

The Witch Apprentice

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Some time ago I translated myself one of my books. Unfortunately I have to recognize that the translation was not as good as I would have expected.

Nevertheless, one of my readers from www.free-ebooks.net, Farideth, commented on my book and spoke some nicely about it that I took the courage to translate this, my second book, "The Witch Apprentice" solely and exclusively for him (or her) to read it. To all my other readers, I just apologize in advance if the English translation does not match your expectations.

1

A LIE

I have been awakened by a cold and glacial fear. The eve of a trip is always an event which exalted the audacities of the adventurous spirit that sailing toward the unknown is ready to receive the feast of the unexpected. But this, my trip to Eisenbaum, the land of magic, is not a touristic trip but a mystic journey by training purpose. ¡Yes! Finally, the courage of resolution took me by surprise and planted itself in front of my indecision, and cried out loud: ¡You will be a Witch! ¡A Witch! ¡No matter the cost! ... And the subsequent events of that summer were synchronized in order to comply with my destiny.

Nevertheless, a few hours before beginning my dreamed journey, while my body was still warm and deflated on a foamy grey leather armchair, dressed with a Spanish lace gown, I was battling between continuing sleeping or awakening. I was watching the new-born daybreak winking me the eye against the background of the incipient solar clarity, through the transparent rose cotton curtains that Ño Josefina so prodigiously hung just the day before.

A lot of worries rained upon me, but not even one had to do with the path that my sisters, Beatrice and Mariana, would transit; thanks to the trust fund that we inherited from my dear grandfather Gennaro, always a trustful and foresight man, and whose custody I had been granted for having arrived to the majority of age. We could live wherever we wish and as we wish, without the fear of tasting, once again, the horrible and bitter fruit of poverty; casual guest that slip through our lives during the time we lived with our grand stepmother, Gertrude, far away in Saint Andre. Our lawyers were still struggling in court in order to gain the property, The Borrascosa, again, usurped dishonestly by the malicious Gertrude and her exasperating granddaughter, Leticia.

Saint Andre... Saint Andre... Strange place that little town! How far it seemed now the memories of that incipient valley where I had my first encounter with magic! And how far, also, the memories of the Black Book

of the Witch Zarnia that I misappropriated, and the enchanted and pernicious ring that threatened to put an end to my life; but that all is part from another story, another past.

The reason of my worries had a deeper root, almost embarrassing, that extended its tentacles until strangling the few peaceful moments of my existence. Some months ago, before receiving the news of the acceptance of my postulation for the Apprentice Witch Program; I filled out some forms to inform to the Witchcraft Institution of my personal and familiar data, listed with details my abilities and skills, praising with generosity my strengths and minimizing meticulously my weaknesses. The statement of my health status, some personal references and the required recommendation letter from a personage of the magic world were also attached to this document compendium. So far, so good; because I had as well the support of Americus, Lord of the Magicians, which was more than enough guarantee to enter in any magic apprenticeship institution. However, as this exposition of my life before the eyes of third parties that do not know me were not my liking and considering that my life experiences were not as exciting as they should have been; and considering that I was below the standard required to be a good apprentice, I opted for seasoning this insipidity with some episodes of my life that never happened. In other words, I lied! And I lied unashamedly! And I lied knowing that I was lying!

I shall clarify; nevertheless, that not all the information sent was false, quite a lot was adjusted to reality: and that was my name and my age; the rest was fantasy fragments and truth approaches. My lavish pen, in an inspirational outburst, embellished me with the most coveted virtues and the most exciting life experiences, more befitting a fairy tale than a biography, I must recognize. But, how to allow that other eyes scrutinize my life to the smallest detail and judge it so bored, so little thing, so unable to raise the smallest feeling of envy? It is really a regrettable sin to enlarge our strengths and to minimize the tiniest character imperfections? I should say that under the circumstances, my behavior was more than justified. However, the cold and glacial fear that had installed by my side the very first moment that I delivered my application in the Post Office to be remitted to Eisenbaum National Magic Learning Institute, was keeping its reign in my thoughts and emotions, sharing place with an old and forgotten friend, the insomnia.

In few hours, Americus would be knocking at my door to escort me to the famous city of the magicians, and, another unusual feature, for some reason that I was not able to elucidate, I must get there by my own means, in other words, without using magical tools. Ah! What nostalgia I felt for my luxurious magic carpet! How it travelled patrolling the blue skies! For a moment I resented the fact that I gave it away to the Genie Batam-Al-Bur.

THE WITCH APPRENTICE

It has been more than six months since I had not heard from him. What would have happened on his life? Would he have encountered at last the tranquility in the warm and stormy deserts of his loved Persia, as was his wish? Or would he continue being as frightened as always looking for shelter in the interior of his extravagant bottle at the least sign of threat against his person?

After all these considerations, I forced my attention to the actual problem and the fear I would feel if my little white lie was discovered. After long minutes, or hours?, of looking for a solution, which does not threaten to unnecessarily expose me to the public shame, I had to conclude that all remedy passed, no doubt about it, through the narrow and often-impassable road of the truth. Yes! As it is customary in the most fierce Catholics to expiate the blame, there was no other remedy that the confession! Sure as I was that Father Sebastian, loyal friend of our grandfather Gennaro, who has kept strict contact with us and tried by all means and with his best Sunday sermons to keep us on track, would never understand the helm of my behavior, I decided to confess myself, as soon as I can, to Americus. Yes! I will do it! He will understand! I was decided! And I would do it without delay, before the little lie ghost comes along again and persuade me of leaving aside my regret.

A gentle knock on the door of my room, took me out of my thoughts and little by little the heavy oak door opened giving way to the silhouette of my sister, Mariana and, behind her, mimicking her steps with his tail wagging, Bartolomeo, barking and gasping after his short hike by the green gardens that surround the house; already accustomed to his new life of rich and wealthy dog. Far away in his memories the days of shabby dog of Saint Isidro Square, full of fleas and ticks, where battling for food against other dogs of unknown origin, was found by Mariana, one morning, to the verge of collapse and malnourishment.

My sister stretched out her arms around me and we were crouched in the armchair, with Bartolomeo at our feet, with submissive attitude. After briefly looking at me, my sister added:

-It seems that you did not have a good sleep night! What a face so large and exhausted, ah? Is it because you are leaving us? It is just one year and we are going to be taken care of by Ño Josefina, you know that, right?

And then, without preamble:

-By the way, a few minutes ago she told me that you have to go down as she is already serving breakfast. You must eat and leave behind that laziness! She will not allow you leave without your nutritious food. A cup of warm milk sweetened with honey, a fresh oatmeal bowl and an “arepa” with white cheese, which looks so delicious, all that is waiting for you ... ah ...and the orange juice to repel the flu. She also prepared a food suitcase for the journey and, as I see it, you will have more than enough for a whole

year –said jokingly, then paused to talk:

-Will you miss us?... Promise that you will miss us!

I stroked the two rosy-circles that formed on Mariana cheeks every time that she made a significant effort, as walking up the gardens perfumed by the aromatic gardenias, or contemplating the exquisite gladiolas, or cutting back her pretentious lilies and the whitish orchids with hints of red and yellow, imported from Brazil, born and raised by the tenacity and effort of my little sister, Mariana, who against the recommendations of two master gardeners that stated with vigor and arrogance: *This soil does not serve to grow plants!, That is to throw money away, lady, the orchids will never grow here!, They will get rotten by humidity and will decay by fungi!*, she strived for cultivating the extravagant plants. The truth is, whether for reasons of the lovely care that my sister provided them or as the orchids, horrified by the bloody destiny predicted by the almighty gardeners, insisted in growing in that hostile soil, dried and foreign soil, flourished beautifully, even against the rules of nature, reason and experts. They flourished in the north side of the garden, from there, walked reaching the house entrance, and as excited by the frenzy walking, continue flourishing and exploring, fragrant and shameless, until climbing the old and lonely oak, which guarded our playing area, and then, continuing flourishing and flourishing until reaching unsuspected heights in our neighbor's yards.

A slight smell of cinnamon exacerbated my hunger and, shaking Mariana off the sofa, I stepped up to follow that delicious aroma that was coming from the kitchen. Just baked cinnamon rolls sunk in a creamy English sauce. Uhhh! What a pleasure! I could not wait to dip my hungry teeth in such a delicacy! I knew that Ño Josefina would prepare a special dish as a farewell gift for me, besides the oatmeal. Hurrying, we went down the stairs, with Bartolomeo as escort rolling on our feet, until almost tripped on the aristocratic figure of Beatrice, who was gracefully walking to the kitchen. My sister dragged her expensive white silk satin gown, edging with some tiny feathers stitched to the sleeves, which gave her a feeling of Hollywood actress of the thirties. Her shining hair touched her waist and was swinging as she moved. Her gigantic eyes posed inevitably on me:

-But for God sake, Camila. You are so foolish! Why are you running around the house as a wild animal? Not even Mariana behaves like you! Should I remind you that you are the oldest and that it is time that you become an adult?

I stopped in my tracks on the unjustified comment, overall because Mariana was emulating exactly my actions and, however, she was excluded of the nonsense accusation that Beatrice was given me, but, I ignored the sarcastic comment because Americus will arrive soon and I did not want to say goodbye with a fight that would embitter, even more, the pain of the farewell. From the early days of our infancy, our fights were pitched battles

of rhetoric, a lot of metaphors, a lot of sarcasm, moderated doses of arbitrary accusations, abundance of adjectives and a variety of nicknames, but, we never crossed the lack of respect frontier.

We sat round the table and Ño Josefina began the display of her gastronomical delicacies. Both Ño Josefina and her daughter, Salome, moved out with us as soon as we left The Borrascosa, and she became a sort of adoptive mother, loving and intransigent when was required and it was required very often. Although she was treated as a member of the family, there were two things she was not yet used to: one was leaving the kitchen management on the hands of third parties, the other was the pronunciation of the letter “s” of some words of the English language and she was constantly skipping them from any sentence or phrase she pronounced: *Thi roat i unavory* (This roast is unsavory) – used to say – or *Umju, thi paella i lacking affron* (This paella is lacking saffron) or *Thi cream i lumpy* (This cream is lumpy). The following was that she rolled up her sleeves until the elbow, swirling a scarf around her head resembling a Hindu midwife, then, placed an apron, and beating and beating the cream until it had the silky consistency of oil. For her part, the little mulatto Salome, sister adopted by our reciprocal love, attended elementary school displaying her exuberant love to colorful attire and the inharmonious melodies that she loved so much to sing at inopportune moments. Little Mariana and Salome, both very similar and different at the same time, as if a soul were divided in two different persons, so was the relationship between them; they loved with the same intensity the same things, shared with the same passion the same laughter; cried over the same misfortunes and outraged at the same injustices. Never two people with so different origin shared so much affinity of taste and character, as if two drops of water were sprung from the same spring.

We started breakfast. Under the reign of Ño Josefina, there was no room for loss of appetite. Everything that we took from the bowl must be eaten in its entirety. This rule was unavoidable, as Beatrice was able to see when we first arrived at the house with the mulatto and her little girl.

It happened an April morning, when gathered all under the canopy that protected the garden table, we were about to receive our morning breakfast. As soon as the bowl was served, and placed at the center of the table, Beatrice, in a gluttony episode, so used to wasting and showing bad manners, took two jam-and-cheese croissants, her favorite, a generous piece of bread covered with guava marmalade, a thick slice of lemon pie, two apples and three apricots. With so much food on just one dish, an overflowing was threatening. And my sister, chatting and chatting, innocent of what was coming up, was nibbling a bit of this and a bit of that. After the dessert, Beatrice tried to get up when her breakfast was almost intact and that was the time when, zas! Ño Josefina took advantage and with just one

blow pushed her back to her sit:

-Why you getting up table, little Beatrice, without finishing breakfast? –said placing her arm on Beatrice’s shoulder. Something should be told in order to comprehend the relevance of the scene and that is that Ño Josefina’s hand is not just “another” hand. They seemed huge lead gloves about to explode and that the last phrase “*without finishing breakfast*” was told with a thunder voice, in an accusatory tone, as the one that God would pronounce if he were talking from the heavens. Beatrice, ignoring this circumstance, in spite of her frequent boastings of intelligence, failed to notice the situation and the tone and made a second attempt of getting up... and zas! Again the heavy lead glove pushed her back against the chair.

-Do not get up until eat food –stressed the mulatto with bad English and approached the dish to Beatrice’s face.

-But... Ño Josefina, I am full. I do not want to eat any more!... I am going to explode! Please have mercy, I could eat those croissants later... I am not hungry right now! –Erupted in a series of bizarre excuses that were not enough, distancing the dish with her two hands.

But Ño Josefina, collecting the impulses of her valuable African race, turned a deaf ear to Beatrice’s excuses and ignoring her crying continued deploying her Samaritan sermons:

-If you full, why you took more? –And with an unyielding voice said- God gives us food to treat it with respect. Not waste it. A lot of people on thi (this) Earth do not eat, is starving. Children hungry everywhere. Food do not have to be wasted. You have to respect food, so eat!. If no eat, you do not get up the table –and these words were told in a decisive tone, which did not accept excuses.

Beatrice tried unsuccessfully to convince the old lady that, this time, let the incident pass, Beatrice kicked, Beatrice insulted, Beatrice cried, Beatrice begged, but all was in vain; Ño Josefina seemed immune to her dramatic deployment.

In that moment I understood something that I was suspecting since some time ago... What Ño Josefina wants, Ño Josefina gets! After long hours of being pushed back against the chair with the dish at her sight and listening lectures on the sin of gluttony, Bangladesh history and Gandhi teachings... and as the list seemed to never end, Beatrice, finally recognized that she would continue being prisoner of the lead glove until she accepted the defeat and had no other choice than to eat to the very last piece of croissant covered with lemon pie and bread with marmalade; and was very close to eat, also, the apricot seed!

The educational tenacity of Ño Josefina had its routes in life wisdom and the teachings of her ancestors; her methodology was empiric and rough, very far from the precepts and practices of the Modern Psychology,

but was not less effective. That day the breakfast proceeded smoothly.

I walked back to my room with the retinue of sisters behind my back, ranting all at the same time as poultry brooders: If black velvet prom dresses were the most appropriate for celebrations, that I should wear mine just in case the occasion arrives, if black patent leather shoes were passé but were preferable to the blue patent, which in addition to ugly, cheap and ordinary, are damaged when rain water falls, which it was to be expected since they are the cheapest in the market.

-Nothing like a good pair of shoes to raise self-esteem -stressed Beatrice while helping me to order the garments that I had selected for my trip into the small grey leather suitcase that was lying open on the bed.

Tips of how I should behave when I find Leonardo rained down from Mariana and Salome, but their voices reached me from afar, as murmurs from a distant land. Away as I was in my own thoughts the mere mention of Leonardo evoked in me a bittersweet sense of nostalgia and regret. Those verses delivered to me by Americus in Saint Andre, in quiet confidence, as written by the hand of Leonardo for me, had left more questions than answers in my heart.

Thousands of times my eyes had reviewed, line by line, sentence by sentence, word by word, scrutinizing the thin and worn pages that suggested Leonardo's undeclared love, but I did not find evidence I was the muse that inspired them. The possibility existed that the romantic prose had not been written for me and Americus, blinded in his role of father, had confused the feelings of his son mistakenly thinking I was the object of his love. Leonardo's long silence and absence during the past six months were not fitted to other thinking.

-Camila, Why are you so silent? Aren't you excited about the trip? -asked the mulatto Salome while throwing her body down on the bed, pressing her elbows against the mattress with her arms in a "v" shape, and squeezing her cheeks with both hands.

-It is not that...- I hesitated.

Immediately Mariana interrupted:

-As you are going to dedicate yourself to the business of magic, do you think that there exist any spell that would serve to revive Filomena? Wouldn't it be nice to have it again hovering around the house?

Beatrice stopped what she was doing and very upset replied:

-Are you crazy? That is the last thing we needed! A zombie chicken in our house! Help me God, such nonsense! Thinking of the undead? It exasperates me, but thinking about a dead-zombie-hen is the worst. I can imagine it, walking by dragging her two bloodied legs, scratching the carpet and looking for someone to nail her peak! No! No! No! Everything has to have a limit, I had enough magic in Saint Andre and do not want to know anything about it for the rest of my life! I do not understand your

commitment to become a witch, Camila -she said addressing me, then continued:

-Aren't there enough witches already in this world? When goblins, trolls or any other gruesome creature are chasing you, do not call me! Enough magic I have already had in this life! Enough! Did you hear me?

The familiar sound of the buzzer echoed in my room and put an end to the discussion and as animated by an invisible spring, we got up and walked through the narrow space between my room and the living room.

I was the first to get the angled door and opened it, I was so anxious to see Americus and confess the secret that tormented my soul; behind me landed Beatrice, Mariana and Salome, but the figure that stood on the other side of the door was not in any way Americus'. The enigmatic sapphire eyes, the perfectly cut hair, the impeccable coat of black leather that covered him until the heels, were unmistakable.

There he was, after all this time, six months to be exact, Leonardo, lying on one side of the gate, suffocating me with his eyes and waiting for a reaction on my part that refused to appear. Flushes flooded my face, drowning me the voice.

My sister Beatrice, pushing me with her elbow back, immediately took charge of the situation:

-Wow, Leonardo! So long without seeing you...We were expecting to see Americus. However, you are also welcome. Come in now! -said excited making a small gesture with her hand indicating him the entry.

We all instinctively moved aside leaving free space. He gave a few steps and was standing in the lobby, waiting for the invitation to sit down. I gave a quick glance at the studio, which was the room that could be seen from the lobby. It was indeed a welcoming piece decorated with very good taste, by my grandfather, Gennaro, shortly before his death. There was a sturdy desk in the middle of the living room, lying on a stucco wall dressed in the immense canvas of a landscape where some young ladies were playing in a colorful garden of ochre and pinkish tones. So vivid was the scene that seemed that these ladies were about to jump off the framework to play with the large mahogany armchairs placed in front of the desk. The armchairs reflected the hospitable spirit of my grandfather; stationed there, they seemed to open their arms ready to dispense a warm embrace.

Suddenly, I was aware of my own clothing. I did a quick inventory: my favorite pajama was a faded cloth that barely sketches of the small bunnies that originally populated the fabric. Although the garment was an atrocity to the eyes, to the skin was like the caress of a cotton swab, and only for this reason I had defended it from the aggressive attacks of Ño Josefina, preserving it in a privileged place in my closet.

My hair resembled a tangle of elderflower wool tangled by the antics of a cat. And my slippers? Not to mention! A small hole on one side left to

escape a small gut of rubber foam providing a really grotesque spectacle. In a flash I realized how little graceful I should look to the eyes of the wizard and ran to my room in search of shelter and more encouraging clothes.

Beatrice, Mariana and Salome also made their own inventory because they ran in search of best costumes. So Leonardo was left, alone, standing in the room, with the company of the furniture and Bartolomeo, which was entertained licking his already polished shoes. Minutes later, fortunately, Ño Josefina appeared and took the role of hostess.

On the other hand, chaos reigned in my room, remains of clothes, shoes, and makeup scattered everywhere. I ran to the closet, looking from side to side a suitable cloth, but no garment seemed good enough for the eyes of Leonardo. In the end I selected a plain jean and a white blouse and a pair of brown suede boots to match the belt. A styling liquid helped me to master my rebel hair, then, already tamed, I combed until I got a small ponytail.

My image on the mirror was very satisfactory and I was very pleased of the result. However, before leaving, I took in my hands the humble pajamas, faithful fellow of many nights of pleasant dreams, and despite the pitiful look that the little bunnies threw me, full of resignation and accusations, I threw it without remorse to the dustbin, determined as I was not to ever repeat the embarrassing spectacle of the faded pajamas. The damaged slippers also had the same end.

Already dressed, I started down the stairs without much noise or stridency. Leonardo, in the studio, was conversing animatedly with Ño Josefina explaining the reason for his visit. I hid behind a pillar where I could see him seated in one of the front seats and Ño Josefina was in turn on the sofa with hands entwined on her lap.

-My father is finishing a very important assignment outside Eisenbaum. He could not come but commissioned me especially to escort Camilla to The Fortaleza and make sure that she is properly installed.

The mulatto scowled, she did not quite understand the magic stuff. She watched over us as if she were our own mother.

-I disagree (*disagree*) with the desire of Camila to become a witch. Playing with magic and orcery (*sorcery*) does not bring anything good. In my good time (*times*), girls wanted to be teachers or nuns, or in any case, marry a lawyer or doctor with a generous provision for the future. Those girls listened to what our grandparents had to say and we let us guide by their experience and advice. We raised a lot of children, that is true, but now, girls only want to be self-sufficient, professionals and become a model or a witch!

Leonardo laughed and I saw him taking courage and patience while he was about to reply. His laugh was like a dark lullaby to my ears and his presence was like rosewater to my eyes Ah! ... What divine is the kitsch of

love!

-My beloved lady, magic, like everything else, is an instrument that can be used both for good and for evil. Precisely for this reason there are institutes, to educate the powers and use them wisely. A Wizard knows the power of herbs to cure diseases and save lives, knows the vibratory power of phrases and spells and, at will, alters climate and other events. Who has not heard of the powerful amulets to attract luck and love? Who has not felt tempted to listen to prophecies from a fortuneteller through the reading of the cards or the revelations of the tarot? Even churches use the power of candlelight to request desires or ask the good omens for a project. Don't be so sick with wizards. Weren't we the ones who saved Camila from her fatal fate in Saint Andre?

The mulatto released a resignation breath. Leonardo was well versed in reasoning and eloquences issues. Whatever he said had the force of conviction and, Oh!, poor of those guys who made against it, by dint of approaches, resolutions, justifications, voice modulations, allegories, metaphors, epithets and similes, sustained in such a way the reasoning that the opponents were very convinced that what he said was authentic and irrefutable truth and ended up adopting his convictions.

At that moment, my sisters came and packed behind me. We walked together toward the studio. The magician turned his eyes towards us and getting up from his seat said:

-I thought for a moment that you had seen a ghost. You ran so fast that I couldn't greet you -and without waiting for our reply, he waved one to one with a squeeze of the hand and a kiss on the cheek. Then, he turned to me:

-Camila, I have instructions from Americus to take you to Eisenbaum. Unfortunately, he could not come because had an urgent matter that could not delegate. He sent you his greetings and apologies. You will have to travel with me. My car is outside. I hope that your luggage is arranged. The journey will take two days and I already made arrangements to stay the night at an Inn.

As my words abandoned me and a brief chill was whistling through my body, I nodded with a slight movement. No Josefina, instead, having heard the word "night" and "inn" in a same sentence, frowned on such a way that I thought that her face was going to be cut into two halves. I saw her, first, inflated like a raging bull and then, abruptly, I heard her mumbling sentences in which emphasized the words "inappropriate", "indecent", "disrespectful", pronounced with the strength of the Spanish of the 15th century, but, Ah!... Leonardo... who was not afraid neither of bulls, nor the tones or the circumstances, charged against her with equal force with his collection of sentences and appeasing in which abounded the words "principles", "values" and "regards", leaving reduced to pieces the

poor Ño Josefina reproach. She was very convinced that I would travel to Eisenbaum in the company of the very same archangels.

