and setting aside the house. The cloud was distilling a sickening smell that impregnated the whole place. From the

amorphous and lugubrious mass one could hear lamentations sprouting from the interior. Remains of arms, legs and human heads were standing out in the surface that was showing a slow revolving movement as if the weight of its iniquities was too heavy.

I closed the eyes for a few seconds to avoid the vision of this horror, but I had to open them again when I listened to the words of the black magician:

-You are not sufficiently powerful to face me! - The demon said with vanity.

-We will see that! – Leonardo shouted from the veranda. Zoroastro lifted the support staff towards the amorphous mass that was the cloud, while doing this; he murmured a few strange words similar to Latin. From the thundercloud arose the broken line of a blue beam and, with a movement of his hand, directed it to Leonardo, who had drawn sort of a metallic pole very similar to a saber, but without the handle. The pole intercepted the lightning that was coming to smash irremediably against him, but before crashing with noise in the front of the house, hurt obliquely Americus in the head and threw him against the door, to few meters from which we were, remaining unconscious.

In my head I felt the pricks of some debris that fell down from the collapsed roof. It had destroyed the door and the whole opposite wall. For the gap we could see the furniture and the paintings of the room. We crawled up to where Americus was. I took him by the arm and Beatrice took the other; Mariana supported his legs. I rolled over to see where Zoroastro was and, seeing that was entertained martyring Leonardo, we moved away from the house to hide behind some shrubs. Leonardo was crawling under the cloak of sunflowers and daisies while the black magician was throwing fulminating beams that were falling down scratching the surrounding surface, leaving smoky craters of considerable size.

Where will Batam be? – I was wondering - It was quite a while since I hadn't seen the Genie, perhaps he ran to hide in his bottle, thought that I was even considering it. Tearing the sleeves of her blouse like unexpected bandages, Mariana managed to accommodate them around the Magician's forehead. She was very skillful when it comes to applying first aid to helpless beings that fell down in her hands.

-Look! – Beatrice pointed out towards the window.

At this moment, Cirila was going out for the small garret and was extending a hand to Petrarco to help it to go out too, since he was clogged by the waist. The suffocated Drefno screams gave us the idea that he was on the other side pushing him also.

After a small struggle, the fatty figure went out and it was the elf who extended the two big green plush bags that Petrarco delivered to Cirila,

to vacate the hands to help his partner. Minutes later the three of them were standing on the cornice which supported the rainwaters tubes, threatening to collapse due to the unusual weight. Cirila could fly, but not her friends, so she flew to lighten the weight. The gnome and the elf jumped to a tube installed in one of the corners and slid for the pipe down to the soil. Mariana whistled to indicate our place and they ran to meet us. On having come, Petrarco was exhausted and reported the meeting with the enchantress as he could.

- Oup! You got quite activity here! - Said giving a look to the surroundings. Seemingly they had not been successful in the rescue of the book for all they brought was two big bags, very small to contain the volume.

-And the book?

-The witch has it! - The three answered smiling.

Now I already had no remedy. The only thing that could save me lies in the hands of the witch who wanted to send me to the underworld. However I did not understand why they were so happy and suspected that something had engineered!

-What is so funny?

- We will explain it to you later! We must help the masters of the region!

- He said seeing the scene that was developing in the large door where Alaris, Ducran and Xanatrix were facing three horrifying creatures. These creatures had sulfur teeth standing out projected out of their mouth, sharpened like knives; their long tails moved in all directions and used them as if they were a whip. In one of these movements they impressed Ducrán, which thrown to a few meters smashed against the struck dead crust of one of the acacias, remaining so injured that he could not already lift his little body, situation that The Executioner took advantage to flank the entry and went towards the house. Alaris and Xanatrix remained with the fierce beasts that rushed forward towards them in a frontal attack. This way Drefno and Petrarco found them, fighting against the devilish ones, and this way, in obstinate resistance, they joined Alaris and Xanatrix to fight with teeth, stones and determination. They were fighting with bravery and this was perhaps their best weapon.