Then, without further delay, she called Juancho to look for my luggage and take it to the car. Beatrice sat with parsimony besides Ño Josefina while playing with a tiny tuft of her hair, inquiring about the place where I would stay in Eisenbaum. In addition to being intransigent, Beatrice was curious by nature and greatly pleased in the investigation of the personal affairs of third parties.

-We made arrangements for your stay with a family -replied the Magician- we think that this way you will not feel lonely. Severa and her husband are waiting for you. They live on the low lands outside The Fortaleza and have three boys. The familiar atmosphere will be beneficial for you. You will have a week to settle down and then will start the training.

-Will you call us as soon as you arrive? -Mariana, replied with a hint of melancholy.

Immediately the Magician intervened:

-The communication will be by letters only -objected- We do not allow any other means since trainees are distracted and neglected their responsibilities by thinking in the outside world. We have a very good mail system, so letters are received and shipped from one day to another.

Salome went to the kitchen and brought a crimson, large and very well polished apple which offered to the Magician, accompanied by her smile from ear to ear. He appreciated the gesture and kept it in his coat, while mentioned:

-We should go now, Camila, I want to take advantage of the daylight - and while saying this, he walked to the door that had remained open throughout this time.

No Josefina and my sisters came to say goodbye. A feeling of nostalgia stirred my spirit and excited my anxiety to the unknown. I had never before been separated from Beatrice or Mariana, and a veil of tears began to cloud my view. The old lady gave me a hug that literally made my bones creak. Beatrice, with her goddess aura and floral perfume, gave me a huge and sonorous kiss on the cheek while whispering in my ear: *-If you do not take advantage of this trip to get him as a boyfriend, you will stay single forever.* After such lofty advice, she dropped me as if I were a hot potato. Mariana, for her part, always subtle and unobtrusive, let me covered by kisses and tips: *-Sister, do not miss this opportunity!...* and to not be outdone, Salome, amid laughter, also made me part of her recommendations: *-Bring him as a boyfriend, although you have to thread him by the neck!*

So many exhortations to appropriate me of Leonardo's attentions made me feel like an old woman, bossy and spinster, whose only chance of happiness was sailing in a ship called Leonardo.

I left the house, crestfallen; a light breeze cooled my face and ruffled

my tears. Leonardo waited in the car. When I turned my head toward the house, I found four sad heads behind the window, waving their hands in farewell, and it was at that moment, I confess, that my crushing heart could not be stopped anymore and a sob fountain erupted uncontrollably, overwhelmed by sadness and emotion. Huge rows of black mascara crossed my cheeks until landing on my newly purchased blouse in white muslin, decorating it with some amorphous blackish circles.

When I entered the vehicle, Leonardo tended me a delicate tissue, so clean but as clean, almost a shame was burdening it with the secretions from my sadness. So, with dissimulation, I saved it in my bag to preserve the garment with his manly aroma, and wiped my splotches with the edge of the sleeve, which after all, was already discredited. The car started.

2

THE TRAVEL

The road coming out of the city is a submissive and narrow line that moves undulating through obese mounds and deflated valleys. On its back there is an endless procession of cars, trucks and vans. I have always thought that cars, thus formed one after the other, high, short, chubby or thin, are very much like toy soldiers marching toward an uncertain destiny or an unknown battle. When it is afternoon and traffic is heavy, the soldiers, anchored as they are in one place, observed the pointed pines that parked on the side of the road seem to applaud them in silent attitude.

When traffic is light, the soldiers march hurriedly, abstracting unintentionally from the magnificence of the environment whose colors, blurred as they are by the effects of speed, are dressed in a homogeneous stain of greenish tones. There is nothing more beautiful than a sunset on the road, it seems as if the nuances of the sky were fading and frayed from falling into the horizon as a kiss.

The magician had remained in respectful silence behind the wheel, in tribute to my sadness. A soft classical melody sent its chords to the wind. Seated, motionless, gazing at the window, scanning the strange shapes of buildings and vegetation that we were leaving behind, I was wondering: what would Leonardo think of my innocent lie? Would he judge it innocent, really, or believe that it was all a calamity?

I lacked of the sufficient confidence to open my heart to him and confess my fears, moreover, when I should, in addition, modulate my words and dose my gestures for not ratting, in any way, my feelings towards him. I hoped that arriving at Eisenbaum I could talk to Americus and end, once and for, with this entire hoax. Far from my thoughts was the fact that I might be testifying in the Magic Supreme Court, again. The ultimate experience was frankly unpleasant and the least I wanted was to face a mob of angry magicians besides the fact that I could end up, perhaps, roasted on

a stake, as the ancient witches of Salem.

I turned my face to Leonardo, he continued with his eyes set on the road. The natural light began to mute and the first stars of the electric poles sparkled intermittently pointing the way with tenacity. Finally, Leonardo broke the silence in peaceful and conciliatory attitude

-Why so quiet? In Saint Andre you did not stop talking, talked so much that I was dazed. You are very quiet today and, I confess, that is very strange for me. Did mice eat your tongue?

I opened my eyes excessively and from the slums of my imagination the words made presence inside my head: *Now he wants answers? Ah! Ah! Now the child wants answers! Was it not enough that you disappear without farewell in Saint Andre, without letting me even the consolation of your goodbye? And that kiss stolen in the forest? Was it just not worth mentioning? Dead on the wings of your indifference from the very moment it was born sentenced to die in the deep abyss of your forgetfulness. Where were you the last six months when still the answers were at your fingertips? Have you ever seen such cynicism? Oh!... men... they know nothing about romanticism or subtleties, they speak when they have to be quiet and shut up when they have to talk; It seems as if a mischievous Pixie was whispering to their ear the wrong instructions all the time.*

Leonardo, magician as he was, seemed not to read the message of my silence and continued expectantly waiting for the gift of my answer. Of course, I said nothing. Instead, I just babbled a few meaningless phrases that made the wizard set his sight on the road again, without attempting to bring up any other topic of conversation. Finally, after hours of listening to Franz Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody and the Fantastic Symphony of Hector Berlioz on the radio, we reached the village of Bourlox.

We headed to the Enchanted Village Inn, and certainly I found it to be a peculiar name, nothing original, to tell the truth. A name, by nature, should reflect the substantiality and the essence of the person or place that carries it, if not, there is the risk of falling into inevitable inconsistencies that raise the ironic smiles of those who have to hear the name, at the end, and it does not serve the person or place. "Enchanted Village" evokes a mystical, contemplative place, for the experimentation of magic and witchcraft; in contrast, it was a set of wooden huts scattered in a small space, populated with many trees.

It was dark, but the yellowish light, which came from the lanterns placed along the sidewalks and the entrance of the main cabin, granted a pleasant and hospitable view. At the inn lobby, a too much friendly receptionist gave Leonardo the keys to our respective rooms. The hunger had already begun to martyr me with constant abdominal pain, stitches and unpleasant sound effects, I agreed with the wizard to find him in the restaurant at the end of an hour.

THE WITCH APPRENTICE

My room was small but everything was clean and in good order. A vanilla odor saturated the atmosphere and invited to the comfort and rest, but my mind was busy in another important and urgent matter: my attire for dinner. I threw my luggage on the bed and chose a simple sleeveless cotton dress. I went to the bathroom for a quick toilet. After the bath, I looked at the clock, still remained half an hour; I started to dress with much emphasis on my makeup and hairstyle. At the end, when the set of hair, makeup and dress, were all in harmony, I went down to meet the wizard, who was already waiting for me in one of the tables of the restaurant.

During the course of the dinner, Leonardo was flourishing in attentions and compliments. In my eyes, his charm was enhanced by every word he spoke. His hands, his eyes, his lips lived together in perfect harmony in the person of Leonardo, and the more I look for his defects and imperfections, the more I find more perfection and splendors and more I have to admire him. The theme of magic came out through the conversation, and I, who was so at ease navigating by the banalities sea, tasting the sweet delicacy of his words, encouraged by the light of a half-moon that strained out the window, I dared to ask randomly:

-The application documentation for the apprentice program was a nightmare. I am not sure of having filled all properly. What if, unconsciously, I had made some mistakes?

The wizard stopped the glass that was halfway toward his mouth:

-What kind of mistakes? -He asked at the same time, frowning and looking directly into my eyes.

-I do not know... omissions, false information, errors, false information?

-You placed false information?

-Of course not! -I said to the point of smothering- but I'm curious... to know... what would it happen if that were the case...

He thought of his words, the magician never issued a judgment prior to the sieve of reason:

-I am sure that a Disciplinary Tribunal would have to deal with the sanction. Honesty is one of the most precious qualities that a wizard or a witch must have. I will never endorse a lie and I think neither the judges of the Court. The expulsion with disgrace would probably be the sentence.

At this point, I was transported by the imagination to Eisenbaum, I saw myself again in the paved floor of the Tribunal Chamber, where I had been months earlier, with a peat of wizards and sorceresses shouting in against me, and Leonardo and Duprina as main accusers. Another trial? This time, maybe, I would not have Americus to save me and eventually, perhaps, I will follow the same destination of my ancient counterparts in Salem, tied to a stake on a mattress of logs and tinder, surrounded by a sea of hot flares, with my meat cooked until it was removed from my bones,

until leaving only grey ash that the wind would transport who knows where. Thereafter, the dinner was not so lively. The prospect of a near death had the effect of depriving me of hunger.

-Tomorrow we should get up early, we will cross the bridge and will be in Eisenbaum -Leonardo interrupted my negative thoughts- so if you want to talk by phone with your family, do it from your room since then you won't have more opportunities to do so. Remember that we only can use letters.

I looked at him directly in the eyes, and then I asked:

-Why Eisenbaum appears to stay stuck in the medieval period, with its castles and forests? It seems a rather archaic place to live.

Leonardo was not amused by my comment and immediately attacked with the sermon of his convictions, but not without first clearing his voice and acquiring the condescending tone of a teacher:

-Modern era is not an appropriate environment for the development of magic. Phones, computers, video games, absorb the human being so much that they have no time for anything else. Magic studying is a journey in which you must immerse yourself with all your senses and your whole being. Medieval atmosphere, as you call it, is a favorable environment for the development of faculties. There are many living beings from the magic world that you will get in contact with: goblins, fairies, undines, sylphs, and will transmit their knowledge and skills to you, if you let them. The urban cities dislike them tremendously and you will never find them there. Wizards and witches, once they finished the studies program, can choose in what world to live or live in both worlds, if it is what they want. I recommend you start showing a little of respect for the lands and beings that you are going to meet and not to despise their world.

The magician words, so full of wisdom, made me clear how terrible my fault was and I thought that it wouldn't be enough with a simple confession. There, in that small spot, while Leonardo conversed with the innkeeper and paid the account, I first began thinking about him and realized how little I knew of his life, except for those short stories told in confidence by the maid who had served us the room last time my sisters and I stayed in The Fortaleza. In addition to those stories acquired unlawfully, in other words, not from the original source, I knew nothing of him, except that he had a poisonous girlfriend named Duprina.

Back to the realm of reality, Leonardo escorted me to my room and said good bye without much ceremony. After closing the door, I took a look at the room; I don't know why it now seemed to me much tinier, much more insignificant that when I saw it in the afternoon, as a tiny doll house. However, the bed made me feel very welcome with a warm embrace of sheets and blankets, so I plopped down, among clouds and cotton pillows. So got me the dark night and the sleep... and also got me the dawn

the next morning.

The morning glow suddenly awoke me, the brazen sun entered by the window, pecking me the face and causing me a light and pleasant sting.

I jumped out of bed, untangling from the sheet and blanket jumble that held my legs, which still retained the warmth of the night. I rushed to pick up my belongings that were lying stacked on the couch, next to the small bedside table. I did not want to have the wizard waiting for me. He had been very clear and precise in his statement "we will depart early in the morning" and by the amount of light hurtled through the window, the day had cleared for quite some time. With a quick motion I picked up all the clothes in a single bundle and squeezed it in the suitcase that refused to accept the valuable cargo. After rushing to get dressed, I went down the stairs quickly, leaping the stairs two by two and dragging the blessed suitcase that murmured a dry sound when it hit the edge of the stair steps, "tucupum", "tucupum", "tucupum", which made that all passers-by turned their faces to look at me.

When I got to the ground floor, I spotted Leonardo in the Lobby, impeccably dressed and with impatience in the face. I looked out my best smile, improved posture, beat my hair and tried to walk wielding class and distinction, but my luggage was too heavy and refused to keep me up, so I could not keep acting for a long time. When the magician saw me exhaled a sigh of relief, took my suitcase, returned to the Lobby and gave instructions to the too much friendly girl to keep it, since he would send someone to collect it during the course of the day.

I bothered a bit that he disposed of my personal belongings, without even consulting me:

-Wait! How do you think I could be without my clothes?

His response was quick:

-You do not have to worry. When you arrive at your destination, your suitcase will be there.

I closed my mouth and decided to give him a vote of confidence.

We had breakfast hurriedly. Leonardo only took a cup of coffee and milk and I, in order to avoid unnecessary delays, took the same and bit a cookie, leaving me with the desire of tasting the fluffy pancakes that were floating in a sea of butter and cheese, exhibited in the dish of a couple that was sitting next to our table. When we finished, he grabbed me by the arm as if I was an annoying bulk and practically dragged me to the exit.

I was surprised by the fact that on our way out from Enchanted Village Inn, which, again, concerning the name, was neither Enchanted nor Village, we did not walk toward the parking lot where we had left the car the day before as I was expecting, but in opposite direction, toward a sprawling green ground, bordered by a small white stakes fence, which culminated in a door also stakes-made, very similar to a stable. A freckled

young, red-haired and barefoot, was waiting for us with two horses.

I scrubbed my eyes thinking that perhaps the vertiginous dream was playing me a dirty trick, providing me with fanciful visions, but it was not the case, the horses were still in my visual field, one black, the other white. The animals interrupted their grass breakfast, raised their heads and turned towards me, and they instinctively decided, with a whinny, that I wasn't valuable enough as to stop the tiring work they were immersed in, and returned to the everyday task of eating, ignoring me without pretense. I burst in Severa protests:

-What does this mean? Is this our means of transport? There must be a mistake. I am not a rider! Never in my life I have ridden into a beast, much less on a horse and I am not going to start now! -I said very angrily- in addition, watch them! Surely they are dirty and full of germs and lice, what is wrong with the car? -I asked agitated and restless.

Leonardo looked at me and sighed, I did not know if it was a resignation sigh or an impatience sigh:

-There are no cars in Eisenbaum. I had already told you. We have no service stations, in other words, there is no gasoline! Cars remain at Bourlox. The only means of transportation is on horseback or on foot. Unless you have wings and know how to fly, I suggest you take the horse, the walk from here takes two days, so it is not advisable and much less with the outfit that you bring on.

The freckled young, barely kept back his laughter, looked at me up and down, expressing his tacit agreement in relation to the comment about my outfit expressed by the magician; and dared to speak to me:

-Mr. Leonardo is right, Miss. That is not riding clothes. This is "Good" -he introduced pointing at the white horse- and that one is "Wrong" - he said pointing at the black one

When I heard those names, so trite, I broke into a forceful laughter attack; which brought tears to my eyes:

-What ridiculous these names are!

However, the seriousness of the magician and the young made me stop the revelry and then, before my astonished eyes, one of the horses, "Wrong", answered in perfect English:

-Let's see if your laughter reaches you to Eisenbaum, because I and my ridiculous and farfetched name do not think of transporting you.

-Neither do I -responded "Good" with a mouth full of half-chewed scraps of straw.

The tongue is the punishment of the body prays an old adage and how certain it was in this particular circumstance. Speechless, stunned, mute by the amazement before the talkative horses, I could not articulate words, so much was my bewilderment. The morning breeze fluttered and moved the soft hair that fell in cascade from the back of the horses. The sun climbed

the mountains and emerged with his torrid and sweltering rays on the landscapes full of red roofs cottages. A few meters from there, a bridge loomed that separated Bourlox from Eisenbaum; in the distance, huge vermilion and white peaks, and behind them, the city of the magicians.

Leonardo took my arm and I moved to talk:

-What are you doing? Didn't I tell you to show a little of respect? Is it too much to ask?

-How the hell I was going to know that the horses talk. You should have told me!

-How the hell I was going to know that you would insult them?

Then, as an excuse, I dared to say:

-But what happen to the beings of the magic world? They have no sense of humor? Would you dare to deny that their names are not ridiculous?

-We are hearing you –said “Good” in a ruminant and singing tone.

We departed a little further. Leonardo urged me to apologize and although at first I refused, I understood that if I didn't, I would not be at The Fortaleza in time; so I swallowed my pride, approached the horses and putting me in the middle of them, said cautiously:

-I apologize -the two animals turned their heads towards me while the freckled young man took a seat on a small wooden stool that was lying on one side of the fence. He had obviously thought that the outcome of the story was going to take a little more time than he thought, so he decided to become comfortable.

-Her words do not sound sincere to me -said “Wrong” with a circular movement of its tail.

What ridiculous this scene seemed! I was prattling with two arrogant and pretentious horses, whose only outstanding skill consisted in the articulation of phrases and sentences and the understanding of the English language; not at all surprising considering that other animals, such as parrots, knew this art of speaking a foreign language for a very long time ago. I moderated the tone and tried to seem humble.

-Please, please, please, I beg your pardon. Please help me get to The Fortaleza!

Since the colts continued their warlike attitude, the wizard intervened, and after a few words, full of kindness and justifications, they agreed to take me. At that time, the freckled young were already taking charge of placing the sheepskins, assembling chairs and unleashing the moorings. Leonardo instructed me, briefly, about the good management of the whip and the reins. I chose “Good”, hoping that she was worthy of the name and refrain from any vestige of revenge that could accommodate her heart.

Ready for the departure, I tried to ride on her back without embedding the heel of my boots in her flesh but my attempts were fruitless. Very

difficult was the task for me, because every time I tried to place my shoe into the bracket, the horse, with premeditation and treachery, stepped forward and this action made me lose my balance and, inevitably, I ended up sitting on the wet grass that minutes before had served them as breakfast.

After three failed attempts, Leonardo, impatient and intransigent, came over to me and supporting his hands on my waist lifted me up in the air to place me in the chair, then, gave me the whip and said:

-Now, you are ready! Be warned, the world you are going is full of characters and unimaginable creatures. Given your disrespectful nature I know that you will find it difficult, but make an effort and try not to insult them, okay?

Then, he turned to his horse and in a single movement, full of expertise and majesty, mounted on it, seized the reins and the riding crop and began the ride towards the bridge. "Good" made a mild whinny like a derision snicker by what had just happen. Thus I whispered to her right ear:

- And you, devil horse, this does not stop here. As soon as we reach Eisenbaum, I personally shall ensure that you are fed with poisonous nettles instead of grass and instead of water you will have a laxative so watery that you will be unable to ride for days.

By response the only words I got were:

-I am a mare! -followed by another threatening whinny.

ARRIVAL TO EISENBAUM

I had been riding for five hours on the back of “Good”, tied up to the thin reins as a castaway would tie up to a lifeguard, not to stumble over the uneven gravel road. Exhausted, by the double effort that meant to keep me upright on the back of “Good” and, at the same time, to resist her attempts to expel me from her spine, engaged as we were in this silent war that unfolded behind Leonardo, we reached a point where the road ended and a trail of fine, white powder began, which penetrated into the mountain and then became smaller and smaller until losing its sight.

Huge cliffs bordered the road. The mare, with her four legs as long as stakes splashing numb powder that was dispersed to her fast touch, traversed the acute hills. I had the certainty that the animal lifted much more dust than necessary with the clear intention to cover me with the blast of white dust from head to toe.

Leonardo, in front of me, walked the same path, immutable. There was a moment during the trip in which “Good” walked on an edge of the roadway and leaned her head leaving me a deep cliff view, covered by big, greyish stones, very sharp, full of nettles and vines, very thorny. Shaken by the sensation of vertigo and the expectation of an imminent downfall, my body shook with an intense flavor to fear and amazement. Then, she turned and said:

-Who is ridiculous now? -and getting away from the abyss joined the path acting as though nothing happened.

I had the feeling that if Leonardo had not been present, my body would lie in the bottom of the abyss with profound and multiple lacerations. I decided to abstain from adverse comments as long as more cliffs were ahead.

Passing the abyss and the mountains, the vegetable lattice became milder and we began to see the first stone houses with the reddish clay roofs and the gardens planted with orchards and green vegetables. The clean air carried a faint aroma of orange blossom and fruit. My mood

revived by the freshness of the atmosphere and my adventurous spirit resurfaced. In the distance, I recognized the imposing structure of The Fortaleza, with its large gabion walls, plump and corpulent as Titans. The sound of sea waves highlighted the closeness of the sea.

The night was just falling when we arrived at the village, a small town on the outskirts of The Fortaleza. Being in the villa is how to make a jump back in time. It had no electrical lighting and all the night time lighting was provided by the glow of the moon, the shine of the stars and the kerosene lantern that seemed onlookers from the windows of the houses. The roads, which were not paved; were sown in beautiful countryside and wherever the view the rugged hills and lush green terraces in gradient dominated. The houses had orchards and stables and some, showed rudimentary carts in front of their facades.

Diversity of clothing swarmed among the inhabitants of the village, modern outfits lived in perfect harmony with robes of the early century, all a Carnival of colors and styles. And as a result of this dichotomy of fashion, it was not uncommon to find, for example, a gentleman wearing an oxidized iron pants and a prestigious Lacoste terracotta flannel; or a lady, with French lace petticoats under a majestic gown by Carolina Herrera. How came these garments so far? It was a mystery. This town was very avant-garde, at least in matters of fashion, not so in matters of morality, as I realized, sometime later, when one of its inhabitants was commissioned to instruct me the concept in detail.

We crossed the village very slowly along the main street, Leonardo occasionally looked back to ensure that I remained "still on" the back of the mare, I, as an Amazon trying to keep an experienced and perky attitude, made superhuman efforts to keep me on the brawny backbone of "Good" and she did equal effort to make me look like an eyesore.

In one corner, where a building with a sign of "Library" was, Leonardo bent to the right and rushed; as I could I managed to put myself by his side. A few meters from there, he stopped in front of a house, so white and bright that it seemed built with sea salt, the windows seemed to greet us warmly. I sensed that I had reached my destination. The magician got off the horse and caught the mooring ropes to tie them up to a stake placed in the sidewalk for this purpose, then tended me the arms to help me get off my rebel mare. So delicate, so subtle, so exquisite, it was the contact that I felt transported in billowing clouds of cotton and my spirit soared into the outer reaches of the absolute happiness, and during one thousandth of a second his enigmatic blue eyes looked at me with the glare and glow of a lover, but the moment barely lasted until the minute that my legs were anchored on the ground. Blurred the magic of the moment, Leonardo returned to the expressionless face that usually wore and warned:

-I am going to introduce you to the kind people who will take care of

you, but please, try not making mockery of their names, right?

I nodded with a slight movement but I couldn't stop thinking about the warning that I was being given. Were the names so ugly that they deserved of such exhortation? Or perhaps Leonardo intended to intimidate my effusive spirit with the ointment of the prudence. In any case, soon the question would be solved. From inside the house, a lady came out with averaged height, somber expression and narrow and flaccid face. She wore a very black dress that covered her arms and neck completely. Grey circles hung below her eyes, brows so thick that they almost meet with the heavy eyelashes. Behind her, a Lord appeared with the complexion as round as apples, which cost him to keep pace since the weight made him to balance forward and backward.

Leonardo introduced me to them:

-Camila, with great pleasure, I am pleased to introduce you to Madam Severa and her husband, Misfortune.

For a moment I thought it was a joke... Ah! And a treacherous laughter began to form very inside of me threatening to transfer the dyke of my moderation and throw me into the humiliating valley of recklessness. How right was the Magician to warn me! But, what have these people against normal names? Didn't they know of the existence of "John", "Mary", "Peter" or "Charles". Isn't the name a judgment with which we must live each day of our lives? And since the promulgation of this judgment is given to the parents, shouldn't they really consider more carefully the consequences of this action? As their children are the ones walking along the already tumultuous paths of existence, carrying a name that promulgates derision and scorn. What fault does the unfortunate carrier of the name, have if his Grandfather Euleterio, was a god of generosity on Earth and rendered some money to the mother to manufacture a little house in the land of Don Gutiérrez? Or what if Aunt Rosa is an angel of goodness, which was always stuck, feet and head, in the Jesus Sacred Heart Church, praying and praying, to get a job at the pharmacy to the father of the creature? In gratitude, parents decided, as a big deal, naming the kid with the first three letters of the name of the grandfather and the first three letters of the name of the aunt, who was so good. Thus, the poor boy ended so-called "Euros" and lived his existence blaspheming by the benefits received from Grandfather Euleterio and lovely Aunt Rosa.

However, Severa and Misfortune did honor to their names and to complete the family they included their progeny in the presentation:

-Camila, these are our cherubs, Victor Joseph, Victor Rafael and Victor Andres. The Cherubs were three boys with skeletal appearance and too kinky hair, very similar to mine, dressed exactly in the same way, with the same eyes, the same mouths, the same noses and the same manners;

and this constant uniformity was reflected not just in clothing but in characters. Everything that one said was repeated by the other and the other. When one of them laughed, the other chuckled and the other chuckled too. With so much homogeneity of thought and clothing, it was difficult for me to recognize them separately; but this small mishap was diminished by the coincidence of names, so to avoid confusion or discrepancies, I chose to call them all by "Victor" and with this small gadget I was able to appear as "educated and distinguished" to the dark eyes of Severa, her husband and the Victors.

Then, Severa allowed us the entry to the house. The door was wide so we could go in in threes without problems. Passing the door, there was a small seeded hallway planted with fuchsia and yellow roses that after a while changed color and were purple and green, beautifully cultivated in a celestial blue turf, which caught powerfully my attention, but as the others this singularity did not impress them, I, following the dictates of reason and in order of not attracting unnecessary suspicions, choked the question that was beginning to emerge in my lips about the origin of such phenomenon.

On the grass, a huge cage of narrow, long white bars in wrought iron, housed the robust figure of a parrot that bobbed in its small bamboo swing, singing a Frank Sinatra tune, "My way", and I shall say, with excellent diction and great expertise in the management of the musical notes! I later learned that was a "female parrot", which was unmarried, that her name was Consuelo and had been in the family for more than thirty years.

From the hallway departed a long corridor of small white and turquoise mosaics, with rooms side by side of the corridor. The doors were closed so I could not look inwards. The aisle led to a main room upholstered with a paper with dark designs and cold and sad colors. The furniture was also unicolor, without any part in particular that highlighted above the others. A kerosene lamp shared lighting with a candle candelabrum whose wax was dripping intermittently giving the site a smoked fragrance.

Severa and her black dress extended us the invitation to sit; the Victors remained standing next to Misfortune, watching me as one could watch an animal in a Zoo, with the vitrified smile on the face. Leonardo sat on a small sofa and I sat by his side, then he talked:

-As you agreed with Americus, Camila will be with you until she finished her studies. The coming week she will begin the course. We will look for her transportation. She will be picked up at seven in the morning and will return at five. I am counting on your customary hospitality!

Severa looked at him with the phlegmatic face that I would be very familiar with. Her voice was sharp, without modulations or nuances, like the monotonous melody that you hear when someone is praying. The face

and the voice were a very gloomy set very appropriate for a cemetery, but in the house, with the accompaniment of lighting so weak and so strange characters were shocking and misplaced. Leonardo, immune to the face and the prevailing tone in the enclosure, continued giving directions to the matron, and she assented with a nod while Misfortune had not said, so far, any word, and I began to doubt of the existence of the vocal cords of the Lord.

-I am sure, Leonardo, everything will be fine if Camila follows the rules of this house. That was the only condition that I agreed with Americus, nothing less or nothing more -concluded the woman.

Instantly I started to think about the blessed rules. What if they were not to my liking?

-I think it is time for me to leave -said Leonardo and looking at me- I'll see you in a week.

While he was talking, walked towards the door and almost disappeared from my view when I realized the bloody fate that meant staying in that house. I ran up to him and caught him by the arm with the absurd hope that he would feel pity on me and take me with him.

-Wait! Are you going to leave me here? I have to see Americus. I do not understand why I cannot stay in The Fortaleza. As far as I know all trainees are staying there -I felt like if a huge hole was being open in my stomach.

Leonardo, using the same conciliatory tone used with Ño Josefina at the time of my departure, looked at me for a moment and replied:

-These are instructions from my father. In a week you will see him and be able to ask him directly whatever you want. In this place, you will be okay, if it were not so, I would not leave you -and lifting my chin he gave me a light kiss on the cheek.

The kiss, as unexpected as it was, left me paralyzed; signal which was misinterpreted by the magician as my consent to remain in the residence and then, riding in one of the horses and taking the reins of the other, began the ride towards The Fortaleza, leaving me behind. When I turned my head I saw the big eyes of Severa nailed to my neck, shaking her head in disapproval. Misfortune and the single Victors looked at me in silence.

-A decent young lady should not allow a gentleman to take such liberties with her. It is in very bad taste to give that kind of spectacle in the middle of the street, when, surely, neighbors are watching us -said roughly. Then, taking my arm I was brought to the living room, where a Victor brought me a chair and the others took position around the table, with Severa, at the head of the same. From one of the pockets of her black dress she drew a small glass lenses and placed it on the tip of her nose, then she brought closer the light of a candle to greater vision.

-Dear girl, now I will read the "Regulation of Coexistence" of this

house. It is important to note that we do not make exceptions to any of these rules. They must be obeyed, with disposition and discipline. A copy of these rules has been placed on the bedside table in your room so you can study it as carefully as they deserve.

Thus she began the reading:

-Clause N° 1: In relation to meals: breakfast is served at 6:30 am, not a minute more or less. Consequently lunch is at 12:00 m and dinner at 7:00 pm. To attend meals, you should dress with casual attire.

-Clause N° 2: In relation to the sleep hours: every inhabitant of this house must be in bed at 9:00 pm. It is enforced the use of pajamas. I will pass inspection to check that this rule is serving. Also, it is strictly forbidden the use of insomnia.

-Clause N° 3: With regard to the objects of the house: all inhabitants are responsible for the pans that are assigned for use: dishes, cups, cutlery, glasses, etc., as well as of its care and cleaning, or replacement in case of loss or breakage.

-Clause N° 4: In relation to the site of the objects in the house: personal hygiene items, such as toothbrushes, shampoo, soap, must be placed in the white cabinet installed over the sink of the bathroom for this purpose. The elements must be 5 centimeters from one another to avoid the appearance of disorder in the toilet area. With regard to the position of other objects of the house, every cabinet and closet has a paper list attached to one side with the correct position of the elements.

-Clause N° 5: In relation to leisure: laziness is not permitted in this house, so that activities that encourage participation and family harmony will be enforced. These activities will be displayed in a list at the beginning of each week, on the undercard on the inner wall, beside the door facing the street. Spontaneous recreational activities which by their nature are not included in the program will be monitored by a member of the family, in order to preserve the reputation, morals and good manners of the family entity.

-Clause N° 6: On lies: lies are strictly prohibited in the family, and in any case, restricted in the outer scope. If it is necessary its use, in very exceptional cases, this will be under the supervision and authorization of Severa, indicating date, reason, lying (black or white) type, and will be used only in situations of extreme emergency or when life is being threatened.

-Clause N° 7: On the noise: the level of noise allowed in the house is 60 decibels.

-Clause N° 8: On the sanctions: in case of any kind of breach, partial or total, of any of the clauses stated here, we will proceed to gather evidence and, in a family reunion, will take on consensus the necessary corrective or preventive measures that put an end to the conflict.

THE WITCH APPRENTICE

-Clause N° 9: The President of the Family Office, Severa, has the authority to issue, resign, reject, defer, evaluate, pamper, approve or disapprove any of the above items, without the consent of the other parties.

After read the parchment, Severa raised her eyes above the glasses and observed me, carefully, studying my reaction.

I would have laughed very willingly if it were not for the tragic circumstance that was developing before my eyes in which I was irresolute, hopeless and irreparably alone at the mercy of this Hitler sympathizer. Where had I fallen? In the military forces? As ridiculous as it might seem the regulation in this house had force of law and was very clear that whoever violated the rules would be the receiver of the sanctions. I had no other choice but nodding as a sign of conformity and get into this military regime.

As it was almost nine o'clock, and if we continued talking we would be violating the Clause N° 2 of the law, Severa took a candle and said that she would take me up to what would be my room. Misfortune and the Victors rose in turn and after the < *Goodnight* >, were lost after one of the doors. As seven o'clock had already passed, I sensed, as indeed happened, there would be no dinner for which I was glad of the good judgment of Ño Josefina to provide me with abundance of food for my trip.

We walked towards the corridor and stopped before a heavy oak door, Severa took from her pocket a strange key with a cross made of copper on it and opened the door slowly. She entered first and placing the candle on a small nightstand next to the bed, turned indicating me with a gesture to get in. As the Magician had promised, on the bed was my luggage. At that moment the "gong" from an old clock I had seen in the room, began to sound indicating the nine bells. Severa, with a disgust face, said goodbye blaming me for having her maintained up to that hour of the night. When she closed the door, I let a sigh of relief and took a look around.

The room was spacious and ventilated. A huge window was hiding behind a white chiffon curtain, matching the quilt that harbored the bed and the very fluffy pillows. They seemed to greet me lolling on the header. A small door on my left hinted the bathroom. I was very satisfied with the inspection; then I felt asleep.

Very slowly the days passed by in the house of Severa and this had not meant a mishap were it not for the strict Hitler military regime ruling in the small Republic of Severa that was his home, where her person only presided with omnipotent authority the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary power, and, in addition, boasting the title for life, in other words, indefinite and perennially.

Misfortune, the Victors and my person, humble inhabitants of her autocratic Republic, were not able to have our say, and our presence was only tolerated in order to complying with the orders of the great dictator. It

disturbed my sanity the nonexistence of instruments or means of communication with the outside world, namely, telephone, computer or fax, so any attempt of insubordination or protest, remained isolated within the confines of the house, classed as fascist by the Supreme Court of Severa, without the right to defense or counsel. Having no means of expression our protests died in their inner selves, without having ever met the daylight or a just sentence. I suffered from this injustice and enduring it with high-minded agreement, waiting for the propitious moment of my interview with Americus, to empty the pot of my recriminations for leaving me to my fate in such autocracy.

Severa complained with much indignation of all my acts, how much more so when passing the days became evident that her progeny flourished in deep admiration for everything I did or said and always followed me as little lap dogs in all my endeavors and daily chores. When I arrived late for breakfast, Severa, billowing anger and irritation, hid the bread, cheese and the orange juice, which from six and a half had been on lively display on the table, under a cloth decorated with a few felt hearts that watched me on the table without being able to say anything; on the other hand Severa did say the following:

-You broke the Clause N° 1, therefore you're confined to your room, reflecting on your actions!

As exemplary punishment executed to force me to arrive early, Severa was not very successful. Her offspring, away from the look of her mother, hid abundant and nutritious snacks that later delivered to me close to the lawn, next to Consuelo's cage, where the haggard eyes could not see, reason why I was able to get rid of the famine that I would surely suffer if it were not for the altruistic actions of my silent benefactors.

After breakfast, we always went for a ride in the surroundings of the village, full of greenery, so it was extremely easy finding places to surrender to leisure and fun. There, the Victors and I freed up our revolutionary spirit and discussed of the excesses of the Nazi regime, the President and all her Cabinet; then, we engaged in some fascinating discussions of what we would do if we were in the position of Government.

It was then, when we argued very passionately of the virtues of communism, socialism and capitalism. On occasions, we were more in favor of communism and socialism since its economic structure by an equality of classes, in my view, satisfied more to the poor people, but when it came to the point of the non-existence of private property, I was thinking about the tragedy that this would mean for my poor sister Beatrice and then, I twisted my convictions toward the freedoms of capitalism.

On one of these walks, I came with Dorian, the magician that I shared dances at the Party held last year in The Fortaleza and that throughout the night was dedicated to woo me. On this occasion, he found me sitting on a

sack of wheat, on the outskirts of the village; with my clothes saturated with mud and my hair matted of herbs, talking about the French Revolution with the Victors, whose clothes and hair were in identical condition than mine.

As I did not want to be rude with Dorian or abandon the Victors for engaging in conversation with the wizard, to his question about how I had been, I answered only with the indispensable, that I was staying at Severa home and that in a few days I would begin my learning. After this short encounter he said goodbye with the promise to resume contact as soon I reached The Fortaleza.

Shortly after noon, after the allegations about different Government systems, we returned to the house, like sheep into the fold, with the same resignation and gentleness, to enjoy a silent and abundant lunch. Indeed! Severa, with all that blackness and darkness in her temperament or her outfits, in culinary matters was very colorful and mixed with much authority, carbohydrates, proteins and fats, and the end result was a dish that was very chromatic and colorful, with the additive of being low in calories as well as nutritious and delicious.

As Ño Josefina, Severa had a special obsession about wasted food, and looked after with psychopath dedication that no trace of food remains on the dishes but the minimum time required swallowing it. After much thought, I understood that this was not the only similarity shared by the ladies: both reigned in their homes as the King Luis XV reigned in his court, religious fervor took one to the Heart of Jesus Church and the other to the Three Seas Church, with the same facial numbness of Saint Theresa in the Calvary street. Severa carried the blackness of her soul with pity and Ño Josefina loaded hers onto the canvas of her skin with pride.

After lunch, a nap was mandatory. And that was the precise moment I chose to think about my family and Leonardo. Wow! Leonardo! Leonardo! Leonardo, you said good bye to me so lovingly! Would it be possible that, perhaps, you are having feelings for me? Cupid! Cupid! Cupid! If you exist, I call you, and call you loudly, so aim your bow, relax your arrow and in the sweet ink of love bury its tip to aim your crossbow towards Leonardo's heart because I am already in love and do not need your spear.

Just days away to see him again, I felt the vaporous agitation and nervousness of a faithful lover. Severa's punishment or harassment did not matter if I could remain in Eisenbaum to see him again! However, not all was blackness or blackening in the person of Severa. There were occasions in the afternoons that in an effort to dominate the rebellions of my soul, she dipped in the sea of anecdotes and confidences, revealing to me, without suspecting it even, the wonders of the fable that was her life, with moral and all. That was how I found out of her past vicissitudes, her childhood and youth in distant lands. She was the fourth in a family of seven brothers that death broke little by little. First, it took her parents,

victims of poorly healed tuberculosis, then two brothers martyred by a profound malnutrition, followed by two deceased product of cholera and the last two taken by the calamity of war. Thus, two by two, little by little, the death took the members of her family to let her alone, helpless and sad, sunken in a bottomless depression. Then, the misadventures of fortune came, luck reverses and the subsequent submission in misery. It was at that point that she decided to come to Eisenbaum and begin her apprenticeship as a sorceress, but this did not have a happy ending because she knew Misfortune, another apprentice of good strain and from her same town, and fell in love, married and began the production of Victors, so she had to devote herself full time to support her family, beginning in this way her autocratic reign. In view of these facts, Severa gained recognition before my eyes, acquiring hero overtones and protagonist characters. With the birth of this other Severa, more human and subtle, the features of her face also lightened, the dark circles were no longer dreadful spots escorting her eyes but rather palpable evidence of past pain. Softened the bitter grimace from her mouth by the nectars of my indulgence, I saw her now with other eyes, other ears and other mouth and, also, learned to read through her authoritarian shield, the democracies of her spirit.

Thanks, dear Severa! Because in your fable I found the greatest of morals, that no other teacher had ever taught me in a class room, with the skill, expertise and the greatness with which you did,... you taught me that in all blackness there is a whiteness, that all whiteness hides a piece of blackness and that the two of them alternately redeemed the scraps of life.

Another aspect that Severa devoted much of her time was to teach me the scope of morality. Morality is a very prestigious quality in the realm of magic and its concept is much wider here than in the real world. It had a lot to do with ethics, decorum, honesty, decency, integrity and commitment and when Severa spoke, tremulous of passion in praise of the morality, shaking her hands and the fins of her nose in an effort to give more drama to the enumeration, I, on the other hand, dwarfed of shame, remembering my lying and how little I had of such a prestigious attribute. As if this were not enough, attached to the moral, as an inseparable companion, was a strict code of conduct that I do not intend to enumerate here, by the intricate and extensive of this code and if I mentioned it is only to express that my actions did not comply with it, constituting another obstacle in the way of my learning. Thus between fable and morality tales I spent the week in the National Republic of Severa.

BEGINNING THE LEARNING

The night before the morning I would start my training, Victor Joshep, violating the Clause N° 2 of the rules of coexistence, came to my room at about half past nine, to deliver a letter which he collected from the post office and had not had a chance to give me because he had been absent from the house most of the day; but as it was a letter from my family, and he knew how melancholic I was for not having known anything about them, he risked up to my door and whispering softly handed it to me; disappearing immediately through the dark tunnel of the hall. Once on my bed, I looked at the envelope closely and recognized the fine writing of Beatrice. I immediately turned and tearing an edge with my teeth opened the folios and began to read:

"Dear Camila,

Five days have passed since you left and still we have no news from you. Do you remember your call from Bourlox? You promised to keep in touch and write every day. I guess that your travel to the land of Camelot, where there is no modern wonders of communication, has something to do with this, your silence. If you knew how much we miss you! ... And after all this missing you, you surges continuously in our discussions. Oh! How will be Camila? Mariana says with a sigh, throwing the question to the wind, but as neither the wind nor we have the answer, the question is always repeated at breakfast, lunch and dinner, changing only the interlocutor who pronounces it.

I will now move on to briefly explain: at breakfast, before swallowing the first bite, is little Mariana who asks about your whereabouts; at lunch, between the soup and the main course and before the dessert, the mulatto Salome and to close the journey, at dinner, after the coffee, it is Ño Josefina who does the honors. I, for my part, do not wonder or join this rite inquiring about your whereabouts, not for lack of love or interest, but because I have the firm conviction that even if I ask, the wind does not have the answer. This "How is Camilla?" is repeated throughout the day with slight variations: "Will Camila write today?" Or "Have you heard from Camila?" "What would have happened to Camila?"

But all these questions, by very different that they might seem, all, all of

them, comes from the same root, in other words, from the original question I mentioned in the beginning. As I do fulfill my promises, I will write and narrate the facts, since I believe that you, back in Camelot, also must be wondering “How is Beatrice?” or “How is Mariana?” or “Would Salome write today? and I know that you do not wonder “Would Ño Josefina write today?” Because both know that she does not know about letters or writings. Now, I will follow to tell you what happened during the week, in order of occurrence:

The Monday following your departure the most wonderful thing that can happen to any girl occurred, and please, do not overtake guesses thinking that I speak of love, which, as you know, has a place very low on my list of priorities. That glorious day, Dr. Linares came very early to the house wearing his red taffeta necktie and his green crocodile briefcase. Do you remember? The one we used to inspect to see if it still had the teeth somewhere? Well, the lawyer locked up with No Josefina in the former studio of our grandfather and talked for a long time. During this long time, Mariana and I, outside, in the room, asked ourselves about the reason for such confinement. As it was early and the mulatto Salome had not returned from school, the reason for so much confinement was barred for her also.

At this point, I imagine that you may be wondering: If Salome was at school, why weren't we? Isn't it? Calm and patience! Everything has its expeditious and accurate explanation. Do you remember the leaks of the north side of the school, those that when it rained, the father Bermudez chased with a metal pail so they did not crash against the hallway tiles, which were from 16th century, old and ugly; and that the passing of time and students were deleting the figures? Well, finally the School Board decided to give an end and a plaster to the cracks in the ceiling and that is why we had a free day, so workers could do their job without the worry of being pouring plaster on our student heads.

So we were in the house at the time that Dr. Ramirez came. Returning to the initial event, I tell you that we were intrigued and it was not until we were called to attend the meeting, when the mystery was unveiled. Ramirez, sitting at the desk, with a very serious face and tiny lenses that floated in the tip of his nose and the wide open alligator on the table, pulled out a brown envelope which proceeded to open. Ño Josefina watched us carefully from the chair and we, standing, mute of expectation and Oh, Camila! You could never imagine what Ramirez pulled out of that envelope! It was something so little, so tiny! And as I already imagine that you should be as expectant as we were until Ramirez unveiled the mystery, to put an end to your waiting, I reveal the enigma: Camila, Ramirez pulled out a credit card, yes! A silver one! One of those cards that when you go shopping you do not have to worry about the credit limit, and with which

you can buy from a bra to an apartment. Ah, Camila, you don't know the emotion with which I received it! Then, Ramirez went on to speak about responsibility, care and obligations, but the truth was, dear sister, I did not listen at all, and did not listen to it because my thoughts talked louder than his mouth, and what my thoughts were screaming were much more interesting than what Ramirez was saying. However, I decided to ignore his talking and followed my thoughts, that after all are with me all the time and instead I see Ramirez occasionally.

You should know that he also left a card for you, similar to the one he left us, but I believe, and correct me if I am wrong, that in those medieval lands where you are now, having no phones, no computers or faxes, much less they will have retail outlets or shopping malls, and as far as I know, and as history tells, neither Merlin, nor King Arthur, or the Knights of the Round Table never knew of this wonderful system that is the credit system, which is a modern and avant-garde invention; so your card will be kept in custody in the wood casket you have in your room.

Guess what happened on Tuesday? See, as I was very eager to start using my "Silver", as we affectionately named it, we got up very early and went to Zoe's, the new mall on Av. 5. There, all the stores were waiting for us, greeting us with winks and smiles and shouting: Here I am! Here I am! The same as it would shout a very loved and dear friend whom we had not seen for a long time. And as I am not neither rude nor ungrateful, I could not let my friends yelling there all the time, so I decided to enter into a very large and very fine store and purchase a set of jeans which was very sophisticated, very blue and very expensive.