In the hollow where it had been the door, the witch Zarnia appeared, supporting with arrogance the two Books of Saint Andre that she had snatched from the guards. Her hair waved up to the waist, swirled like snakes; her sinister mouth was drawing a smile that looked more like a grimace that allowed seeing the whitish pieces of a few teeth. The Executioner reached her in the grayish sandstone that was in the center of the garden near a mutilated fountain made of stone also. They greeted each other by a head inclination. With the same slowness that

was showing in the stairs, Zarnia approached his master saying:

-Here you have the Books, master. You can take the girl whenever you want! I have fulfilled my dealing! I served you for fifty years! Now it's her turn. This way I remain free to return finally to my home.

The spectrum smiled with satisfaction and released the staff to The Executioner to take the books. With one swift movement he gave Zarnia the one that belonged to her. And holding the other which so many headaches had given him, unleashed the belt of "The Keys of the Kingdom" with the gloved hand. The first pages were in blank, then he concentrated and the rest, equally, all blank. Finally he noticed that the front was the only element that the volume had of the original book since the rest was just a compendium of white sheets, as white as the snow. Deceived, his face began to turn red like the embers of a boiler and exploded in a voracious and thunderous form:

-But what kind of prank is this, Zarnia? – Shouted while throwing the book to the feet of the enchantress – These pages are not printed!

I looked at the guards not understanding what was happening. Cirila was laughing out loud, leaned on a shrub to support the dashing of her laugh. Petrarco was rolling about with laughter on the lawn with his two hands on the belly and shaking alternatively his legs too and Drefno was smiling but with aristocratic tidiness, supporting the green bags in his hands:

- We stole all the letters of the book! - Said Petrarco in a rustle of voice muffled by his laughs.

-We had never done it before! But it was worthwhile only for seeing Zoroastro's surprise face!

In my boldest imaginations I never thought that similar thing might be done. Nevertheless, across my contact with the magic, I had discovered a world of infinite potentialities where the impossible word seemed not to exist. Beatrice and Mariana were perplexed.

-The letters? But, how is this possible? – I asked.

-With magic! – The three answered in unison as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

-I have to get accustomed to these things of magic – I thought.

Meanwhile in front of the house the following scene was developing:

The witch was complaining, murmuring excuses in which she was confirming that this was the Book that the Guards had. Zoroastro for his part, was shouting about Zarnia's incompetence and pressing her to find the real volume. At this moment, Zoroastro turned and directed the look to the place where we were.

Maybe he did not like the prank or that the shameless laughs of the guards hurt his pride, the true thing was that after taking the support staff he began walking in our direction in threatening attitude. That

could not be good. At once, the masters of the region intervened in the way but he quickly, with a movement of his arms, separated off the road and threw them a few meters away. Soon after that, Leonardo went out of the weeds stroked from behind and also he was thrown on the debris where second earlier the monsters had landed. For his mouth began to slide a tenuous blood thread. The guards dispersed for the surroundings. Beatrice and Mariana remained with Americus, who was still unconscious, and were doing intense efforts for revive him. I tried to approach Leonardo to help him but Zoroastro caught me in the way.

- Where do you think you are going so fast, girl?

He took me by the arm burying his gloved claws in my flesh. I screamed for the pressure of that hand that was burning hot like a fire in full summer. Leonardo got up and ran towards us but he did not have time to come. The bogey elevated the support staff and shaking it repelled him to the airs, falling down this time close to where my sisters were. He joined them. Leonardo thought of using an invisibility charm, this way he might bring over and snatch the pole that was the instrument of his power. Putting his thought into actions, he disappeared from our sight. The demon went again against him.

-This charm will not serve you! - Shouted Zoroastro.

In turn, recited a choir of words that should have been very effective and powerful since undid Leonardo's conjuration and made him visible again before our eyes. Seeing that Leonardo was rushing forward his master, Zarnia climbed by a jump to his back and putting her arms around Leonardo's neck began to strangle, while the Magician was trying to get away from the vulgar knot. He was turning to the woman anchored behind him. I threw a rapid glance to the surroundings. Everything was turning out to be devastated. The dark cloud began to move sucking more trees and ground.

The steel hand of Zoroastro kept on imprisoning me firmly. I kicked him with all my forces and at the moment he released me tried to escape running in direction to the house, but I stumbled for a trip stretched to me by The Executioner, who had been attentive to the events waiting for the occasion to offer his contribution to the contest. He looked at me with his malevolence and a sardonic smile. I fell down, scratching my chin against the sandy soil. So loudly was my falling that I even could savor some grains of gravel. With my fingers, and yet on the ground I had tried to extract the unpleasant adherent corpuscles off my mouth. I felt that a hand was grasping me hard by my ankle. He dragged me towards him again. Seconds later the pressure slackened, when I rolled over I saw Beatrice hung from his neck, using the same skill as Zarnia was using with Leonardo. Mariana, in turn, adhered to one of the demon's legs. Beatrice and Zoroastro, Leonardo and Zarnia were

swaggering through their bodies as if they were executing the new version of some suburban tango.

Beatrice was shouting at me while shaking the head of the Black Magician side to side:

- If we go out of this one, you are going to be in debt to me for the rest of your life – screamed staggering on the back of the black sorcerer, while this one made efforts for coming undone. Mariana was attached to Zoroastro's leg, with the same dedication of a tick posted on a canine's juicy ear and was squeezing the extremity as if she wanted to extract the infernal fluids from him.

My respiration paralyzed when I saw that Zoroastro, of a kick, was throwing Mariana towards the black cloud; I followed her with the look, while, lifted, the force of the wind was swinging her hair; she was fanning the arms in an effort to move away from the thundercloud. Seconds, before ending gobbled by the dark mass, Leonardo, with the magical bore still on his shoulders, held her by the ankle and managed to extract her off the mortal trajectory. I sighed and added one more motive in the long list of reasons to be grateful with the Magician.

Infuriated by so abominable action, I began to kick the bogey with all the force of my eighteen years. While this was doing with delight, I discerned the robust Petrarco silhouette, whose outfit was short and showed his adipose belly between the border of his shirt and pants. Swaggering, he was doing signs that I could not understand. Nevertheless, stop paying attention to him at the moment when the demon, with a slap got rid of Beatrice and lifted me from the waist up to staying opposite to his front. He again lifted the support staff, in order to transport me to his warm world, and in this precise moment, the graceful figure of Batam-Al-Bur appeared. He was not coming alone; was accompanied by seven oriental magicians decked with elegant garbs, riding on massive camels decorated also with metallic skeletons of magisterial coloring.

- Hello, baby. I may be a coward but have very brave friends – the Genie shouted bending of his shining camel going up to the place where Americus was. One genie, a tall mulatto of greenish eyes, with a fuchsia turban coiled about the head, extracted a dagger that threw straight up to the heart of his contender, which I missed only for centimeters. With this, the Black Magician released me and I could run to the shelter up to where the guards were. Leonardo kept on fighting against Zarnia and The Executioner who had joined the combat.

-What a woman! – I thought.

The struggle continued. Zoroastro took from himself the knife that had lodged into his heart and threw it on the ground, at the time that with open arms was making movements controlling the dark cloud. From it

was going out incandescent beams that were crashing for the whole place. The Genie's friends took turns to attack but Zoroastro was repelling all the attempts with his support staff.

The scene was Dantesque, beams, demons, witches in brutal agitation. Finally, I dropped:

-Sufficient! – I shouted from the bottom of my heart and went straight where the demon was - I will go away with you if this is what you want. I cannot stand to see how you damage my dear ones!

Mariana, that had joined again Americus, began to cry.

- Camila, no! Do not give up! You never give up! We still have forces to fight!

-True! We are not still covered with blood! – My hardened and giddy sister Beatrice shouted.

I approached up to where Zoroastro was and placed myself next to him.

-You win! - I said - I will go voluntarily where you want!

Zoroastro looked at me with victory eyes and the enchantress moved away from Leonardo and walked towards the demon, laughing with a horrible laughter, embracing The Executioner and her pet Frosenblack!

-Finally, I am back, I'm on my home now! I spent good moments along with you, my master – answered the enchantress, who was not stopping jumping - but I always longed for my home!