Oh, dear Camila! You don't know how exciting it is to buy with credit card! It's like having a magic wand which makes your dreams come true! Mariana, on the other hand, although she was all morning at the mall and was also in possession of her wonderful Silver, she did not buy anything, but neither was she empty handed.

When we were on the way to the parking lot, next to our car, we found a dirty and abandoned box. Any other occasion, we would have gone without looking sideways, but the box snarled and moved, so Mariana approached to make inquiries. To make the long story short, I will tell you that what we found in the box was a small black kitten, with torn and greenish eyes, hairy as a speck with a forsaken face that even you would have grieved, not leaving another remedy that carry it with us.

Along the way, between the shopping center and the house, the kitty was baptized with the name of Nicanor... and there began our problems, because the case is, Camila, that Bartolomeo does not get along with Nicanor, and Nicanor

does not get along with Bartolomeo. Mariana, with much intelligence tried to separate the doggy territory (kitchen, living room and rooms) from the cat territory (studio, lobby and bathroom), but it seems that neither dogs nor cats understand much of boundaries or restrictions because they continuously stepped beyond the limits in the mornings, afternoons and evenings.

Though the legendary calm of the house has been populated now of barks and meows and meows and barks. On Wednesday and Thursday there is not much to say because it rained all day and we could not leave the house to buy anything. And as I already had my fingers numbed by the effort of holding this graphite pencil so small that was the only thing I found to write these lines, I will leave what happened from Friday to Sunday for my next letter.

Regards,

Beatrice

"Note: Mariana sends her greetings and said that she will write soon, when she achieved the peace treaty between Bartolomeo and Nicanor"

I closed the pages carefully, kept them in the envelope and squeezed them against my heart. What a joy was to have news from home! ... But... how melancholic I felt after reading the small Beatrice's letters! Will I be doing the right thing at embarking on this magic adventure? Was it worth the sacrifice of being separate from my sisters to pursue magic? What was I doing there? Was my stay at Eisenbaum really for magic or for Leonardo? My thoughts kept me asleep and had to make a supernatural effort to sleep because very early, the next morning, my training will start at last.

On the cobbled surface of The Fortaleza terrace with the winds of the ocean swirling our hair and clothes, all those apprentices that, as me, would start the first year as sorcerer apprentices gathered. Being located on the summit of a mountain, The Fortaleza offered a spectacular view of the sea; with marine, greenish, turquoise and blue stripes from the coast away towards the horizon. Below, the cliff, paved of large and powerful rocks, which as enraged giants broke the bluish mantle with white foams that roared through deafening the raging winds. Americus, Leonardo and the Wizards Council were the hosts, all dressed with the blue tunic, which held Arabesque embroidered in silver on the sleeves edges and that was the ones Magicians used in large protocol celebrations.

We, the apprentices, had the classic white tunic, unadorned, as symbolism of vacuum, the insubstantiality, the purity and lack of knowledge that accompanies all neophytes. With time and understanding of magical sciences, these robes would go across color gradation from white to purple, maximum magic grade held by a few.

Eisenbaum meetings were very colorful and very well provided, and

fortunately not held on the terrace but in the halls. All of the magical world and non-magical beings attended. Nobody was discriminated, no one was told “no”, neither by its appearance nor by its lineage. All were invited, no one was left out. Thus, elves, of bizarre appearance and rough manners, were able to sit aside their rivalries, the gnomes, which always were very good dressed, and both drank without moderation, rum and beer kegs, until the alcohol intoxication made them dear friends, at least during the time that the party lasted.

The stunning erased the limits of moderation and good sense, and the groups then began to sing detuned melodies that later became serenades, whose repertoire was as broad as broad is the world. Thus of the moderation of a Gardel tango they passed to the spite of the Mexican songs, from there they jumped to the Colombian rhythms to fall into the numbness of the Puerto Rican bachata and continued up to the regrets of the Cuban boleros, and as the alcohol intoxication continued its course, they also went to the European continent and climbed to the exaltation of the Scottish bagpipes through the ardors of the Spanish flamenco, and from the Greek Zorba fumes flew to the twists of the Portuguese vira.

So much creative and musical activity was incomplete if it was not accompanied by the graphic representation of the dance in question, so between singing and juggling the evening passed slowly. The same exaltation was shared by the fairies and undines, thus Pegasus and unicorns, as well as sylphs and sirens. The only ones who did not attend these meetings were dragons, shy by birth, whose honor was settled on their solitary nature and total disdained for social events and Carnavalesque waste, preferring the entrenchment in their caves. The music was not missing, as well as the performers dancing at the rhythm that the melody imposed.

Americus ended his welcome speech to the apprentices and came up to my table in order to greeting me. After the greeting, he asked for my sisters and greatly rejoiced at knowing of their well-being. We continued talking about trivia until, after a while that I considered reasonable, I told him that I needed to speak in strict confidence.

Tactfully, he informed me that he would not stay longer as he should complete a delicate assignment outside Eisenbaum and that his departure was in a few hours. However he suggested that if the nature of my confidence required immediate attention I should discuss it with my tutor, and at his return he would talk to me anyway. As my tutor had not yet appeared, I stayed with the bizarre feeling of the one who is expecting to get rid of a weight and is informed that had to carry it one stretch more.

Captivated by the festive atmosphere and after Americus left, I devoted myself to watch my future classmates, who, as me, wore their bright and white robes, waiting to meet by the inspection of the eyes the

temperament and character affinity that would allow them to select wisely their future friends. Hiding almost behind a curtain, in the distance, I spotted an Asian girl with long and black hair, very smooth, that was occupied in the same activity I was carrying out; just like me she was looking for an ally among the crowd. Once we established eye contact, I smiled and when I was already about to begin the ritual of the introduction, the presence of Dorian clouded me the picture.

-I was expecting with excitement the moment to meet you -he said sitting at my table without waiting for the invitation on my part.

I looked at him without exaltation and while he was talking I explored his blunt face that at first glance may seem attractive to some people, but as time goes by and after treating him, it began to show his flaws and imperfections, most belonging to the soul than the body. With the smile flowered in the face, an extraordinary repertoire of foolishness and two glasses of cocktails, he was trying to capture my interest, but I remained silent, responding only with polite monosyllables, abstracted in my own thinking. After a while of closed answers, he decided to let me in search of more cocktails, while I was engaged in a dialogue with myself in which the magician was the only protagonist.

I was hoping with excitement that my tutor and advisor would be Leonardo. But Oh, God! How banal my hopes and how useless my illusions! The implacable fate, voracious destroyer of illusions, dreams and daydreams thief, good fortune annihilator, twisted in the opposite direction the hope of my being and without notice handed me the more unpleasant of the surprises: Duprina, the former Leonardo's girlfriend, my rival, hostile and fateful opponent, diligent adversary, black sorceress and expert in the occult arts, was my tutor.

There she was, standing in front of me, next to the table where Americus and Dorian had been minutes earlier, wearing a lilac tunic, very tight to her tiny waist, exposing a good portion of the bust, neck topped with a dolphins gold collar that slid playfully by the cleavage between the breasts, lost between the thickness of the two big mountains. She had belatedly joined the celebration and now enjoyed the moment, appearing before me with the triumphant smile that foreshadows the failure of an enemy.

My encounter with Duprina could not have been worse, mediating the circumstance of our mutual antipathies and the breaking of her courtship with Leonardo, back in the outposts of Saint Andre, which she blamed directly on me. I did not defend myself as she was indeed convinced of the verdict of my guilt. She gloated over her words:

-Who would say, Camila that you would end up at my fingertips? I as your tutor, you as my apprentice. The turns of life! Did you like the residence I got you? As you know tutors are the ones who choose the place

where the pupils will be hosted. Severa can be a little uncomfortable at times and I am sure she will deal with you with rigor and inflexibility. Didn't you think that it was strange that you were the only applicant who stayed on the outskirts of The Fortaleza? I have prepared an excellent curriculum for you and I can ensure you will receive exactly what you deserve, that is, nothing! We must also talk about your application; I think that there are some inconsistencies that must be discussed. I advise you not to discuss it with anyone else, especially not with Americus. After all, he was the sponsor of your application and with everything you wrote, tarnished his reputation and compromised his credibility.

If the shame talked it would have stopped there in the middle of the hall, with two legs and two arms, saying <present, here I am> to receive the punishment of the judgment; but it is funky, very funky, and chose to hide the embarrassment of the action between the commiseration and the self-pity. How coward the shame is!, especially when it sits on the hands of the truth! I was definitely in the hands of Duprina, as was David in the hands of Goliath, as was Paris in the hands of Menelaus and Cleopatra in the hands of the Roman Council. Not having a place to defend, I assumed the situation with resignation, rushing the goblet of hemlock like Socrates sped his.

To complete the picture, Leonardo came to greet me and sat down beside me, chance that Duprina took to sit down at the same time on the other side that was free. The magician greeted her with a slight nod, and she smiled with shark teeth. Ah! What skillful opponent Duprina was! With a single stroke she annihilated Leonardo developments in my direction; as a checkmate to the Board of love. Very skillful the sorceress was in matters of tactics, strategies, and necklines. With this movement that resulted overwhelming effective by plain and simple, she had assured that the conversation rested on trivialities and banalities of life, without even touching the depths of the heart.

Oh! Duprina... Duprina... for a moment I was obliged to admire the subtleties of your insinuations and cheapness of your primitive instincts that as a snake, you drag with deep Machiavellianism. The versatility of tones and nuances in your random talks! What skill in the proper use of the cleavage, whose dolphins attached to your neck, dancing by the constant rhythm of your breathing, jumped, blissful, towards the abyss of your breasts! And your hair? Not to mention! Not a single strand undervalues the set! And as in common agreement with the rest of the parties, together with the stealth game of seduction, your hair swayed their glares down cascading from the crown to your waist, with a delicious reptile zigzagging. I admired you as it is admired a dangerous opponent, with fascination and respect; carefully studying your maneuvers, scoring with prodigious objectivity and zeal your successes, but also your mistakes.

Enjoy with relish your success, my enemy! maybe you have won this round. But clean your weapons, dust off your shield, get ready to the battle that lies ahead, positioning your figurines; mine are already positioned. And my bishops and my horses, head towards yours, so thus my pawns. You can have my Tower twisted in your hair, but my King you will not draw neither with the check of your insinuations nor with the mate of your cleavage. Urge your bets! The opponents are preparing! ... Because the game has already begun.

5
THE CLASSES

Back to the house, to the shelter of my room darkness, I mused about what it would happen now that Duprina was in charge of my teaching. I was sure that her lessons would do very little with magic but a lot with retaliation. Suddenly, a peculiar sound, like a drumming, made me look out the window. I got up and gently opened it; a restless wind entered vigorously dropping a piece of paper that landed on the bed. Intrigued, I ran up to it and began to read its contents, saying thus:

*"The aroma of your love among the mists pushed me,
Mists of bereavement, mists of disaffection,
Alone, tired and wounded by the arrow of jealousy,
Wheezing with great delirium the fruits of my passion,
Because white nights in your absence becomes black
So hide the agony of my aching heart.
Would you like to comfort this beggar with a kiss?
Who mutilated feel he could not find his heart.
Because, perhaps, at nights, it goes after her owner,
Which it is you my little girl, and does not come back anymore
Without a heart may I live? Cases have happened,
But without your love, I cannot live
May sparrows live deprived of food?
Or perhaps may a path live without the feet that walk it?
You're my path and my food
That is why I cannot live without you"*

I examined the paper in search of a signature. I found nothing. Who sends me these verses? Leonardo? It could be him but it was also likely that they came, perhaps, from Dorian. None of the Victors wrote so delicate and gentle verses, so I dismissed them as probable authors of such exquisite poetry. Or maybe, they came from a secret admirer, who I had no idea of his existence? I slept with the scrubbing paper on my chest, thinking about

theories on the identity of my secret suitor.

The morning surprised me just in time to accommodate myself and going to take my breakfast, at half-past six o'clock, not one minute earlier not one minute later, as provided for in Severa regulations. Now that I started my training, the morning walks and existential arguments with the Victors had been suspended until further notice; and they looked at me at the table, there in the distance from the opposite chair, with resignation and regret like the ones who know that times are changing and that it is necessary a realignment to the new situation. When I left home, a carriage was waiting for me. By the time I pulled into The Fortaleza, it was eight o'clock. The students were already gathered with their tutors in one of the main rooms that were located on the ground floor. The atmosphere was quite informal, with groups scattered throughout the room, with great hustle and bustle. One instructor could have from one to three students. Neither Leonardo nor Dorian was there.

I waited for Duprina a long time but she did not appear. Meanwhile, the guardians had been given to their pupils, books, rods, potions and the study program that would be used during the year. While I was there the Asian girl came up to me.

-Hi! – She said - Has not your mentor come?

-She obviously not -I replied- I'm Camila -and extended my hand to her as a greeting signal.

-I am Sashui -said with a slight bow- my instructor is a taciturn man who is called Latus. He gave me the materials and then left!

-Mine is a snake which is called Duprina and has not appeared, so I have no materials or anything.

The conversation in which we embarked was hilarious, Sashui had a very marked and special sense of humor, very Asian, to say something. But her humor was not that grim and gloomy humor that stands on the gibes and ironies in which a third party is always an innocent victim. No! It was a clean, neat, seated humor based in ingenuity and the subtle nuances of life, and precisely for this reason, it was received with pleasure and emotion, like a fresh breeze in a stormy summer. She came from Indonesia, of humble origin; her parents were engaged in agriculture and had a small farm on the island of Lombok. The girl had an exceptional talent for making potions and amulets. Americus had discovered her in one of his trips to the island when collecting exotic herbs. After convincing her parents of Sashui's great potential in the affairs of magic, they agreed to her departure and there she was, hobnobbing with apprentices and sorcerers away from her native Indonesia.

After one hour, tutors gathered their apprentices and walked toward their respective classrooms to begin their training. Duprina did not appear anywhere.

-So here it starts your revenge! -I said- leaving me planted in the

middle of nowhere to die of starvation!

I gathered my belongings and decided to return to the house on foot to enjoy the landscape while thinking on how to deal with the circumstance. As I was coming down the fields, a wet sea winds hit my face, bringing with them a strong touch of salt and sand. Some farmers met me on the way and took their hats off in greeting signal while driving their wagons which hissed with a rhythmic aphonic sound. Others were standing at the edges of the road into a sort of wood-shop deploying their baskets full of apples, peaches, strawberries and vegetables for sale.

Arriving at the house, I found Severa on the porch, picking up the dried leaves of a tree which stationed in front of her residence, undressed each day around leaving a trail of tiny stalks and crunchy flakes that sounded at the passage of pedestrians, with a dry sound chas!, chas!, chas! That was very disturbing to the acute hearing of Severa. As it was very early, then she asked me:

-Did you have a problem? Are you feeling sick? -interrogated me with concern.

With a sigh I approved to respond:

-I have a big problem, well actually I have more than one, but what worries me right now is the first one, more than the second; although the third one occasionally leaves me sleepless.

Severa had already piled the leaves curbside, left aside the rake and heading towards me, grabbed me by the elbow and urged me to enter the house, while she repeated:

-I do not understand what you are saying but there is nothing that cannot be resolved under the shadows and charms of a nice cup of tea - and saying this followed the action.

Already in the kitchen, put on fire her fat teapot of wide handle and took out from the cabinet two huge white cups with a floral design on them, which were a match with the teapot design; then, filled them with two lumps of sugar, very white, very clean and very neat. Then, she poured an aromatic jasmine and orange teabag whose citrus essence perfumed, instantly, the kitchen. Still on fire, the teapot grumbled their vapors with passion; Severa removed it from the oven and poured the precious liquid in the cups. During the entire operation, which lasted less than five minutes, I had taken my place at the table and when the steaming infusion was ready, she approached me a bowl.

Quite right Severa was to joining her praises to the properties of the jasmine and orange tea, because at the first sip, my tongue, feeling the warmth of the concoction, unleashed the secrets of my mouth and with a profusion of details began to parade one by one, before the undaunted face of the woman, who was listening to me like a priest listening to a parishioner in confession. First, came out the lie, that ungrateful which forced my hand to write the testimony of my false virtues and my fictional

experiences, condemning to the most good-natured of the Magicians, Americus, to the discredit and dishonor. Then emerged Duprina's revenge whose opinions I accepted with impotence and resignation, hoping an illusion: that she will honor her duties as a tutor and give me the knowledge to become a sorceress. Last, but not least, I confessed my love for Leonardo in all its grandeur, in its entirety, with its forwards and backwards, with evidence and mysteries. I also thought it was appropriate to mention the sugary lyrics of my secret admirer, in the hope she shared her suspicions with regard to his identity.

Severa heard all the time without making judgments, but in the end, after my heartfelt confession, unleashed her language to cover me with accusations and recriminations:

-Foolish girl! How could you get involved so much in this string of lies? Don't you realize how it has been complicating your life? Honesty is a very serious matter to these wizards. Lying, Camila, is like a monster that is growing every day waiting for the opportunity to take the blow. How could you, girl? How could you?

The answer emerged inside my head: *"Severa, I did it because I wanted to and because I could. You see, at that time the idea did not seem so bad. If you weren't so meticulous, so carefully and so outdated, you would realize the genius of my occurrence. From every point of view, it was very beneficial since got me what I wanted: to be an apprentice and also be close to Leonardo"*.

But, there was another voice in my head that backed up everything that Severa said and accused me with the same devotion: *"Are you very pleased with what you did? Ah? What lack of sanity! If the foolishness were a person, its name would be Camila. Have you noticed the pandemonium in which you're stuck? Now, you have to be responsible and accept the consequences of your actions. It's time to pay!"*

And as the two voices were so different and contradictory, I decided not to outsource my thoughts and keep a submissive attitude to the woman, who was still talking about:

-Oh! The follies of youth! Duprina parents were black magicians and there have been rumors that she is involved in such activity. However no one has been able to confirm this fact. And you are precisely messing around with the boyfriend of a black witch! -And shaking her head, said- How would you untangle this mess, Camila?

My reply was a shoulder shrink since it was very obvious that if I had the answer to that question it would not have been necessary my confession and well I could have saved me the awkward conversation and the subsequent exposure to ridicule. She also devoted some time to the development of theories about the identity of my secret admirer, and like me, dismissed her Victors claiming the total ignorance that her boys had in any kind of literary manifestation such as verses or proses and that the only

approach they had had to literature was reciting, aloud loud, the letters of the alphabet.

-Well! –Severa said at the end- with point one and two, I can help, with point number three, unfortunately, not, because I do not have inferences in the affairs of heart.

Severa told me that still maintained contacts with personalities from the magic world and that she would contact them to talk about my problem. On the other hand, she considered that Duprina no way would fulfill her tutor duties, so Severa offered herself to replace her as an honorary tutor.

-You must, however, understand that I am not familiar with the procedures of the current magic and that my knowledge comes from the old school. Nevertheless, I think, and you will agree with me, that old magic is better than no magic at all.

The truth was I was in agreement with her thinking and sealed the arrangement with hugs and laughter. Severa rose from the table and, with an air of mystery, walked toward a corner which was in darkness. There, from a small cabinet pulled out a copper key the same as the ones hanging from her waist cord and that clinked each time she stepped; and making a sign told me to follow her.

We headed towards the back of the house where a courtyard, planted of friendly orange trees scattered on either side of a never-ending corridor, cut into two halves the sturdy garden. A disguised pine door was hidden, imperceptible to the eye, unless you were very close to it. The door was carved with strange figures and quirky symbols that I could not define. Severa introduced the key carefully and after a little "click", which chirped, the gate opened wide with ease. My heart gave rollovers inside my chest when I saw the outline of a stair falling into a deep and gloomy darkness. Severa rummaged in her pockets and pulled out a small candle that ignited and landed on a small plate. Then, when the enclosure was illuminated she started down the stairs and I followed her.

The smell of moisture was unbearable, the walls and the stairs were covered with slabs of gray stones and cobwebs hung everywhere, entangled in our heads and adhering to our clothes as we walked down. At the end of the staircase there was a small room. Later I understood that it was the place where Severa kept her magic items and where years ago practiced witchcraft. All the furniture and utensils were covered with a grey powder that reminded me very much of the basement in which my sisters and I had to live in The Borrascosa in the custody of Gertrude.

-With a bit of cleaning, we can start your lessons of magic here -she said.

A gigantic table reigned at the center of the room: it looked like an oak monster standing on four legs, voluptuous and quirky. The woman approached and opened the front drawer and pulled out a bulky book that

struck giving three hits. This innocent action raised a gray cloud of dust that covered up our bodies and made us sneeze for a few seconds.

-This is my book of magic. You shall have yours. Shall not you?

I responded with great resolution:

-Last year I found two books in Saint Andre. One belonged to the sorceress Zarnia and all it did was bringing me problems and misfortunes; the other, "The Keys of the Kingdom" was the one I found in the basement of The Borrascosa and where I found the cure to the ring curse which Zarnia had tended me. The first is in Eisenbaum in custody of the wizards so it cannot do more damage in the world of men, the second, I have it in my power, since for some reason, although it seems insane, I feel that the book wants to be with me.

The woman smiled with satisfaction, then exclaimed:

-It is not crazy! This is your book! It will reveal the secrets of its magic. You should only believe in it, and also believe that what I am telling you is possible. Without belief, or faith, which comes to be the same thing, you will not get anywhere.

I nodded gently giving her the understanding of my total agreement.

Oh! The inconsistencies of life! Who would have thought that Severa, the dark, the haggard, the bearer of the Hitler theories, the dictatorship of the Republic, would be precisely the person that would guide me through the mysterious ways of witchcraft? Duprina, my enemy, Duprina, how bad I see you! How bad your revenge is turning! And from the poisonous flow of your actions, it flourished the sweet flower of hope in the figure of Severa. Well the saying expresses when stated that when a window is closed, thousands more are opened to the rescue! In this puzzle that is the existence, often, evil disguises itself of goodness, and to not be outdone, goodness also disguises of evil, and thus walking together through life, let us to us, poor mortals, the ignoble task of going by deciphering which is which.

6

AN OLD FRIEND

Two weeks passed quickly, and Severa had remained faithful to her promise to instruct me in the affairs of magic. Each day, at six o'clock in the afternoon, no matter what, we would gather in the small room, embedded in the recesses of the courtyard with the complicity of the greenish orange trees and entered in the vast world of amulets, witches and potions. These few hours that Severa dedicated to magic produced an alteration in the rules of her Republic: neither Misfortune nor the Victors were allowed approaching the area while we were in magic practices. Initially I thought that the arbitrary rule was put up to avoid interruptions in the learning process, but Severa told me later the real reason: we would be driving supernatural forces that could endanger the life of the other residents of the house, making it necessary to put distance to prevent unwanted transformations of some family members. None wanted to see Misfortune turned into a frog or any of the boys become a goat or a ruminant. Such a transformation would be an unacceptable occurrence, as well as very humiliating for the family member in question.

One afternoon I was in my room getting ready for my usual lesson when Severa appeared at my door announcing me a visit. Nevertheless, and despite my insistence, she refused to inform me the identity of the visitor. With great caution I headed toward the room, intrigued and expectant about who I would find there. It would be my secret admirer coming to profess his devotion to me in person and loudly? Or was he tired of the subtle prose and poems and now came with the concise help of his words and presence? Oh, love! Irresistible Cupid! What new craziness are you preparing for me? Was it not enough that you planted the seeds of a fateful love in my heart for a magician who did not even notice my presence? Cupid! Cupid! As a farmer of hearts, so far, your task has been deficient, imperfect and harmful! Why didn't you sow also the seed at his heart? Thus, love would have been mutual and I would be suffering neither the misfortune of disaffection nor the arrows of love. No! Then, I would be happy with the greatest bliss than any heart could ever know, with the gates of heaven open wide leaving me a string of blessings. How different is life when it is accompanied by the perfume of love! How different my life

would be if you had had your arrows rightly pointed!

Upon reaching the room I had already finished my musings on love and great was my surprise when sitting on one of the sofa contemplating me was my bizarre Persian friend, Batam-Al-Bur, wearing his unmistakable gigantic olive-colored pants, his jacket attached with precious stones and his fuchsia turban swirled around his head. He had rings with different precious stones on each of his fingers and a solid silver belt tightened with relish the circumference of his waist. He ran to meet me with open arms, as in a crucifixion and squeezed me through all the profusion of oriental greetings. Long time we were united exchanging warm and friendly hugs and sweets phrases as salutation.

-Batam-Al-Bur! What a pleasant surprise! -And gently pinching his forearm, I went with a claim- Where have you been? It had been six months without hearing from you. That is not a way to treat friends... Batam-Al-Bur.

-The same at your service -said with a reverence- I regret the delay, dear friend. I have been busy travelling the world, after all I was locked up for fifty years in that horrible bottle where you freed me. You know how aggravated my ailments become with closure. But freedom has filled my life. My allergies have diminished, migraine hardly accompanies me and the respiratory discomfort has also largely withdrawn during this time. However, despite everything, my dear friend, I have always kept abreast of the events in your life and your sisters through Americus and Leonardo.

I looked at him with surprise and puzzlement at first, then with anger.

-You meant that you have been in communication with them and not me? -Annoying I claimed- you are an ungrateful knave! Couldn't you call me; send a fax or an email? What a tremendous friend you have been!

The Genie put distance between us conveniently taking refuge behind the couch where minutes earlier had been sitting.

-Do not get angry! My absence was not deliberate, I swear! I swear! It is only that the world is such a wonderful place that I got lost in its succulent landscapes not realizing of the passage of time! With regard to Americus and Leonardo, fate wanted that they regularly crossed my paths on my travels through these fascinating places -then, scanning my face to look for signs of the decline of my anger, continued- I assure you that I always asked for you and was much happy when I was told that you have been accepted as an apprentice witch. I know that everything will turn out ok for you; I always thought you had a witch face; well... that is not what I meant... What I am trying to say, without much success, is that you have attitudes and vocation of sorceress. Oh, God! I'm already saying nonsense. I begin to feel that the ulcer is already spilling and clouding my speech. Oh, no! And I am already having a headache too... Heavens Saints! I choke!

I went to the Genie fanning some air in his face with the palm of my hand in an attempt to alleviate his sufferings. The effort yielded fruits

because a few minutes later his complexion seemed to regain the bronze tone of his skin. For my part, I left aside my criticisms and claims, taking into account that the Genie had shown convincingly that he was a beloved and faithful friend. In addition, his presence could not be timelier.

Severa classes had been, until now, purely theoretical but already told me that we would start the practice sessions by the end of the week; for which had extended me a list of materials that I should get to begin with these lessons. The list had elements that I had no idea of how to get because they were quirky, obsolete and incomprehensible. Thus, the presence of my dear friend was like a ring to my finger.

-Will you stay a long time? There is one thing that I need your help. In addition, there is so much of what we need to talk. Please find a day so I can update you on the vicissitudes that I've had to go through -I said in a plaintive tone by appealing to his commiseration.

My words had the desired effect on the Genie who excited informed me that he would spend a good time in Eisenbaum as in his last trip to Egypt he was invited by Americus to visit the natural beauties of the realm. And bearing in mind that he was a Genie without master, work or occupation and without girlfriend or wife that could muddy his dizzying life of laziness he had devoted for the last six months; told me with a reverence that he was under my command for whatever I needed. He was staying at The Fortaleza, in a luxurious room, where the sound of the sea waves visited his bed full of fluffy cushions giving him the relax and well deserved rest he deserved on the warm evenings escorted by the luminous moon After this dialogue I updated him of all the events in my life, with full details of the occurrences of those months in which he had been absent; using the same phrases and sentences I used days earlier in my confession to Severa under the purview of the legendary orange and jasmine tea, in that corner of the kitchen which with such stoic silence it still kept my secrets. After his reprimand sentences, very similar to the ones promulgated by Severa, and many "What folly!" and "What were you thinking of?", he seemed to condole of my grief and my sufferings and let me quiet.

Immediately, and to put an end to the wave of reprimands, I took my material list and handled it to him, so he could read it. He said thus:

"Witchcraft Practice No. 1"

Materials:

- Three hairs from the tail of a grey Siamese cat.
- Happy frog legs
- Five grams of land of a cemetery gathered in full moon
- A multicolored bird feather"

Batam-Al-Bur was very versatile with his expressions. From the profusion of a very audible laugh could pass, with ease and without

remorse, to a frown, or from a catatonic laughter to tears; produced in infinitesimal fractions of a second. All in Batam-Al-Bur was transparent. If for some strange reason it was necessary the enactment of a lie or the omission of a fact to third parties, although his body was in favor of the lie and the omission, his treacherous eyes betrayed him. Yes! His oblique and greenish eyes, his treacherous eyes, always shouted from the rooftops what his body intended to hide. Thus it was for that strange peculiarity of his pupils that my Persian friend lived tucked into problems due to excess of truth, or what is the same, due to lack of lying.

As soon as Batam finished reading my list, immediately I realized that he didn't want to participate in the collection of materials. Yes! His eyes told me, but mine, which were as foolish and stubborn as his, said they would not accept a "no" for an answer, and by dint of arguments, looks and lamentations I came out victorious from this singular battle of eyes.

- And how do you intend to put these elements together? -He asked still reluctant.

-I have a plan. Let's start with the easiest: a multicolored bird feather. Severa has a parrot here in the house. She is caged but whenever I approach, she moves away towards the other side of the cage where I cannot reach her. If we are two, one can entertain her while the other rips the feather.

The Genie remained silent for a few moments, in thoughtful attitude, then added:

-I entertain her and you take away the feather -was quick to say the Genie- I do not want to have direct contact with those stinking animals that are carriers of diseases.

-Okay -I said resignedly- Her name is Consuelo. You have to give her some rice grains to call her attention while I do my work.

Outlined the plan, we would continue the action. I kept Severa, Misfortune and the Victors out of the plan for fear that they objected my method for sentimental reasons, given that the animal had been in the house for over thirty years.

Carefully and without making any noise we went to the hallway where the prodigious parrot was rocking peacefully in her wire swing. She spotted us and quickly assumed an alert position. Ah! Whatever they say, I have always thought that birds have a sixth sense; sometimes much more acute and timely than that of humans. Consuelo, in a second, seemed to guess our intentions because then raised her flight until the cage furthest place.

-Camila -said the Genie- this animal is all white but, as I read, what you need is a multicolored bird feather.

-Shut up! -I shouted- it is the only bird to which I have access. When you have the feather I would paint it with watercolor.

Batam frowned and I, for my part, did not pay attention to his comment:

-I think that you are crazy! Do you think that Severa won't realize that has a painted feather? -He said standing at the side where the Parrot was and opening a bag of rice grains that I had given him minutes earlier; began to throw them without reaching his target, bashed the banisters and piling up on the floor.

-You must have better aim! You are throwing them to the floor!

Batam looked desolate and making a great effort suppressed the feeling of disgust and anger, then as smooth as he could, slid the fingers between the bars in an attempt to place the rice on the cage floor. Fateful occurrence! Because Consuelo as soon as she saw the thin hand bursting into the confines of her residence, rushed pecking aggressively against his intrusive fingers.

-Ayayay... -cried my friend- Ay, Ay. I had forgotten the hardships that happen anytime I'm next to you.

I replied quickly:

-Silence!

The Genie had withdrawn the hand rubbing the bruised area.

-Come on! Let me see -I took his hand and did a quick inspection- it's nothing, it could be worse!

-Yes! -He said- she could have eaten the full finger. This birdseed is not giving result.

-You're right, we should think about something else.

We sat on the short wall that divided the hallway of the house from the porch while looking for new ideas that allow us to achieve the mission. Consuelo, for her part, returned to her wire swing with what appeared to be a derisive smile and rocked it and rocked back to front and front to back, without removing the view of us.

After a few minutes of intense thoughts, a brilliant idea occurred to me. I asked Batam to lend me his fuchsia turban but refused claiming that it was a fine and exquisite silk which was acquired from Damascus merchants last month. I insisted and assured him that I would not damage it, so he agreed and handed it to me with reluctance. I then approached the cage. Consuelo flew back to the farthest place. With the rapidity of lightning, I opened the little door and threw her the scarf up clouding her vision. This trick allowed me to put my arm up to where she was and drag it to the door where I could start with treachery pulling out one of her right-wing feathers; but much to my regret, the situation became complicated.

The exquisite silk scarf was embedded in the beak and claws of Consuelo and in her eagerness to break away tragically tore the delicate threads, so to the cries of the parrot joined also the cries of Batam; and while more efforts I made to free Consuelo more it snarled under the blows of the parrot and more screaming by Batam for the corpse that was now his scarf.

Obviously with all the fuss, Severa, Misfortune and the Victors reached

the place.

- But what is going on here? -Severa asked alarmed approaching to the plump bird and freeing her from the yoke of silk.

With all this public gathered I had no other option but lie once again.

-Seemed that Consuelo was cold and we think to curl her with this scarf that so generously my friend brought me.

Severa looked at both of us; nothing in the geography of her face indicated if she had believed or not my words. Then she said:

-It is a very noble but inappropriate gesture. The birds do not suffer from cold; for that they have plumage which protects them from any change in temperature. I hope that this incident does not become a repeat - and looking at the scarf said:

-It is a pity that a delicate garment has been damaged as well.

And saying this, she withdrew with her family leaving me and Batam alone in the hallway. How bad I felt, then, for my action! I got my feather, but to what cost? I damaged Batam's scarf, the one he had entrusted me with so much confidence. I had failed him; I had promised that I would not damage it and there it was now, spoiled, marred, a rag! Filled with birdseed and stool!

-Sorry, friend -I said convicted- I would find a way to compensate you for the loss.

-Don't worry -he said- as you said a few moments ago it could have been worse. At least you have your feather.

Batam's words far from comfort me made me feel worse. Batam, to my eyes, stood loyal, faithful and unconditional. Raised in the arms of friendship he had backed up my story and not even a sigh of protest had shown his displeasure. Nothing had said to Severa that contradicted my saying. In contrast, I was raised, perfidious and ruin. What kind of person was I? Lying shamelessly, bypassing the wishes of my friend to get my petty interests, also lying to Severa who had so generously hosted me at home and impregnated me on a daily basis with her magic knowledge. Ah! How wrong my reputation was standing by this incident! Stained by the deception and carelessness onslaughts. How low I had fallen! Then I thought of my grandfather, Gennaro, and my shame became bigger and thought of my sisters, Beatrice and Mariana and was so big my shame that it began to spread to the outside in the form of tears. Tears of shame and dishonor! And there was Batam, faithful friend, ready to wipe the spring that poured from my eyes and pick up the words of my repentance:

-Batam, I have been doing very bad things lately and I regret it. I want to leave behind this version of me that scares me. I feel that if I continue on this deception and lies path the moment will come when it will be very late and I would not be able to come back. The lie monster has been eaten me and I refuse to continue to serve as its food. It appears when I least expect it and takes over my words and my actions. I want to pledge to you, my

faithful friend, that I will not lie any more. Never again! I want my loved ones to be proud of me. I want the truth in my words and my actions. I want to recognize me as the straight and honest person that ever was; but I cannot do it alone. This monster that now dwells in me is very astute and often hides behind the convenience disguise; and sometimes it is very difficult to recognize. I ask you, Batam, when you also see it, let me know, but you do it by screaming. An arduous task awaits me, I know, but just in you I trust. I hereby grant permission to use any means possible and available to make me to my senses. Will you do it?

Batam smiled and added:

-Count on me! It will be interesting to see how I make you enter into reason.

After this incident, the visit passed without major inconveniences. That night Batam dismissed by promising to return the next day to help me find my materials list.

The night swept through all corners of the house and, after dinner, we, inhabitants of the house, said goodbye with a simple 'good night' recited in choir, under the weight of tiredness, along the corridor. Arriving at my room, on the fluffy pillow of white cotton, was the familiar envelope containing the verses of my mysterious lover. I hurried to take it and opened it without delay:

*"I wish the lonely night shelters you under the white hue of the Moon,
 And the flaming stars sing for you my love hymn,
 Arriving at your feet, graceful and arrogant, the sighs of the sea
 And in serene procession showing you the way to my arms,
 Because my arms are waiting for you and will always wait in sweet and sour agony
 So far until they can join you in a sublime hug
 That your dreams surrender before the nectars of my love,
 And be fruitful puffed of mirth, clamor and expectations,
 Because I wrote these verses to show you the fruits of my devotion.
 Sweet dreams, my love!"*

That night it was impossible for me to sleep. Who are you? I thought. Who was the person who wrote such exquisite verses? I didn't know what to think. Would I find him someday? What if he never appears? Would I remain with the infinite doubt of his identity forever?

That night I dreamed with a sinister forest of protruding Cedars that raised their infamous shadows chasing me while I ran. I fell and turned up, barefoot, to get away from them. The moon covered with stormy clouds appeared at times up the blackish dome of the sky and a sound as menacing owls hurt my ears. A chilly breeze blew fierce and froze my steps making them even heavier and slow, sinking in a thick, foul and nasty sludge. In the distance I saw the whitest unicorns I had ever seen that moved away

running from the dark forest but I could not reach them. A rider, whom I could not see the face, was riding with them. And although I was screaming to catch his attention, he did not seem to hear me. Between fear and despair, my heart joined my breathing spasms; and suddenly, like a miracle of infinite grace, I woke up.

True to his promise, Batam appeared at the residence in the very early hours. He declined the invitation to breakfast that made Severa indicating that he had already delighted with delicacies in The Fortaleza. Severa did not like his comment very much since she never lost opportunity to offer her delicacies and accept the praise, and frowning, turned around and returned to the stove where she was handing out her culinary delights which we expected with passion around the table chaired by Mr. Misfortune.

If there was something Severa was proud of was her kitchen: no Eisenbaum apron was cleaner and flawless than the one Severa fitted at her waist every morning at six-thirty, none withier, always starched to give greater clarity and texture, no silverware so shiny, so much so that it looked like a mirror, all in tone, all in harmony with the whole, nor a single utensil scratched, nor a single vessel loading the filth of dirt, all cups dressed with the same floral design, as the coffee and the sugar bowl set, all shining with the frictions glow of the sponge and soap the woman religiously used to wash them, every afternoon from one to two o'clock. There, Severa shone as a sole Queen and Lady, as a theater actress before a large audience, she was devoted in sharing not only her gastronomic talents but the histrionic also. Yes! There, Severa really shone and shone with her own light! Through the coffee vapors she liked to talk of the virtues of the marinated bread, while at the same time, daubing the virtuous bread with a generous layer of butter seasoned with parsley; then, she passed to comment on the benefits of parsley and with exquisite sharpness exalted its diuretic properties and effectiveness for the slow digestion and intestinal spasms. Ah! With such elegance Severa walked with her teapot pouring the precious amber liquid into our cups which exhaled their wonderful aromas: jasmine, orange, cinnamon or lemon! With such mastery she elaborated the delicious, fragile and fluffy pancakes that succumbing over a sea of maple and honey syrup expected the final destination to our mouths! The milk pouring into our glasses was not pasteurized in any way, no!; It came from a white cow with caramel spots, called Scarlet, which lived on a nearby farm whose owner each morning was given to the task of supplying of the precious liquid to some families concerned about the good health and nutritional habits of their offspring.

After breakfast, Batam and I left the residence, accompanied by the Victors, who indicated they wanted to help me in my task of collecting materials for the wizardry lesson. Mr. Misfortune let us use the wagon to go to the countryside in search of the happy frog legs.

-And how do we know that the frog is happy? -Batam asked very

intrigued while clung to his seat that bounced like a bull at a rodeo.

-I don't know -said Victor Rafael- you have to look for one that is laughing -said bursting into laughter which also joined his brothers.

The road was paved, so the cart squeaked and bounced and our bodies were wobbling and crashing against each other. Some villagers raised their gaze to see us, greeted the Victors and resumed their duties. The cart horse did not speak, or he didn't want to do it, but, just in case, I abstained to promulgate any comments that would hurt his susceptibility. After half an hour of horses, we began to see the extensive greenish landscapes, soft hills waving by the whole variety of green, brown and blue shades. The sun shined hard on the plateau and a smell of damp earth flooded our space.

-Over there! -said Victor Andres pointing out the bluer water lagoon I had ever seen, bordered of shrubs and smaller plants that gave it the appearance as an aquarium. As a native of the area, Victor Andres knew where to find the famous frog race, so confirming his order I said:

-Well done! Go over there!

I felt drunk by the spirit of adventure, as well as those Spanish explorers, subsidized by the Spanish Isabel Queen, that sailed in ships plying the endless seas, around 1700, in search of new territories. My exploration although smaller wouldn't have the mystery tinges that carry all discoveries. Reaching the lake my astonishment broke: hundreds of frogs populated the place. There were in all sizes and colors: large, small, tiny, green, brown, red, skinny, fat. Without a doubt, all species on the planet were represented by one of them in that small space.

-Ok! Tell me which one is happy? -repeated the Genie.

-I guess that all. Look how happy they are still free and jumping from here to there -one of the Victors said.

For a very brief moment I felt some remorse. Get a frog to be used in a spell, removing him, perhaps, from the delight that is to be immersed in the warm waters of a pond and sunbathing under the delicate solar rays. My list only referred to the legs, did not speak of the body at all. However, I doubted that the small animal would live after having been stripped of his legs. Who was I to dispose of his life?

However, the task would not be easy; every time we approached the well, frogs, perhaps foreshadowing the bloody fate that awaited them, jumped as high as an Olympic high-jump athlete and ran to take refuge under the shade of some aquatic plants whose leaves were as big as beach umbrellas. However, thanks to the human cleverness, Victor Rafael managed to procure some beetle larvae, which I knew then constitute an element much appreciated in the amphibian frogs world, something like chocolate is to the human realm; and strategically placed it behind a huge bush, so thick that it reached to hide two Victors, and managed to pounce on the naive that was pulled to the succulent delicacy with the aim of nailing its first tooth.

Do frogs have teeth? Interesting question but I don't know the answer! I do not know it! The case is that I have never ventured or I will venture to investigate on my own if they have teeth or not. I'll leave that task to science people whose research spirit leads them to undertake the most disgusting experiments at the expense of the amphibian world. For my part, neither for science nor for sorcery, my fingers would never touch such cavities which I imagine moist, watery, and resinous. It was also fortunate that the Victors accompanied me on the ride since Batam would have never lashed out against any frog, so the unpleasant task would have been mine.

I had to be very honest on this respect, I do not know if I would have been able to even touch a frog. I really dislike exceedingly wet and gelatinous textures, much more if these textures are attached to animals and a lot more if these animals can jump over me with their bulging eyes, rough skin and protractile mouth. Victor Rafael had the good sense to bring a vessel that served as a container for the little frog.

Back to the village we stopped at a cafeteria to review the list. The place was almost empty, so we ordered a few cookies and refreshments which were served immediately and noshed with passion. The items that remained in my list were five grams of a cemetery land gathered in full moon, since the three hairs of a Siamese cat were provided by Victor Joseph who obtained it from a friend. It would be a feat to convince the Genie to accompany me to the cemetery the next night, which is when the calendar said it would be full moon. The Victors could not come since they had an activity in the morning that would keep them away for three days. So using the plaintive tone that women use when wishing to obtain any concession from masculine gender, I moved my long and lush eyelashes, I showed the most famous of my smiles adorned with the exquisite pearl necklace which were my teeth, and took my time to convince the Genie to accompany me.

-Please, Batam, you have to come with me.

Ah! But the Genie had also tuned his cunning; his long journeys around the world had inoculated him against the perfect art of manipulation and I was not able to convince him so easily.

-No, this time I won't listen to you. A cemetery in full moon? You are really crazy if you think I will go there! And I would be even crazier if you accompany me. Of course not! No! No! No!

However, I was not discouraged and kept insisting:

-Are you letting me go alone? Where is your chivalry? After all that we spent together. Imagine how you would feel if something bad happens to me. Could you live with such charge of consciousness? Please, do it for the good old days!

But the Genie, entrenched as he was under the blanket of denial, still reused undergoing my desires.

-No and no! There are zombies and ghosts in cemeteries; and I thank, God that I do not have to deal with any of them. There was no way,

reasoning, threatening or begging that could persuade Batam to accompany me to the cemetery overnight; so I understood I would have to tackle the unpleasant task by myself.

As soon as we ended up snacking, Batam said goodbye and left for The Fortaleza, I followed my way back to the house with the Victors. The night came early and accurate with its natural darkness, shining stars, moon and lanterns. Determined to get the last ingredient to my list, I prepared to go to the cemetery. I crossed the hall, got to the door, opened it and closed it with extreme softness to not wake to Misfortune or Severa.

The street was large and seemed deserted; a succession of small white houses with their red roofs looked like little hats observing on either side. The library highlighted within the whole, with its terracotta columns and a wooden sign exhibiting hours of operation: 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. I looked at the clock, it was almost midnight and the cemetery was located at the West side of the village, so I would have to walk a long way. The cold of the night was squeezing me the bones so I wrapped with my sweater and began the walk.

My steps produced a mild, dry sound crashing against the paved surface; my vigilant eyes looked towards all recondite places where some human, or not human, being could hide. The fear began to play me tricks; there were elusive shadows behind the trees, there were winding eyes following my path, there were strange sounds and unintelligible words whispering behind my back, there were cold and fear; and between fear and cold I did not know which one was bigger.

A cart anchored in front of the cafeteria before my eyes acquired overtones of monster, whose wheels as sharp claws seemed to be waiting for me to destroy my bones and flesh. A curtained window was the silhouette of a witch hat scaring and scratching her warts.

An iron frame was a skeleton placed in the middle of the road, waiting for me to attack me with sharp prickles. Finally, after so many strange and bizarre creatures that paraded through my imagination, I arrived at the gates of the cemetery. The moon had already taken its position in the center of the starry sky and watched my figure, silent and expectant, as saying *<and well, girl what are you doing here?>*.