Leonardo was looking at me weakened and ruefully. He was lacking the breath for the effort of the contest. The witch approached the black magician to say goodbye. She placed her long arms about his neck to give him a brotherly kiss. This precise moment was the one I took advantage of to extract the ring that I was keeping hidden in my pocket and to put it back on Zarnia's finger.

- I am afraid that you will have to spend another fifty years with your dear master!

The witch observed her hand and by the whole place there was heard a colossal shriek as that of a hurt and moribund animal.

-What is this? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME? – The enchantress was shouting.

-Nothing at all! – I answered – I am just returning what it's yours! With pitfalls you put it on my finger, with pitfalls I returned it to you! Happy days in hell! Even there I will send you the remains of the chocolate cake that you used to tease me!

- But how was it possible?

-Magic! – I answered – Only by magic!

-This cannot be possible! You are not a witch! - The enchantress was howling.

-Not yet! But I had a good beginning and very good teachers. I have all the attributes to turn into one in the nearby future, don't you think?

THE TWO BOOKS OF SAINT ANDRE

Zoroastro became red with anger. He was feeling deceived since his interest was centered on me. I directed a few words to him:

-Now that I do not have the ring, you will have to take your witch again: At least for another fifty years!

The demon looked at me with powerlessness.

-You are saved for the time being, but sooner or later you will be with me in the shades!

-I doubt it – I answered - I will never be in the shades.

Saying this I turned and looked around for Leonardo, ran up to him and embraced him. The guards were shouting and jumping. Zoroastro disappeared as suddenly as he came and took the witch, his demons and the dark cloud with him.

Americus had already come around and was joking about how he had got lost in the action. Beatrice saw her garments and began grumbling because they were broken, spoiled and dirty. Mariana ran to the house to rescue Bartolomeo.

We sat down as we could on the only step of the veranda that was not destroyed.

-Now, explain to us. How did you achieve it? – Beatrice asked.

I smiled with extreme satisfaction, sighing as if an immense sack had been removed from me.

-When we were in the shrubs helping Americus, and Zoroastro was walking towards us, we ran and dispersed in different directions. While we were running, the guards dropped the bags with the content of letters. When they returned to gather them they saw that these had made themselves placed in such a way that it was looking like a conjuration. Petrarco made signs to me to approach and on having done it I recited the magic phrases that had formed on the grass. When I finished reading, the ring got rid of my finger with facility.

-We were not sure that it would work – said Petrarco - that's why we had a Plan B.

-Plan B? – Answered Drefno - we did not even have a Plan A!

-Of course we did!

-Of course we did not!

-Of course we did!

-We did? So, which the plan was? – The elf asked.

-I cannot say it! It was secret! – The gnome said.

This way they continued some time discussing until Cirila intervened. Her tiny wings fluttered in Petrarco's face that then began to discuss with her.

Leonardo approached and took the shell of "The Keys of the Kingdom" as it would be necessary to do a restoration work so that the letters were occupying its positions again.

A new opportunity for me, a renewal; the feelings were crowding me hoping to be translated into words. But all effort I might be able to do remained short before the size of my gratitude. I chose to embrace each of them, in a warm and tight hug that were reflecting the emotional load that my words could not say.

-Let's go out of here! - Beatrice said in the end throwing a look to all the ravages.

-Where will we go? – Asked Mariana.

-We will go to the Grand Prince hotel - I said - to celebrate my birthday and from there we will call our lawyer.

-Yes! - Shouted Mariana giving a jump.

Nobody knew what happened with The Executioner or Frozenblack. They simply disappeared off the scene without leaving tracks.

Batam-Al-Bur dismissed his friends and remained with us to celebrate. Very late at night we reached the hotel, we jostled toward the room to refresh and after a while we went down to the restaurant where an enormous chocolate cake had been ordered by Americus and was in one of the tables in the center of the lounge. I was surprised that after the incident, my love for chocolate was still as intact as always, free of traumas or phobias. I felt so happy about being surrounded by the beings that I loved the most.

The party passed among amusing pleasantries, very sonorous laughs and interesting anecdotes. Just Leonardo seemed distant and shy. I tried to look for conversation but he answered me with discreet monosyllables. In the end, I chose to leave him alone and join the chat of the group.