I left the moon on the heights with the question unanswered. The gate was ajar; in the background, hidden between the greenness of the grass, one could see the white gravestones, some decorated with figures of winged angels, others with crosses or cherubs in a variety of positions: a whole eclectic met in order to ensure the last sleep of the dead. A thick fog was wiggled giving them a more macabre and mysterious look.

-Very well -I thought- it is only a matter of minutes: go, take and come - I said to myself for encouragement.

The grating growled as I pushed it. I walked a few steps and looked in all directions. Without delay, I reached down to take a handful of soil when

a noise behind me warned me of something moving. Full of terror and uncertainty, I ran to hide behind a little stone wall slab that separated a small ornamental garden from the tombstones. Thus being hidden in a petunia garden whose scents merged with those distilled from the lilies and gladioli of the tombstones; I sincerely admit that I wanted to cry.

There, trembling and frozen by fear, I managed to gather the courage to lean out above the wall and see the cause of the noise that had scared me. In the distance I spotted a figure approaching. She was a woman, wearing a gauzy tunic who gave her the ethereal look of an appearance; the black hair hung to her waist and on her hands was holding a small grey leather pouch. She crossed the gate of the cemetery with the ease and tranquility that gives routine tasks.

She was not scared at all. She stepped up to one of the niches that were piled up in rows of ten in length by four tall, forming a mosaic, very peculiar. With her hands, the appearance rolled the cap that covered the niche and pulled out the bones, placing them on the floor in the shape of a circle; then pulled out some implements from the gray bag and placed them on the paved floor; also throwing a kind of white powder from the palm of her hand, which were dropped on some of the figures on the ground.

She started to recite bizarre verses like in a trance. When flipping the face, the light of the moon allowed me to see her. I was very surprised when I recognized Duprina's face. Oh Duprina! What a strange spell are you doing? What poor innocent victim will be the recipient of such exalted rite? She was manipulating objects, utensils and herbs; I only could watch her from a distance and wait until she finished in order to getting out of my hiding place and leaving quickly to the house.

The fog was dense as the minutes passed. The wet land on which I was seated made me cold and this intense cold was shivering my teeth. My coat was insufficient to keep the heat of my body, so to warm my hands I breathed upon them with the sublime task of heating my limbs. I rubbed my hands in an effort to retain the warmth.

A litter of amorphous clouds moved through the vastness of the sky and hid for a moment the glow of the moon and the stars, leaving the place in total and complete darkness. In that finite moment of profound darkness, of infinitesimal blackness, a cold hand clung to my ankle. The terror became a cry; a dry, sharp cry born from the entrails of my fear, which huddled in my solar plexus, then came out expressing that primitive and instinctive fear that obliges us to undertake the biggest feats born more from improvisation than understanding. The same fear that has been acting for our survival since the prehistoric times to the present day was the one that made me stand up and ran, in a single and sudden movement, towards the cemetery tombs trying to get rid of the knot of the threatening hand. I jumped tombstones, I jumped angels, I jumped crosses and cherubim, and I jumped everything which rose as threatening obstacles in my path. My feet

had never been faster, my body had never been more agile and lightweight. As a ray I left behind tombs, branches, trees, flowers; to my eyes everything was fuzzy like a heterogeneous diffuse mass. Whatever had seized me ran behind me.

I could feel it; I could listen to it, I felt the weight of his treads after mine, felt the weight of his agitated breath puffing behind my back. I could not flip, only had time to flee. And I ran so fast that I did not know for how long and when my forces, mitigated by the exhausting effort to flee, seemed to abandon me, a leafy tree, that was guarding a small marble tomb, planted on one side of the road with its roots protruding as fingers scratching the ground, made my weakened legs bend and fall against the dusty and weary way. I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable with a sigh.

A few seconds later I felt that something fell to my side and with breathy voice said:

-Wow! You do run! -Said the Genie trying to regain his composure. I recognized his voice so turning my head I began to reproach his reprehensible action:

-Batam! What are you doing here? Are you crazy? Why did you scare me so much? I can hardly breathe! -I said at the edge of a nerve and paranoia attack, trying to control the shaking of my hands, my voice and my body.

The Genie looked at me. He did not understand what was going on.

-But who understands you? You begged me to come and accompany you. And now that I appear, that is the way to welcome me?

The Genie comment was quite right and I had to recognize that he had required a strong willpower to be present at the cemetery. However, I should make him understand that his form to approach me was not the best way to honor my request.

-I am very grateful that you're here but please think. It is midnight, I am alone in a cemetery, everything is dark and gloomy, and the best way you found to let me know of your presence was grabbing my ankle? Couldn't you just whisper any word or even whistling? -I said calmer sitting on the branch that made me fall, removing a lot of dust, which was covering my clothes- You told me that you did not come here for anything in the world. How was I going to know that the hand seizing my ankle was yours?

-I know, I know... I came compelled by my guilt, not by choice. I took a valerian tea to quell my nerves and came running to help you as we are friends; but if I had known that you was going to run like that I had better taken a Red-Bull instead of a tea. By the way, since you already have the cemetery land, we'd better leave. This place gives me chills.

-Did you see a Duprina? Do you think she saw us?

Batam shook his head.

-Everything was dark. Even if she saw us, I do not think she recognized us.

I had my doubts. A Genie with such quirky clothes was easily recognizable.

-I think she was doing a spell. Let's go to the place she was and see if she left something!

-A spell against you?

-I hadn't thought of that. It is very likely -I stated with concern.

We took a closer look at the surroundings. All was quiet, the clouds had passed and again the moon and the stars were shining in the sky. In the distance we spotted the exit gate. Certainly we had traveled a great distance and I concluded that fear is the best way of transportation. We quickly headed for the exit. There were no signs of Duprina; the place where she had been performing the spell only had traces of a white powder that already the wind was taking care to disperse.

-If I were you -declaimed Batam- I would talk to Severa about this. Sure she knows a protection spell against any coven she could sift over you.

The Genie knew very well what he was talking about. I had had sufficient opportunities to meet Duprina in The Fortaleza and realized that she was a very vengeful and dangerous rival.

-I will speak to her, Batam. I will speak at the first opportunity!

The first opportunity arose the next morning at breakfast. The Victors were not yet in the house, so breakfast was spent with Severa, Misfortune and my person, as the only people at the table. Misfortune was a quiet man. Very rarely I heard him pronouncing words, with the exception of the daily <Good morning> or <Good night>, he was satisfied with smiling and rubbing his protruding belly, unequivocal signal of the delicacies prepared by the laborious hand of Severa. I should be careful or in a very short time the lush belly would also be mine.

-Severa -I started the conversation- I think that Duprina may be throwing some kind of spell on me. I am not sure yet, maybe yes, maybe not.

Severa stopped the fork that was making the journey from her bowl to her mouth with a load of fried egg and bread and refuted:

-Camila, Is it "yes" or "not"? These digressions of yours drive me crazy.

- But I have no certainty; it is only what I sense.

The fork ended the trip and once swallowed up the egg and the bread, and after a sip of juice of grapefruit, the woman spoke:

-Very well. We will make a protection talisman. Remember me to prepare it this afternoon when the classes begin.

I smiled with satisfaction.

-In addition, you have a surprise. I got letter from your family -and pulling out an envelope of her starched apron, put it on the table and gave it to me with the tip of her index finger. As I had already finished breakfast, I took it quickly and ran up to the patio to read the content under the accomplice shadow of an orange tree.

It had been quite a while since the dictatorship of the Republic of Severa had become a thriving democracy, as if the silent vote of the ones living at the house had granted her a pardon that allowed her to govern with equality and consensus. The military discipline had softened its edges, although it still included the obligatory nature of some actions, they enjoyed the freedom of observance, in other words, we were not exempted of the action itself, but of the moment that such action should be undertaken. For example, Rule No. 2, "in relation to the hours of sleep" the dictatorship stipulated that the time to go to bed was at 9:00 p.m. With the advent of the newly released democracy we could extend this time up to 10 p.m. or 10:30 p.m. if this interval was used in any profitable activity for the body or the intellect.

Already in the orange patio, sitting on a white armchair, surrounded by flowery cushions that I settled on my back, I opened the envelope. The letter was from Beatrice. I began to read.

"Dear Camelot sister:

How I miss you! I have come to the conclusion that the only one who had the moral and intellectual courage to fight me was you. Do you remember our fights and clashes? Those fights so exciting that thickened our education and culture. So it was! Neither of us wanted to give up, and by dint of fights and confrontations, we embarked on the task of digging into bloody world history books to find and shred data and dates that sustained our most outrageous hypotheses and affirmations. And so, skirmishes and feuds, we were becoming more and more educated. What wonderful times! When your Charlemagne, blackened by the battle of Roncesvalles, fearless and powerful hero was facing my Roman Julio Cesar, bypassing the inconvenience of history that placed their births in different centuries and different cities. We, as goddesses, immortals, using the magic of conveniences, brought them alive in the twentieth century in the backyard of our house discussing the more diverse topics, from disorders by the use of artificial nails to the advantages of the use of trams on the Transylvania railways.

And what about the famous debate between Cleopatra and Evita Peron? What excitement! How passionately we defended, one in favor and the other against, the conveniences of the use of natural goat milk to moisturize the skin, always unruly, exchanging insults and insulting phrases, ending at the end of the afternoon, as dear friends, eating mangoes together walking for the winding road toward eternity.

As you can see, little Mariana is not very skilled in this art of confrontation, always agrees with everything I say and do; and even if she doesn't she cares a lot not letting me know. Salome, on the other hand, follows the same submissive technique than little Mariana, in other words, she says "Yes" to my "Yes" and

say "No" to my "No". And you know that with Ño Josefina one cannot discussed, just follow orders. For this reason, with these short lines that I am writing to you with boredom from the white desk in my room, tangled still in the warm fabrics of my pajamas, I am sending you my sadness in the form of words, so you could translate them there, in the form of feeling.

My credit card continues adding joy to my life and to my closet that is full because there is no room to keep more blouses, skirts, pants and shoes, but, much to my regret, I have begun to notice that after so much buying, the thrill of acquiring things seemed to be losing a bit of its essence. Ño Josefina says that having an army of objects, which do not benefit anyone, is a sin and that the feeling that I am experiencing is a consequence of doing nothing useful for others. And that, Camila, is a big lie! Those "things" did benefit someone. They benefit me! If you saw how elegant I looked when using the turquoise taffeta dress, with the pick of pink organza, matching my shoes and brand bag, you would know exactly what I'm talking about. Ño Josefina is willing that I dispose of some things for charity, but frankly I do not think that poor people would appreciate, as I do, the charms of the taffeta dress with my brand shoes. That would be an injustice! A waste of such a delicate fabric in someone who would not know how to use it!

But, please do not think I am insensitive. Yesterday, in order to stopping Ño Josefina comments, I decided to finally let go of some clothes for charity; and in the evening I began to remove my closet in search of items for donation. But, Camila, it turns out that everything was so new and purchased so tastefully, all was so beautiful, that seeing my image reflected in the mirror adorned with the garments for charity, I realized that I could not live without them and it was very unfair Ño Josefina required me such sacrifice! No and no! So to look good with the charity and my person, I decided to keep a while longer the clothes and when the taffeta dresses were worn and lose its shine and texture, so that they look like cotton; then, Yes, I would gladly donate them quickly and without remorse. But Ño Josefina does not understand this immense love I feel for the "army of objects" as she called my dear trousseau; which for me are loving friends that as a flowered garden never get tired of proclaiming to the four winds the beauty of my ways, my elegance and my composure.

Changing the subject, so you don't think I am selfish or vain talking about me all the time, I tell you that the confrontation between Bartolomeo and Nicanor has not diminished at all. Considering that there was no way that both live together in the same house in holy peace, we decided to leave one inside our home and confined the other to the limits of the backyard. After much deliberation between Mariana, Salome and me, since Ño Josefina decided to keep out claiming that she had more interesting things to do and that if the decision were hers the two animals would be

outside, we decided that Bartolomeo, out of respect for his seniority, was the one that would remain in the house with us. Nicanor, seemed to be in agreement with the deal, because the first days he was adapted fairly well to the granted territory, but when we were getting used to this forced truce, Nicanor, making use of his elastic limbs, leaped to Salome's window and immediately sought to Bartolomeo throughout the house and found him very comfortably frolicking on the red plush which is next to the fireplace curb. He rushed towards him and again began the war. Since that day we have to be very attentive that no window or door is opened, because the cat is very skillful and fast and always takes advantage of any loophole or circumstance to slip.

Abb! But that is not all I have to tell you, little Mariana is definitely determined to turn this house into a zoo. Now we have a rabbit that is big and fat as a woodchuck, white, with the big ears that look like donkey. Still has no name, but the problem, little sister, is that the only thing it does is eat and defecate all over the garden; and it defecates with treachery, without modesty or commiseration; regardless of whether we are looking at it or not. No Josefina already put an endpoint to this illegal chain of animal adoptions, so I hope that Mariana desist once and for all this devout spirit that as Saint Francisco disciple makes her collect from the streets to whatever animal is on her way.

I hope not to be boring you with this long letter full of gibberish; but as boredom is the faithful companion of the narrative and in order to kill time, I decided to continue my idyllic narrations. Do you remember our neighbors the Sanchez? The lady with the most strident voice I've ever heard with a hilarious taste for the gray and discolored outfits whose husband likes to observe us through the fence bars in the summer evenings, thinking that we are not watching him? Well, it turns out that this odd couple has a very good-looking grandson called Joseito, Spanish diminutive of Joseph I guess, that is spending his vacation here. Poor baby! He must be a lot bored living with such persons. However, he hides it well, since in the afternoons I can see him in the company of the old man walking and playing cards at the porch of the house. Despite his name, little distinguished, I am interested in knowing him, so I also go to our porch in the company of a book that never read but put it on my lap adopting an ethereal and intellectual look, as if I was meditating a bit about the philosophical aspects of life. I sit in the rocking chair staring vacantly at such an angle that the boy could see me easily. But so far, although he looks at me insistently, has not approached. Is shyness which mutes his words and preventing him to greet me? Or worse, would his grandparents have predisposed him against me? If the intelligentsia is not reason enough to tempt him to shorten the distance between us, I have to resort to the charms of the Chanel No. 5. Or as a last resort to some love potion prepared by you! In the end! I will keep you informed of the development of the matter.

And write, lazy girl!

With love

Beatrice

"Note: Mariana and Salome send you their greetings and they don't write because are lazy too"

7

PRACTICES

Finally the much-anticipated day of ceremonial magic practices came. I had kept myself away from The Fortaleza since Duprina never attended classes. But Sashui, enthusiastic and very dear friend, had often visited me to keep me informed of the lessons they were dictating during my absence and also told me that at the beginning of the coming week the group classes would start, reason why I could join these classes regularly without Duprina's presence. However, Severa had become an ally very loyal and protective; so I decided to use time at home by acquiring all the knowledge necessary to become a good witch.

That afternoon, armed with the list of materials that so much work, sweat and lies, had cost me, I went to our classroom at the end of the house, went down the stairs, jumping stairs two by two. Severa had already arrived and on the table had placed a copper cauldron very potbelly, which was sitting on a metal frame that contained some slats of wood and kindling. A collection of bottles, of different sizes and colors containing sparkling, watery and transparent substances, were piled around the table. She wore her black robe and the classic shaped-cone hat that all respectable sorceresses use. She pointed out a chair where a similar robe lay and with signs gave me indications to put it on. The fabric was very black and very bright, as the color of a moonless night, seemed to have proper motion as the soft waters of a calm sea.

My excitement by dressing for the first time my magical outfit was indescribable. My magic book "The Keys of the Kingdom" was also on the table. At the moment I dressed the tunic and the hat, the Book unleashed the tab in the form of belt that had tied its pages and, in a go fast, as if a gale was moving them, landed on page 73.

Both approached, very intrigued to the Book that showed us a very strange spell. Severa began to read it by placing her index finger on the first word and, as she was reciting out aloud the incantation, slipped her finger for each line.

-It seems that after all we will have to change plans. The Book is sending

us a message. This spell is about protection. Surely your suspicions about Duprina are true. How did you get with the boyfriend of a black witch?

- But I didn't! -I screamed with agitated voice.

At that time, the crystal ball that was placed in one of the cedar cabinets began to jingle. We left the Book inspection and approached to the ball, which showed us through the thin crystals a wooded landscape that, in a matter of seconds, started to become dark almost instantly with amorphous and horrific clouds. Then the clink was rising in intensity, so that the ball jumped the furniture crashing against the ground, fortunately without breaking, and rolling stood behind one of the leather chairs that abounded in the living room.

Suddenly, a stormy lightning burst outside and made the door to be opened wide by the strong blizzard that began to form. A strong wind down the stairs and pulled out of the cabinet the tarot cards that Severa kept in a pine box wrapped in red silk cloth, spreading them all over the floor. All were upside down, with the exception of two: "The devil" and "Death".

I looked at them with terror and let out a cry:

-I am not a graduated witch but even I realized that this was not good.

Severa looked at the scene with astonishment.

-I have never seen supernatural manifestations so compelling and unique, at least not at the same time. You must be very careful. We have to find out which spell was the one used by Duprina. Are you sure she is responsible for these manifestations? Are you sure that she is the culprit? Is it possible that you have other enemies?

-Don't think so! I saw her with my own eyes at the cemetery. I am sure that she was doing a spell against me. She is a very vindictive girl; I could see it in her eyes. I know that she will do everything possible to harm me and move me away from Leonardo and Eisenbaum.

-From what I see, she wants more than that! She wants to make you disappear from the face of the Earth! Let's go! Let's work on this protection spell! But be warned that this is only temporary; we need to find out what is the spell that she is using in order to prepare the spell that corresponds.

Immediately I took the materials brought to see if any of them could be used for the new spell that we were going to make. Severa immediately put her attention to the small frog that remained stationary in the small container, attached to the lid with its four legs.

- And what is doing a frog here?

-It is part of the materials you requested. Don't you remember?

-I do not order a full frog and much less a live one. I only asked for the legs. You should go to the magic shop and get all the materials there. They sell all the things a witch may need, and even, thanks to advances in chemistry, there are synthetic elements that function as well as the organic. In these modern times we don't have to go around the world killing

innocent beings.

How was I going to know that there was a magic shop? And if there was one, what kind of currency I should use to pay? During my stay in Eisenbaum I had never seen anyone conduct a commercial transaction. Severa got me out of doubt immediately informing me that the mean used was barter and that the very rich ones paid with gold. When I was about to protest denigrating of such a system and to praise the benefits of the paper currency of the capitalism, then, I remembered Leonardo's wise words enacted upon my arrival, advising me on the respect for traditions and the inhabitants of the village. So the unhealthy criticism was left frozen in my throat without the opportunity to be expressed, lost in these inconveniences of the feudal system. At the time I thought in Beatrice and how she would feel to be a guest in this medieval world, what would my sister do without their "Silver" or money to spend? Would she adapt to this barter system? Certainly, for her, it would be the end of the world. However, Mariana would be happy, surrounded by the extensive fauna that she loves so much; she would surely find many opportunities to realize her dream as a partner of Saint Francisco. So much more when in these lands, animals are endowed with speech and enjoy a free trade and two-way communication with humans. Probably she would spend hours touring the countryside conversing with any specimen of the animal kingdom.

I looked at the frog which at the same time looked at me, with supplicant eyes. The immense length of its four legs was deployed. I have to admit that part of me felt relieved not having to remove him his legs, I had not slept much thinking about the sad sacrifice of the frog for the sake of witchcraft. Without further ado, I took the helpless creature and climbing the stairs I shed it in the orange patio; but after that I had my regrets, considering the storm which had unleashed on the outskirts and portentous rays and sparks that gave light to the night face; but at the end I was happy thinking that the frog would not be obstructed for these small inconveniences; taking into account that had saved his life and still retained all of his limbs.

Back at the loft, Severa had already ignited the cauldron and started the preparations for the master protection spell class. She began pouring water, universal amalgam that reduces to brew all the elements that are placed in it; Then some dried herbs threadbare (later I knew it was "peppermint") and from a blue bottle she added a few drops of castor oil; from a stalk of Aloe tore off four crystals and also threw them to the stew along with a thin branch of cinnamon. Then, the turn came for a juicy orange that cut in four halves were also thrown into the brew when the steams began to distill an herbal aroma. Severa, beating and beating the mixture with fervor used a huge wooden spoon, with a force that I had seen her only when she kneaded her chunky oatmeal bread.

The concoction was turning thick, watery and the yellow coloring

became gray, it was at that moment when I began to worry about how I would swallow that potion, taking into account its unpleasant appearance its taste should be really horrible. The concern became anguish when after the infusion, Severa took, with the wooden ladle, a substantial portion of the concoction and poured it with difficulty into a bowl; and I say with difficulty because the potion was so thick that it remained attached to the spoon refusing to let go.

-Drink it! -She said.

I looked at the blackish mass attached to the walls of the container.

-I do not think I could!

-You have to do it -replied Severa angrily.

-Don't want to! Do not make me drink it, please!

I looked at the bowl once more. The potion was a black and rubbery substance which lay at the bottom and released small bubbles like an erupting volcano.

-If you want to be protected, take it! -She cried.

I grabbed the bowl with rage and took it to my lips sipping a good part of the potion. For a moment, I thought that I would stifle; the thick concoction was left in my mouth and whatever efforts I made to swallow it didn't move one iota from my oral cavity. With wrinkled face and hand over my lips, I walked around the room in search of water to drink. I got a glass. Severa wanted to prevent me from this maneuver but I got rid of her arm and took a crop of the precious liquid. Much to my regret, I must confess that this was a very bad idea since the water in contact with the brew inside my mouth, acquired a taste even more bitter than it had initially, a ruin taste, that came down to my inmost being, made me shed tears from my eyes and silenced me completely. After a few minutes which turned out to be eternal, I could finally talk and breathe.

- But what a horrible thing! What is it that you gave me?

-Do not behave as a little baby! You were present and saw all the ingredients that I used. Potions and concoctions are an art in the witchcraft world, so if you want to be a witch you'd better get accustomed to their flavors and leave out those baby tantrums.

- But it did taste really horrible! Have you ever tried it? -I said passing the forearm by my lips in an effort to let go of the unpleasant taste -It is my opinion that some grams of sugar would make it very well to this kind of potions; moreover, they would gain much popularity and prestige. What's wrong with the vanilla, the ice cream or chocolate flavors? Or is it that in magic, everything has to be bitter, watery and black?

I paused, and then continued:

-Why? I considered witchcraft will do very well adopting some precepts of the known art of kitchen, with its harmonious, healthy and colorful ingredients that would make the magical preparations taste different. If all potions taste so bad like this that I just took, then, from this moment on, I

would call myself the forerunner of the "culinary sorcery", and in this new science that I will found, with the help of God, I will use sweetened fruits, such as strawberries, peaches or pears; and I assure you that sugar will be the compulsory and indispensable ingredient of all my preparations; tons and tons of sugar; tons and tons of this sandy white delicacy which is sugar, and to disguise the odors, tons and tons of scents or edible flowers. None of my enchanted ones will have to go through the painful trance of having to swallow such as gruesome paste and they will be happy to savor my potions with the same ardor and perseverance with which one sucks a creamy ice cream with chocolate syrup. Don't you think?