THE FAREWELL

I was awakened up by the cutting beams of an incandescent sun that was striking my face with insistence. Next to me, curled up, were still sleeping Beatrice and Mariana, with a pacific expression that I had not seen on them for a lot of time.

I got up and walked towards the window. For the position of the sun, I guessed it had to be like nine o'clock. I ran to the bath to tidy myself up and then to get down the Lobby to reach Leonardo, before he was setting off. I had so much to say and to be grateful for.

Batam-Al-Bur had left the previous night, had no case to keep him removed from his own land when all our problems had been already solved. He went away very gratefully, giving reveres everywhere, extolling the beauties of his dear Persia and leaving an open invitation to us when we wanted to go visiting him. He left us the bottle as a souvenir.

I became accustomed to the idea of Beatrice being the wife of Prefect Farfan. She had not yet communicated her decision to us in this matter,

but I learned that we had to respect her elections although they could cause inconvenience or distastes. Our destination is worked across our decisions and we cannot impose our criterion on the others.

In the Lobby, the imposing figure of Americus was dominating the stay. He was dressed again in jeans with a white-and-blue shirt. The brown deerskin boots were climbing up to the knees. He was conversing with the receptionist giving her instructions on our stay. I ran up to him and hung myself to his arm. He leaned lightly with surprise and then embraced me ardently.

-I guess you are not leaving without saying goodbye - I said with friendliness.

The elder looked at me with a wide smile.

-Not at all! You would never allow me to do that! - Exclaimed laughing. He was arranging details on our stay in the hotel. The expenses were already covered.

-In one hour your lawyers will be here to take them, you and your sisters, to the city. Also they will be in charge of processing Gertrude for the act of aggression for the attacking against you.

-I do not want to raise charges! - I added - I just want to go away from here and forget about this nightmare!

I threw a look to the surroundings. Leonardo was not. I directed an interrogative look to the elder.

-He already left very early! - He said finally to me.

My eyes became damp with the tears that I wanted to suppress. He did not want to see me. I would have like expressing, if not my love, at least my gratitude.

-Without saying goodbye? So desperate was he to leave me? Americus half-closed his compassionate eyes, surrounded my shoulders with his arm and said to me in secret tone:

-Leonardo is neither good with the farewells, nor is he used to managing with feelings - He said - He is a stubborn boy and he does not want to recognize what he feels. I know he has feelings for you!

- Oh, yes! I - I agreed - He has the feeling of throwing me to a ravine!

The elder laughed again.

-Give him some time, girl!

Then, from the pocket of his shirt, he extracted an envelope with some wrinkled and yellowish pages.

- Take it! - He said - Leonardo wrote this thinking about you, but he does not know that I am delivering it to you. He threw it away into the garbage but I rescued it. I hope you keep the secret. If not, I am going to be in a lot of troubles! - He said laughing humorously.

I opened the pages he delivered to me and began to read. It was a poem:

"You do not even look at me with those green mirrors and the brilliancy of your reflex leaves me without voice or peace. Who could liberate me of this slow torture? If I look at you and curse myself and to your jail I entered again. False, voluntary jail, whose blackness drags me towards a bottomless abyss without hope of more.

Only the infinite slight sign of returning to your presence, resuscitates my conscience and catches me incessantly. Cold nights, cloudy nights, nights of immense anguish that board your memory such as a cruel executioner, of losing up the life's breath that in me flutters, if by you everything is waved and in the shore I am again.

To the shore of an abyss, high, black, deep and dirty, full of so many dirtiness that does not allow to breathe, but then you approach and the smell of your look and the flavor of your innocence there catches me again.

To the arms of my loved one that only in sleep she loves me and in velvets she acclaim me with piety ointments. And there I am left captive of your beauty, like an artist admiring the statue that enchants him. Ah, Malaya, who could tear off me this wound, soft like a caress and like hemlock mortal, because with you I die and without you my soul becomes extinct, and between shades my soul lives like assiduous prisoner.

To fly with my thought to a land without anguish, is what sometimes I presaged could save me, but which ferocious colt that smashes in the thunderstorm, I suffer again for the footpath with the silk that hires me; because my mouth that is mute when it comes to speaking to you, once you have separated it did not stop protesting out loud, infamous love, if when I could embrace you, not even a sound I whispered and again I saw you passing.

Oh, solitary moon, so many nights my partner, weave in her bed a silver tier that comes to me, so that's when it dawns her steps comes to me, and her arms would curl me and they never let me go, weave color lights around her eyes, which light dawns and nights, so that she only thinks of me, so that when she finds me, my voice that flees unfinished, should dare to say "I love you", and should accompany her muse.

Weave in her hair a ribbon that gathers her sweetness, and show it to me in the top of this love that is my madness. Spill in her mouth the passion that only in me she satisfies, and that the nectar of this saga never finishes. Her hands, anxious delicacy; my sweet and sour sustenance; that she avenges in soft lamentation and I could touch her, oh, moon of so many nights, infallible partner.

How do you want that I do not want her? If I cannot forget her, If when I open my eyes her image answers such as a breath that at night did not stop watching. And in the day she accompanies me like a shade and whenever I see her my decency remains undone. As waves that in the sea strike the white stones and do not remain calmer up until everything to destroy.

Winds of April that visit my nostalgia at the sunset, stay with me a little bit to remove from my heart this love that is my frenzy and with a light rest in the dawn to begin again. Tears of so many nights in my pillow spilled like swords caresses along with me have to reside.

THE TWO BOOKS OF SAINT ANDRE

Thief of daydream hours, princess of fairy's stories; if I cannot be your owner, only I want a look. A look is enough to me to fill your absence with blows of your presence and the naivety of your gaze. My thoughts will fly to console your ears for days of lost love that have no value no more, but how to conceal my body if of your image it is nourished, and for love it does not discuss but surrender.

Black-sadness rivers in my dreams watch me and at nights wake me up and do not allow me to dream, troop of sleepless nights that accelerate my penumbra, harvesting my bitterness, my avidity and my sorrow.

Sad lips greet me and among the mist they push me, and impel me to look for you, blind, lost and wandering. But the fear of not seeing you unmelts in me the nostalgia and the anger saddens me preventing me from thinking.

Oh moon, moon! Do not stop of ever touching my door since your beams encourage me and lull my sadness. Sky of the dawn, please take my breath to my loved one, so that when it dawns my flavor stays in her pillow.

And the aroma of this love that does not fit already in my veins, slips after my sorrow to offer her beat and a murmur of her mouth wakes up my crazy avidity and in desire it ends and I cannot already stop. And this love that in its sadness does not stop begging her, that although it is a moment, her love remains with me. And if at her hours of tedium she misses my coward love, she just has to call me and next to her I will be, because this incurable love, although out of my scope, prefers suicide in her than in another port to berth?

I closed the sheets and put them back in the envelope.

-If he felt like this for me, why did not he stay? Why did not he tell me?

- I asked.

-Why did not he stay? - Said Americus - It is a long history that I will tell you some day!

-Will I see you again? - I asked.

-Anytime you want! - And with a hug, he kissed me.

-Think it! You would be an excellent witch! - And with these words, he went towards the door and disappeared.

I remained a long time alone, strolling around the Lobby. I walked up to one of the internal gardens and sat down on one of the stools that were resting under an immense tree; opened the letter and read it again. I wiped the tears that were rolling down my cheeks as I was looking at the set of phrases and sentences.

-Well - I said to myself - if in fact he loves me, I will chase him up to the end of the world.

Under the letter written by Leonardo, I found a card from Americus inviting me for the Celebration of the New Year of the Magicians, which would be carried out in two weeks in Eisenbaum.

I smiled, wiped my cries, kept the letter in the robe's pocket and went out running to prepare myself for so special event.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Perez is a Venezuelan authoress born in the city of Caracas. From very young she gave free rein to her imagination composing short stories for children. It was not until the year 2010 when she began to penetrate in the field of the fantastic literature reaching big popularity among the young public of Caracas. In this opportunity the authoress delivers the first novel of her trilogy "Chronicles of Magic".

"The Two Books of Saint Andre" reports the story of three sisters who must face the dark side of the magic. Her novel shows a fresh, full prose of humor and anecdotal situations in the rural ambience of the little town of Saint Andre.