Severa looked at me with that intensive look she I used to have when I met her at the time of the dictatorship: wrinkled brow, dark look and that morbid grimace on her lips. Ah! Because Severa, although had slightly modulated the reaches of her dictatorship; on special occasions in which she wanted to test the validity of her arguments, she forgot the newly coming democracy, and returned to the degrading of her old regime. So it was from the altar of her Republic that she broke into screams:

- But what amount of follies you said, Camila! Do you think it is very nice what you just said? Witchcraft has centuries of existence and its potions, spells and witches have subsisted without your intervention; but if you are so worried about the flavors, scents and ingredients, then, become a cooker instead of a sorceress! -This was the only answer I got when she got out of the basement giving a slammed door.

I was alone in the room, observing how the seed of my avant-garde culinary project was wandering in the realm of ideas without ever reaching the kingdom of realities. Once more, it was exposed the lack of sense of humor of the inhabitants of Eisenbaum.

The next morning I woke up early, hoping that Severa's bad mood explosion had largely diminished. I also had the firm intention to go to The Fortaleza and locate Batam-Al-Bur and convince him to help me entering Duprina's room. I had to find the gray bag used in the cemetery and, knowing the content deciphering the spell that she had thrown upon me. But to my surprise, hovering over my magic book, that always perched on the bedside table in the shade of a kerosene lamp, because as I have already mentioned, that wonder of Thomas Alva Edison which is electric light shone by its absence in those dark places, were the book guardians, Petrarco, Cirila and Drefno: those beings from the magic world that accompanied me in my odyssey in Saint Andre, when the ring curse was hanging over my head.

-What a joy! -I said sitting on a bank located near the bed and greeting them with enthusiasm.

-It was a long time since I had not seen you.

The hadith Cirila laughed with a hoarse and structured giggle, flying all over the room. The elf and gnome sat down beside me.

-It is a joy and a pleasure for us to also seeing you! -Added the elf Drefno- we only appear when the book has something to do and now it has something to do. While the book is at rest, we have the freedom to walk around the world to our liking. I am very happy that you have decided to travel the paths of magic. After your unpleasant experience in Saint Andre I thought you would be apart from spells and incantations.

-Nonsense! -added Petrarco who had always been very scathing with his language and reviews- we all know that she was not pursuing magic but a "magician".

By very gnome he was his words seemed very inappropriate and out of place, but at the moment I was going to express my annoyance with a loud voice, it was the elf who hit him lightly on the head as a sign of rebuke.

-Don't be disrespectful with the lady!

Petrarco laughed and grumbling replied:

-Gnomes do not tell lies. It is against the rules.

-Rules? What rules?

-The rules of Gnomes.

-There is not such a thing! -replied Drefno.

-Yes, there is!

-No, there is not!

-Yes, there is!

-No!

Cirila, as always, generous soul and mediator, as little Mariana in the warfare between Beatrice and I, ran to stand between them until the matter was out of control.

-As you can see -She said to me- the characters have not changed at all. Everything stays the same!

After a long time of conversation and seeing it was going to be six and a half, I excuse myself telling them that it was time for breakfast and I should leave, but not before extending an invitation to them to accompany me and take advantage of the occasion to introduce them to Severa; but they refused saying that they would remain with the book and that certainly they do it in any other occasion.

Then I walked into the dining room where everyone had already gathered. Democracy prevailed again in the Republic of Severa; I took my place and immediately the woman gave me a good serving of bread with scrambled eggs, bacon and milk. After a trivial conversation in which the Victors told me that they had girlfriends and hoped to introduce me to them at a small meeting that would take place that night, I apologized announcing that I would be at The Fortaleza to reach Batam and ask for his assistance in this matter of the spell. All of them agreed warning me to take care and sending their greetings to Batam.

When I went to the street the freshness morning greeted me with blushing, I took a breath of air and I began the long walk. The main street

was one block from there. While I was walking, I entertained seeing the small houses standing on either side with their windows adorned with beautiful chiffon curtains and the cedar doors open leaving exposed plenty of familiar scenes. So open, the windows were the eyes of the houses that followed my walking, slow and leisurely, along the paved path. Arriving at the corner my view was extended to see the main road in more detail. Little attention I was being paying until then. It was a houses amalgam, very well built, flora, fauna and people of every gender and color, walking up down and coexisting in perfect harmony with the environment. Opposite to the library, a group of elegant horses was stationed frolicking near a water fountain made of dark wood stakes. Just as I passed in front of them, I heard a loud voice saying:

-Look! That is the pretentious girl walking over there!!

Curiosity made me turn my head and realized that the pretentious girl that was walking over there was me, to my surprise. And the words had been spoken by “Well”, that unfriendly mare that transported me to town.

-Wow! –I responded to the compliment- Could it be that you do not know to forget? How are you walking the paths of life with that attitude so bellicose? That does not seem a thing of horses!

-But how silly you are! You can't differentiate a mare from a horse. For your information, I am a Mare...

Meanwhile, “Bad” who was also in the group frolicking in the same drinking and deploying the same bad attitude, began to tell his colleagues what had happened during the trip from Borloux to Eisenbaum: enumerating every detail about my behavior so exaggerated and embellished them with so much derogatory adjectives, that, of course, in seconds the whole regiment was against me.

-What you do to one of us, you it for all -said a mestizo colt that threatened to pounce on me and was neighing as if someone were embedding his horseshoes in the legs.

Very carefully I put myself on the sidewalk, away from the pack of horses that threatened my physical integrity. I enrolled my defense; I was not going to let a group of equine bums to intimidate me that way.

-I did nothing! The only thing I wanted in Borloux was to get a type of transport more decent than the back of an animal.

But my answer, far from calming the tempers, had the opposite effect: exalted even more their vigor.

-What a sassy girl! She says that we are not decent enough for her. Who believes she is, Queen Mary-Antoinette? -Said “Bad” in turn avoiding my eyes- if she continues with her attacks, she may end up like her: despised and headless.

-That is not what I meant! I had never mounted a horse; it was natural that I wanted to continue the journey in a vehicle.

Then the group formed a bustle of protests and neighing.

- But what ignorance! In Eisenbaum we do not have transportation that pollutes our spaces. In addition to sassy, she is ignorant.

-But I didn't know it at the time! -I replied to the edge of impotence.

Horses! Mares! Colts! Foals! All against me engaged in a series of accusations that the equine kingdom as a whole was putting on my shoulders and they would have continued that way if not by the timely appearance of Leonardo in the mess. It seemed that my beloved Leonardo was in the library since very early hours in search of some books for The Fortaleza's trainees, and in this laudable work he was when, alerted by the noise of the street, approached the window and watched the singular scene with my person as main protagonist.

I have to say that with the presence of the magician, the equestrian manifestation against me diminished notably the intensity of the dispute. Hypocritical horses! Disagreeable animals! Evil and intolerant mares! That in view of the authority they became as meek as lambs and as sweet as pigeons.

Leonardo's presence made me forget the ugly incident with the horses. His indigo eyes subtracted from me all the hardship and left me lying in a tranquility lap.

-Are you still fighting with the horses? Why every time I find you in the company of them you are in the middle of a brawl? -Asked in fun - they are loyal and noble beings, you should be more patient.

Ah! <I thought for myself >with you they surely behave the same as churches pigeons, but, with me, unleashed their forked tongues and behave like evil stepmothers. I defended:

-Of course not! They began the fight first!

The horses turned back exposing their long fanning tails; clearly meaning the end of the discussion; so I terminated the encounter as well to talk with the magician, which was much more fun than fighting with a bunch of horses.

-I am on my way to The Fortaleza to meet Batam-Al-Bur. I knew he was invited by Americus to spend his vacation in Eisenbaum. It was a nice gesture on his part. Nobody deserves more a vacation than Batam. He had commented how good he is enjoying the stay here.

The magician nodded with a movement of his head showing he was very pleased by the comment. While conversing with me, he placed the books inside a leather bag and tightened it to the saddle of one of the horses and said:

-I already finished my tasks in town and am going back to The Fortaleza too. We can walk together if you wish and talk -while he was saying this loosed the horse reins and began the ride with the horse behind us following our steps.

I walked right to his side waiting that my heart beatings sounded lower than my words. He continued chatting how much he enjoyed walking by

the town streets and regretted the little time he dedicated to his hobby.

-¿How are you getting along with your classes?

I pondered my answer. I knew Duprina was no longer his girlfriend; did not know neither the causes of the breaking-up nor the feelings of Leonardo towards her. However, I did not want to let Leonardo know my real opinion on her. There are occasions in which the power of a cleavage is stronger than the power of reason. I would have liked to answered him *<Duprina is a ruin, harpy, ungainly, prehistoric sorceress who has taught me nothing about magic since the time I arrived here>* But with these words the only thing I would get was to set an evidence of a rivalry that I preferred to keep in private.

-It's all right! -I answered- I have learnt a lot and Severa has helped me also. The group classes will begin next week and am anxious to attend. By the way, have you heard from Americus? Since my arrival I had wanted the opportunity to meet him; and it is a pity I did not have the chance because I want his advice on a very important matter.

We left town behind and began the walking on the acute path which led to The Fortaleza. It was a long but not very pronounced slope that as we walked let us see the vastness of the immense sea circling the region. Marine winds arrived to my face with their indelible scents that sprinkled sea drops on it. The noise of the waves came far as sirens whispers. The path was broad, and once in a while a cart driven by villagers surprised us. When this happened, Leonardo stopped to pay his respects and disrupted our affable conversation. During those moments, I kept silent and my telltale face lit up with the sudden fascination that produced the magician in me: his manners, the soft tone of his voice, the gallantry of his forms, and the fineness of his robe (which Beatrice would have nothing to refute). But one feature that highlights in Leonardo was, without a doubt, his eyes; I would never get tired of repeating it, those two indigo constellations sipped the whole blood from the veins of everyone who dared to look at them.

At that point I started to remember the stolen kiss at Saint Andre; and I marveled then on my boldness. Not having mediated the circumstance of that death sentence hanging like the Damocles sword over my head that kiss would have never left my lips, and the magician and I had not discovered their glare gloss.

After saying goodbye to the last of the peasants, we continued the march.

-Advice? If I can help you, I am available -said Leonardo's voice kindly.

I thought with horror that no way I could unravel before his eyes the accomplice secret I shared with Severa and Batam-Al-Bur. Those had been very strict in their opinions, naming me with denigrating adjectives such as "foolish" and "insane"; but, in the eyes of the wizard, I should preserve both my reputation and my behavior, so I decided not to report the failures of my character.

-It is nothing. What I want to ask -I answered- is about something we talked at the lobby of the Grand Prince Hotel, in Saint Andre, the day you left without saying goodbye; without even giving me the opportunity to thank you. Beatrice and Mariana had wanted to say goodbye also. Why did you leave that way?

The question came out without my thinking. The questions of the heart rarely dare to go along the soft screen of consciousness; instead they take a shortcut through the subconscious to the mouth translated into words, without having passed, previously, by the mind analysis.

The wizard looked at me surprised, and then he said:

-I did not mean to offend you. I had to take care of a matter of the utmost importance that required my presence; I told you on that occasion that I did not know why Zoroastro was behind you. He never does the work of his demons, but that time he was personally going after you. I wanted to know why.

- And did you find out why?

-No! I am still searching. Zoroastro will never give up. You must be very careful. One of the reasons why you have been accepted as an apprentice if because you should learn how to defend yourself. But, you're right. I worked with very little gentleness -he said laughing- and knowing your great generosity and sense of human weaknesses, I suppose that at this point I should now be forgiven.

Once more the words packed in my mind and, as if they had a life of its own, tight and rebels threatened to come out of my mouth, with the vehemence of a girlfriend. Ah! But my pride is stronger than my impulsiveness and quickly imposed control on the situation, throwing my words into the corner of the unsaid things; so I could respond without showing effusivity:

-Of course you are forgiven! I just hope that I do not have to repeat the same scene again. And when you know something of Zoroastro, please let me know. The last thing I want is to live with the demons of the Valley of Shadows.

Much to my regret, we were almost reaching the gates of The Fortaleza and the guards who were guarding the gate began to open to let us pass. We walked one stretch more until we arrived at the building. Leonardo then informed me that he should go to the stables to deliver the horse.

-Please wait for me to deliver the books and take you to where Batam is located.

I nodded with a slight move. While he unleashed the leather pouch where the books were; he began taking one by one out and stacked them on my forearm. Looking at the books, I remembered the loving verses sent by my secret lover and wanted to clarify my doubts about the identity of the writer, so I ventured to ask:

-Are any of these books on verses or poetry?

He looked at me strangely; nothing betrayed irony or awareness of the completeness in my question.

-Poetry? Not at all! They are magic texts for learners.

- But you have a doctorate in Art History! I thought you would be involved in romantic literature.

-I really don't have time for that! Magic absorbed all my time. Perhaps someday when I retire I will be able to dedicate my time to literature, as you say. However, for now, with the threat of a confrontation between wizards, both Americus and I are focused on these issues so they do not pass to a major concern.

I was a little disappointed, really; Leonardo had indicated me, in short and concise words, that he was not the author of the beautiful verses I was receiving at regular intervals. In the depths of my thoughts I have been thinking that the magician was the creator of such sensitive verses and that he was my secret admirer. To keep my thoughts out of disenchantment, I asked:

-Magicians clash?

-Yes! That is the reason why you've hardly seen Americus. He has been coming and going from The Ciudadela to The Fortaleza and vice versa. There is a group of black magicians who have been causing a stir in some settlements. There are certain rules to be followed by a magician. Magic is a very serious matter. Power always carries a great burden of responsibility that must and should be controlled. The black mages want to topple the established order of things; want to centralize everything through a central Government that would be headed, of course, by one of them. I am sure that Zoroastro is behind all this.

-I am surprised. I thought the magical world did not see those conflicts that are seen in the world of men.

-You are wrong! "How is up, it is down" says an old Hermetic axiom; or in other words "How it is there, it is here". The dark world has been inserting black magic books and distributing them in the world of men, who use them regardless of their power. A power thus unleashed leads to destruction. Black mages have been infiltrating people on the most prestigious positions of Governments of the most powerful nations. We have been doing the same to offset the damage a little. My job is to track the evil books and take them out of circulation. In the cellars of The Fortaleza there is an arsenal of books from all time. We do not destroy them because we have to study them thoroughly in order to know how to deal with evil. Knowledge is power.

Leonardo continued talking about black mages and I shudder to know the painful details of the actions that these beings are capable of. After a while, the wizard was absent with the horse to lead it to the stable and returned a few minutes later; then we went to deliver the books at the library and after that, he accompanied me to Batam's room. A good time

we were knocking at the door but the Genie did not open it. After long minutes, finally a drowsy Batam appeared before our eyes scrubbing his face.

-I hope I haven't awakened you -I said trying to be polite.

The sleepy Genie looked at us with a tired face and replied:

-To tell the truth you do, but it was already time to wake up anyway.

The magician said goodbye and I entered the room. It was a cozy room, clarity came in spurts. The blankets were cluttered on the bed, indicating that its occupant had recently abandoned it.

-In a minute I'm with you -said the Genie getting lost behind the bathroom door to reappear properly grooming and bathed some minutes later. Because if something must be said about Batam, is that he is extremely clean. In addition to always being very clean, brushed and perfumed, Batam was always very well dressed and groomed. Clearly, not everyone understood his colorful selection of clothes taken from the globetrotting 'Eastern' culture and the range of secondary colors from the rainbow, neither his desire to enjoy the delights of soap and water. And it is that the Genie was able to swim up to more than three times daily; and that is a lot of water and a lot of soap for just one body. Many times he had been innocent victim of derision and laughter due to this circumstance, as that of Beatrice, one afternoon in which the tedium and boredom put house in our backyard in The Borrascosa, our troubled mansion in Saint Andre. She, making use of her usual sarcasm, threatened to change the name of Batam-Al-Bur to Batam-The-Cleanest; and for a few weeks so he was named. But Batam which was impervious to the taunts and felt no hatred for anyone, ever, had no calluses on his heart, rising meanness in his spirit, always as good Samaritan in adverse cases, never got angry or rebuked my sister Beatrice in no time; so in the long run she gave up the use of the peculiar nickname. I, for my part, never criticized the colorful aspects, nor of his soul or of his clothes; respecting his right to wear the attire that he better want.

While he was washing I approached the window to admire the beautiful view and was amused by the amount of people going and coming to The Fortaleza. They came and went by foot, by carts and or by horses; a great activity was hiding behind those walls resembling to their homologous in China.

-It was a real surprise to have you here, Camila -said Batam- surely you are in need of something and that is why you come to me; because if it were not so, you would not be here.

Apparently, Batam knew how to read, like Leonardo, the faces and intentions of people. This was an art which I was very keen to learn as I considered it essential to deal with the daily life events.

-There is something very important in what I need your help -so I announced it. Then I told him the strange events of the night before. The

Genie listened carefully and with each sentence of my story, further opened the orbits of his eyes indicating with this gesture his astonishment, terror and fright.

-You must help me entering Duprina's room. It is imperative that I have the gray bag where she hides the elements of the spell used on me.

The young man looked at me with a fright face, dropped the breast and tightened his lips. He acted as if I had invited him to join me invading a circus lion cage.

-Are you crazy? I will not go there! You don't even know if Duprina's spell was against you. Maybe it was for someone else and you are with these machinations and paranoia, thinking that the matter is with you. Why is it that you always get in that kind of trouble? And, incidentally, you always get me into troubles!

Ah! But I would not accept a refusal. So loaded with all the tricks that the female gender usually operate in this kind of situations, I started with the divine art of manipulation.

-Without you I cannot do it. You're the only unconditional friend I have. Come on! Don't be silly! Please! Do it for our friendship and all the adventures that we have been together! -then my complicit eyes in an act of showmanship of a Broadway stage, began to shine through the veil of a few tears that being born at the apex of my eyes rolled down my cheeks, jumped, to fall into the closed hand of the Genie, which was grabbed at the sill of the window. This contraption seemed to have no effect because the boy shaking his hand and wiping it on his pants refuted:

-Don't you dare to believe you are going convince me with this act. I know you, Camila, and those are crocodile tears and they have no effect on me.

Discovered in the manipulation, I resorted to persuasion.

-Batam, please, it is good for you. It has been quite a while since you don't practice your magic. Wouldn't you like to upgrade your powers? Surely in Duprina's room, you'll find important elements that can help you with this matter.

Batam looked at me and resolutely replied:

-Do not insist! Not me, beautiful lady! You are the one that always get into trouble, but I'm the one who always receives the strikes. No and no!

Much to my regret, I had to recognize that Batam had won much conviction and perseverance during these last months. He was there, in the middle of the room, resisting my best efforts of convincing him. It was then when I decided to release my last resort, a distant friend who had always held in the distance by immoral and shameless: the threat.

-If you do not want to join me I'm going to put you into the bottle and the migraine headache, sweats, ulcers, asthma complications, vascular disorders, allergies, etc., etc., etc. will return to you.

-Shut up! Ungrateful! Shut up! That just from naming them my body is

already itching all over! Ay! Ay! -He said scratching his arms strongly and leaving the area with a reddish color.

I affectionately approached him; this time, no pretenses. I gave him a big hug and had to recognize that the Genie had defeated me.

-I will not force you, Batam. I will go alone. Could you, at least, stay on the stairs and let me know if you see Duprina coming?

He nodded. In few minutes, after some considerations, we were ready to put the plan into action. I guarded the window looking for the opportunity to see Duprina leaving The Fortaleza; and when she did, at the precise moment that we saw her, we slide down the hallway and headed toward her room. Few people were crossing the area, which gave us the opportunity to reach the door without difficulty; so by turning the gleaming and gilded knob, this yielded easily and I entered into the room; and behind me, Batam. I closed the door with extreme care.

-And what are you doing here? Don't we agree that you would stay out to monitor the area? -I said in whispers.

The Genie spoke with generous sweetness:

-Yes, but I cannot leave you alone in this.

I had to reply:

- And then, why did you discuss so angrily if you were thinking to come?

Then, the Genie answered, smiling graciously:

-I don't know! Perhaps the force of habit!

All our conversation was whispered and I must confess that I was glad to have the complicity of Batam in this matter. All clandestine and illicit activities are best when you have another henchman with whom to share the blame and the possible consequences of the act itself.

The room was dark. The exterior light coming through the window barely lighted. There were some books piled haphazardly on the table. In the background a huge cabinet stood with jars and wood boxes adorned and carved; some with lyrics and some imitating figures of mythical animals. Nowhere was the grey bag. I knew it was unworthy to be rummaging among the personal belongings of another person, but, given the circumstances, being my physical integrity committed, I didn't compromise my moral and I assured to myself that this proceeding was more than justified.

-Search by that side -I told Batam, pointing out the place of the table- I'll be looking for by the cabinet.

-I don't like this idea -whispered he in turn- you'd better search at the table and would look in the cabinet.

We walked on tiptoe trying not to make any noise that could alert the guards, Duprina or anyone else circulating by the area.

I stopped a few moments making a silent room inspection, then turn instructions for Batam:

-Check out there -I said pointing out a full sheet-fed beige chair- but try

to leave everything as it is.

I approached the table. I checked some books. A bunch of old and worn, parchments, which was in the center, caught my attention. They were tied with a black suede ribbon; I unleashed them carefully and drew them on the surface. They were written in a strange language and I saw that it was black magic spells. I went back to close them and put them in place.

Batam was still reviewing the furniture and occasionally made sarcastic comments about the dirt from the site. The room gave off a strange smell due to the herbs stored in wooden boxes and vials essences. I checked the closet but there were no traces of the gray bag. The Genie was extremely nervous, and this behavior started to make me nervous too, since he constantly was making comments so we abandon the room as well as disagreement phrases with what we were doing. I looked under the bed and in addition to the dirt and a bunch of spider veins making cobwebs nets, found nothing. Already on the verge of giving up, I spotted a sofa with lots of clothes over; I walked down and took all the clothes to the ground; and there it was, under the thicket of sweaters and coats, the gray bag that looked like a tiny speck in a haystack.

I was really relieved. I took it with both hands and Batam, in turn, also approached. At the moment that I was going to open it, the sound of a latch that revolved alerted us of the presence of someone entering the room. I took as I could the batch of clothes and threw it back on the sofa, while we ran to hide. Batam had the chance to hide under the bed; for my part, I ran to the closet and Duprina opened the door of the room at the same time that I closed the door of the closet.

Duprina stood awhile in abeyance, looking all around. She seemed to perceive something strange but could not define what. She walked slowly to the table and observed the scrolls, looked out the window and closed the curtains leaving everything in total darkness. From my hiding place and I could barely see Batam under the bed, on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He was eating his nails closed eyes and sweating profusely; if he continued that way he might be discovered. The sorceress was looking for something in the cabinet, which shone with the flame of a candle; she moved bottles and opened boxes. The suspense was so dense that I couldn't breathe literally. The closet doors were half-open so Duprina movements were easily observed by me. I had been hidden for fifteen minutes but to me it seemed centuries. When she finally left, Batam, as me, left the hideout:

-Camila! I thought I was going to die! Oh, God! Oh God! You put me in some situations..

It was a matter of urgency to get out of there as soon as possible.

-It is not my fault! You were the one who was going to watch outside!

I hid the gray bag in my handbag and when we tried to open the door, realized that Duprina had closed it. It didn't take long for the Genie to

exploit:

-Oh, God! ... And now what are we going to do? -Batam broke into a cry of anguish and desolation.

The situation was extremely delicate. I tried to force the lock but it did not cede. I rushed to the window and opened it; the air stream entered. I looked at the sides: I saw an open window. We could get to the next room by jumping to one of the balconies.

-We had no choice, we had to jump -I said then.

Batam was terrified, in other words, opened his eyes excessively, expanded the fins of his nose and bleached the complexion of his face.

Certainly he didn't intend to attach to my plan.

-Not! No! In addition to claustrophobic, I am afraid of heights, I can not leave this room. Oh! No! I am afraid of heights!

I tried by all means to comfort the Genie, we had no time to lose; we should leave that room immediately, the sooner the better.

-There is a fairly broad stone sidewalk whereby we can walk. I am sure you can do it. Trust me!

Batam looked at me inconsolable.

-For trusting you I'm stuck in this mess.

Batam was giving me a great disgust. My arguments failed to topple the towering walls of his fear. The same as hunger, fear drives us to do the most reckless and unthinkable acts, but in the case of the Genie, he was paralyzed like a marble statue.

-Ok! I'll get out of here and you will be the only person staying in the room. What do you think black witches make to meddling genies? If I were you, I would do very well to get out of here by any means available -and while saying this, I lifted my leg out the window, then the other one, standing and clinging with my two hands to the rail, right outside the room.

-Come on! Batam! Please do not make me beg! -I cried.

The Genie came trembling towards me but when looking down the smallness of people circulating by the surroundings, it gave him nausea and departed.

-I tell you that I won't be able to!

I went back into the room. It would seem that everything was against me. It was not possible that Batam was doing this to me. In a few minutes Duprina would return and was going to find us.

-Okay! This is what we will do: I would tight a ribbon around your eyes so you can't see down; and you are going to follow my instructions. I go first, then you. When you're outside you will place your back to the wall and walk to the right, I will tell you the steps. When I say one, you give a step and you will rest until you hear my voice again, when I say two, you will give another step to the right, always stuck in the wall. When you reach the balcony, I will help you climb. It is the only way!

Despite the ridiculous plan, Batam accepted. So I took the scarf that he

had always swirling in the head and capped his eyes. So blinded he followed me to the window. I jumped first, and then I helped him to get out. While doing this, Batam was complaining all the time, flavoring these complaints with nouns such as "fear", 'dropping' 'death', which made me very distraught and nervous.

-Shut up! I will start to count.

The two of us were outside, backs to the wall; I began to slip.

-One –talked out loud and took a step, Batam, did the same. I kept pronouncing numbers, two... three... four... We were synchronized as if we were juggling running a strange dance of height steps.

With the clarity of the sun blinding me the vision, I could barely see the silhouette of a bird, celestial blue chest and white crest as foam that without reason, rushed directly to Batam. He, feeling the flutter, fell into despair as he did not know the cause of the noise and in an attempt to avert the evil-doer, inadvertently took out the turban and suddenly the sight returned to his eyes and when he saw himself standing on the heights with the tiny world at his feet, in a panic attack, was paralyzed.

-Batam, please move, just a little bit... six - but Batam was not moving.

-Batam! Please! Move it!

The situation became desperate when the bird far from retiring continued with its aggressive winged attack on Batam. So I took off my jacket and throw it to the Genie's head. With his vision clouded once again, I began the counting and this time Batam responded and we were able to reach the balcony of next room smoothly.

Once saved we had plenty of time to laugh. Fortunately, there was nobody in the room. The Genie returned my jacket; I took the grey pouch and ensured it within it, to check it later. At that time, I just wanted to go out of that room as soon as possible, as we did not know to whom it belonged, but in comparison with Duprina's room this one was much more orderly and clean, and so we left.

Already in Batam's room, I emptied the contents of the bag on the table. The materials seemed harmless, ah!.. But knowing the dirty tricks of my opponent, I could not trust her. It had some herbs tied with a red cord, some stones (eye of the tiger and golden calcite), a bag of the white powder that she had scattered in the cemetery and a sort of amulet square-shaped with the figure of a skull in the middle, among other things. The assembly gave off a stench, so, Batam and I had to hold our breath.

-I have no idea what this means, Batam; but thanks for joining me. I deeply appreciate your loyalty. Now, I have to leave to see Severa. She will help me to decrypt this spell.

We said goodbye and I had the unpleasant sensation that Batam felt some relief for my departure. I went running stairs.

A pleasant and unexpected surprise was out. I found Americus who was arriving at that time and was newly descending from a cart. When he saw

me, approached with affection and by greeting he gave me a hug so hard that I was lifted up into the air. What a joy was to find again my old friend, Americus! So great was my need to talk to him I lost no time in requesting audience.

He listened to me carefully, and then said:

-Can we have dinner tomorrow? -announced with that voice so good-natured that I already knew and that had given so many tips in the past. I felt at that moment as if he were my grandpa Gennaro.

Then, I recovered the courage because the time of liberation had come.

-Excellent! I'll be there! -and giving him a big kiss said goodbye and got lost on the path way home.

Upon arrival, I did not find Severa in the residence. The house was lonely, the Victors and Misfortune were supposed to be in the village. I went to my room and as I was alone, had nothing urgent to do, no one to speak or distract my attention, no occupation to undertake; before this depopulation of people, thoughts and things, I decided to write a few lines to my dear sister:

"Dear Beatrice;

Thank you for your letter! Believe it or not, it is always a pleasure to hear from you! Please tell Mariana and Salome that I am very hurt because they have not written. It was very funny the incident between Bartolomeo and Nianor, though it is not surprising as it has been known since ancient times the rivalries between dogs and cats. Send my love to Ño Josefina. I miss you so much!

Here in this land of Camelot, as you named it, many things had happened. And taking advantage of the chronology of time, I would try to respect the order of events, such as they occurred.

First of all, do you guess? It turned out that my tutor, responsible for giving me knowledge and teaching, was Duprina, that hateful woman who was Leonardo's girlfriend last year, and for some reason that I do not know, blamed me for the breakdown of her relationship with him. So at this point of the story, I would not know nothing, nothing of magic if it were not for my benevolent protector, Severa, in the shade of which I lived at her residence, and that in her younger days was also a well-known witch. If it were not for her, I would continue as Duprina left me, orphan of magic knowledge.

Now another story that I know you cannot imagine, not even in your wildest dreams: here animals speak! Although I must confess that my relationship with some members of the horse breed is not friendly at all. They hate me!... and hate me without reason. So I try to use as little as possible their services and when I require transportation, I use my two feet.

Ah! But not everything is bad in this land of Camelot... no, I have a friend, her name is Sashui, she is Asian and besides the Victors, they are the only

friends I have in Eisenbaum. You'll be wondering who the Victors are. Well, patience, my dear sister. My lessor's name Severa and her husband Misfortune, and I would ask you here, as I was asked when I heard those names for the first time, that you do not make value judgments with respect to the referral names; if you lived here, you would see that there is a large leafy incredible and picturesque names in these regions which are so abundant and prolific as the fruit of an apple tree in April. The Victors are their children, three teenager boys, so similar in their physiognomy as in their characters; and although their first names are common to all of them, the second varies, but for me, in order to avoid inconveniences of time and space, I grouped them all under a same name "Victors". They, for their part, accept this shrink of their names without problems, what has simplified much the terms of our living together in the house.

Despite all the troubles I'm going through in the land of magic, there is one in particular that mortifies me greatly. And I'm going to confess it because I do not want to carry this secret on my back; that crushes me, that haunts me, Oh! That sinks me into a sea of uncertainty and anguish. So I will shout it out loud. Because a confessed sin is a sin which loses a little the weight of its guilt; and takes us along the path of redemption. See, Beatrice, I used many lies in my application to be accepted as an apprentice witch. Uff! I said it! Don't be surprised!

In my application, riddled with lies, I dumped the nectar of my hope to become someday a prestigious sorceress. But, during all this time, I've thought about it, would I become a prestigious witch if my lies have been undermining precisely this aura of prestige and admiration that all sorceresses should have? How could I be a witch if my reputation is stained with the vice of this deception? And in these reflections I fall and sink. That is the reason of my need to confess.

On the other hand it is Leonardo. Oh, Beatrice! If you saw what a gentleman Leonardo is! If you could see his indigo eyes which do not cease to pursue me in dreams and vigils, and let me no rest or peace, nor the days and nights! Not in weeks or in months! Those enigmatic eyes that promise the delights of heaven and hell at the same time, accompany me through the activities of the day. What could I tell you of such eyes? And his voice? What melodious phrases come out of his mouth, breaded with wisdom and conviction! It even seems that a choir of angels descended to this land just to give to his voice the delicious gift of melting to every human creature that has the pleasure to hear him!

Also, I have a secret lover who writes me the most sugary verses that you can ever imagine... but, to my misfortune, despite the immense desire that sheltered my being that these verses were written by Leonardo; I must confess, my sister that is not the case. Last Friday while we talked, in a very entertaining chat, I took advantage of the opportunity to ask him, very secretly, his interest in literature and

poetry, and he confessed openly in my own face that he is not fan of literature, verses, poetry, or anything that has to do with romantic prose. But, despite my sorrow, in my imagination and my thoughts, I will be thinking that the hand that wrote me those verses is Leonardo's, and that the lady for which he wrote it is me; because in this imaginary world that unfolds inside my head, as I am the only person who writes the scripts, I've decided that Leonardo and I will be the only protagonists of this imaginary novel. Thus, in the mist of my dreams, anchored in my fantasy, Leonardo will write me forever all the poems full of sweetness and charm that my hands will receive and his kisses will be as two open doors as cocoons which finally unweil before my eyes the mysteries of love.

And returning to Duprina, I want you to know that I have strong suspicions that this Machiavellian witch is performing incantations against me, Yes! Yet I don't have evidence in hand but as secure as Tuesday is coming after Monday, I have the firm conviction that I am the recipient of her evil spells. Fortunately, thanks to Severa, I am convinced that I will get rip of them.

*I send you all a huge kiss,
With love
Camila"*

I folded the sheets carefully and introduced them in a small scented envelope. I always liked flavoring my letters with a citrus touch of orange and jasmine, the same that Severa uses in her magnificent tea. It seems to me that the letters, so wearing the perfume of the flowers, as well as the message of the words, also carry the message of the affection; thus the receiver of the letter, when opening the envelope, receives first the subtle surprise of the aroma and much further back, distinguished and fragrant, the letters of the message.

At the time that I slipped the tip of my tongue on the rubbery part of the envelope and proceeded to close it, I heard the peculiar steps of the grey leather shoes cheerfully announcing the arrival of Severa. Her shoes, humble and unpretentious, jingled continuously her presence throughout the residence and at all hours. At mornings, they stood at about six o'clock, and announcing her passage all the way from the hall to the kitchen, wearing the subtle tinkling of the beginning of the day; so I heard something like: toc-toc-toc, toc-toc-toc. After breakfast they remained in the kitchen a good time, then, the sound became continuous and powerful, like a military march, "ta-ca-tan", "ta-ca-tan", echoed the majestic steps accompanying Severa in all the tasks of the day. After a brief rest at lunchtime, they resumed their military march and then sounded like gun shots through all corners of the house, wherever the necessary daily hygiene and cleaning is required. They then returned to the kitchen, to the ritual of the dinner, and it was not until nine o'clock in the evening, when the

portentous steps, already tired for the sake of the tasks, crawling solemn up to the quiet bedding with a sound that was more like a click.

I ran to the room and found Severa lighting a small kerosene lamp. It was not twelve o'clock yet; at that time of the morning, the sun hadn't appeared by the window, but running, chasing clouds, in the very center of the blue light that sheltered the sky, and from there he made fun of us, poor mortals. The room, without the clarity of the sun, looked like an abandoned bride, dark and desolate, so the small kerosene lamps were making the work of the substitute groom and with great tenacity returning the joy and vitality to the gloomy and sad space.

When Severa saw me, approached me and made me signs to hurry up to the table and I, at the same time looked for a chair and sat down. I pulled out of my pocket the grey bag subtracted from Duprina's room. I opened it and spread the contents on the rough surface of the table. Severa and I began to inspect the items.

-This is not anything good -she said pointed out at the powder white bag with a very serious face- you know what?

I denied with a resounding nod. If I really knew what it was, I wouldn't be in need of showing the items to her. However, to keep me out from hurting sensibilities, I kept this sarcastic comment to myself, which was outlined in my mind without ever emerge by my lips.

-This is skulls bones powder -she said quietly and looking at me.

The mere mention of the skulls transported me to an unreal world in which death was the unique protagonist: that evil and treacherous villain that lurks on the edge of roads to exercise its reign of terror and doom.

-You meant skulls bones from dead people? -I asked with a slight pang in my stomach.

-That's exactly what I mean! Powders, herbs, essences and the amulet; without a doubt it is a work of black witchcraft.

After saying these words, my protector went into a kind of trance and began to speak quickly and disjointedly. It was as if someone had stolen her blackness, buried in her flesh, kidnapped her vocal cords and began to speak on her own:

-You must be extremely careful. Duprina not only wants to keep you apart from Leonardo. She wants you disappear from the face of Earth! Your book is very powerful, just like you, but you still have not noticed it. I can see that you have very strong guards, not only in this world, but in the after world, also. That is the only reason why you still walk in the world of the living. Evil cannot defeat you but it is surrounding your loved ones, and it will try to join you to his cause. In the battle that lies ahead, you will have a very important role. But beware! Evil is like a treacherous snake that rolls up and blows away even its most loyal allies. Do not rely on anyone! Zoroastro is going after you, he wants your light! Your light can be very bright or the darkest of all! That is why evil and good want it. Take care of

your steps! Beware of the road that leads to the crossroad between good and evil! Be judicious in your decisions! Decide well! Your decisions will decide the course of the battle.

I looked at Severa full of terror. What was the significance of the words coming out of her mouth? She seemed possessed and I was terrified. What decisions she spoke? And she was referring to what battle? We were not at war! I remembered the words of Leonardo about the rebellion of some magicians of The Ciudadela; and if this ended up in a war?

I shook Severa's exhausted body and after several minutes she came back but did not remember anything of what she said. I had to repeat, word by word, everything she had told me.

-Are you sure I said all that? -She asked me with a hesitant tone.

I looked at her with an astonishment face.

-Of course I'm sure! None of what you said was encouraging! Black witches! Skulls! Wars! Zoroastro! Oh! Just thinking of what you said gives a chill.

-More reason for you to be careful! -suggested with very imperative tone.

-I do not like that part of magic! -I said airy.

-All light has shade and every shade is light. Even you should know that by now.

-I know it -I said uneasy- but what is wrong in wanting just the light?

-Life is not like that! It is illogical and irrational! Life is an entanglement of light and shadow. If you are to become a witch, you should leave aside the misbehavior and the childishness. Behave, for God sake, as a witch.

- But there must be a way -I insisted with a honeyed tone.

-No, no. Shadows also live in you. Or you think you're all love and kindness? Calcutta Mother Teresa of the witches? Where, then, came all those lies of your application for witch apprentice that with so much eagerness you now insist on hiding? Where is the desire to defeat Duprina? Revenge, perhaps? We all have a dark side, even you.

I was a little bit preoccupied. There was no way to convince Severa when she barricaded behind her philosophical and moral sermons; but out of respect I inhibited my protest loudly against her predicament, on the inside, yes, I complained and complained so vehemently: *"so you, Severa, think, I have a dark side, ah?" Nice to think of the shortcomings of others, ah? Is it nice? You surrounded by the darkness of your clothes, your hair, the shadows that dwell in the shade of your eyes, whose blackness you wear with the ghostly air of a widow, you, you come to lecture me?"*

And as Severa seemed to read between the closed lines in my face my clandestine protest, then, more vigorously, she hold in her sermon and I had to listen her assertive ideological approaches for hours until, at the end, my furtive protest, already silenced by the weight of such conviction, fell

exhausted in the crate of the not pronounced words.

One thing was clear: a spell was hanging over me! Once again! However, I didn't feel bewitched. How does it feel to be bewitched? I didn't have the slightest idea. I was not feeling anything abnormal: not taller or shorter, not skinnier or fatter...

- Neither more foolish? -completed Severa.

I immediately started. How could she know what I was thinking?

-Do you read my thoughts?

-Sometimes, Yes!

- But you never told me...

-What for? To deprive me of the exciting show to delve into the depths of your mind?—She said funnily - but don't worry, it is not all the time.

Her answer did not satisfy me.

-And there is something that prevents people to read my thoughts. I do not like going out there, on the roads of life, as an open book that everyone can read.

Severa meditated her response, then said:

-Oh, Of course! Why do you think that wizards and witches use those long, conical, and black hats? It is precisely to maintain hidden thoughts!

-Help me God!, every day I learn something new. Remember me to buy several in the store.

We agreed that the subject of the spell should be consulted with Americus and take advantage of the opportunity to make a “mea culpa” confession and also obtain his recommendations on this delicate matter.

Back to my room I found that the book guardians had already left; so with great tranquility and parsimony I planted myself in front of my closet and opened the doors wide with absolute resolution, to select a garment that made me seem humble and repentant in the eyes of Americus. It is not easy to confess the faults of character when they come from our own harvest, in other words, our own fruit garden, i.e., children of our own belly. Take for example, the lie, in order to illustrate my case; I, being the physical and intellectual author of the swarm that eventually was the promulgation of my lie; from my point of view this fault had a peculiar, very small, tiny and insignificant nature. And aside from the ethical and moral considerations, my fault, so tiny in comparison with other harvested by other specimens of the human race, did not seek hurt anyone, but benefiting me. No one was damaged, no one was injured; and if it wasn't for Duprina, everything would have followed in holy peace in the kingdom of the lie.

A white linen shirt and a black skirt that covered to my knees was my selection for dinner; I imprisoned all my hair into a high ponytail and wore black Suede booties, collegial type; all very angelic and humble. The image of me on the mirror was like a student who had recently gotten out of a Catholic convent, after five years of cloister: just what I needed for my

contrition act.

When I was leaving, Severa gave me the look, frowning but did not say anything, Victor Rafael volunteered to take me by cart to The Fortaleza. I accepted the offer gladly, since I did not want to be at the dinner with my moccasins covered with dust product of the long walk down.

It was seven when I was entering the main hall of the building and the guards were beginning to turn on the lantern of the lateral and central courtyards. It was a beautiful flashing light; they looked like frozen stars in a small prison of iron wrought, twisted and vibrant. From the staircase Batam-Al-Bur came down and greeted me with a movement of his hand, then approached:

-What is that costume? -He asked bluntly down my body with his eyes in mock. Because I have to confess, that Batam, as well as neat, was also too sincere.

-It is not a disguise! -I answered in aerated form- I came to dinner with Americus and I have very important matters to discuss with him.

He just seemed to hear me and in a way that showed that he did not agree with my costume, continued:

-Ah! You are going to confess that little matter at last? And you think that this dress will convince Americus, Lord of Magicians, of your innocence and repentance? You look like a nun in holiday!

I looked at him with a helplessness face and also started to have doubts in relation to my outfit. I felt it was a bit exaggerated but at that point there was no remedy, I had to move on. I did not want endorse his sarcastic comments neither. Such action would have meant that I was wrong, something that was very against my life philosophy or my way of behavior.

-I do not see why you think my cloth is an exaggeration. I believe that a dress should reflect the emotional state of the person carrying it; and this cloth reflects exactly the degree of repentance I feel.

-Repentance or boredom? -Batam erupted into an audible laugh that made people who were passing and the guards turned in our direction. With dissimulation, took him by the arm and walked towards the place of dinner, whispering between teeth that he should control his impetus and his laughter.

-This meeting is very important for me. You should show some respect instead of taunting. I'm really nervous.

I had reviewed thousands of times in my imagination the way that I would communicate to Americus the event details: Would I do it slowly or would release the truth all of a sudden? What was the best way to confess a fault? Reflecting I concluded that the best way was to hurry the bitter chalice and do it as soon as possible, even before swallowing the first bite. Who would enjoy a dinner if one has stuck the solid rock of a hoax in the throat? Certainly I could not; I will take care of the deception first and of the food later! Yes! So I will enjoy, at the same time, of the delicacies of

forgiveness and the culinary delights; in other words, and as the saying said: to kill two birds with a same shot! Ah! I was marveled to my good judgment and intelligence and congratulated myself of such a rightful decision. But as I was getting closer to the table and watched Americus to get up to meet me, my determination was dwindling at a rate inversely proportional to the distance, until it became tiny, tiny and infinitesimal. So tiny that I could not find it on my conscience, it was drained by the rails of my cowardice. Batam-Al-Bur had promised me to escort to the table and once there leave alone so I had the opportunity of confession.

The dim light of the place combined perfectly with the pearlescent ochre shades of the sunset that protruded through the window of the local. The dying sun gave off a slight pinkish lines beginning to merge with the grey cloak of the night that soon would dress its dark grey suits, and much later, the black one, to walk the entire firmament. The tables were dressed exquisitely with white linen tablecloths with an arrangement of blue and silver roses. As clothing, Americus sported a navy blue tunic and a smile. Two powerful arms surrounded me until almost suffocate me, that loving was Americus. I responded with a kiss on each cheek. After greeting, Batam left quickly as had promised, and finally Americus and I were the only persons at the table.

The place was sparsely populated; only other two couples were at the bottom of the enclosure and their silhouettes were not well defined. I sat down with extreme calm, as wanting to lengthen the minutes up to the sky in an effort to delay the enactment of my secret. Meanwhile, Americus was asking about my sisters, I replied that they were very well and kept talking about I do not know what trivialities in order to gain time and courage. The evening continued with the old magician trying to elucidate why my query but without asking openly, and giving me the chance to initiate the topic of the conversation.

A young man brought us snacks: a combination of shrimps in sweet and sour sauce placed on a mattress of lettuces and, I must say, in some positions so outlandish that they looked like an unfinished painting of Picasso. And seeing the shrimps, so bathed, innocent and concocted, in a bittersweet pool frolicking under the greenery of lettuce, to the point I started thinking about the similarities that both, the shrimps and I, shared in that same table: the sweet and sour sauce covered them as the sweet and sour sauce of my lies covered me, the green crepe cushion where I was sitting on surrounded me exactly the same as the lettuces were around them.

Americus watched me as sensing the flow of thoughts that was crossing my mind at that time, preventing me from speaking, ignorant of my shrimp lectures. Ah! How I missed then the relaxing Severa's jasmine and orange tea! The sublime concoction that unleashed the ties of my mouth and made me scream from the rooftops the secrets of my soul! How I would

appreciate having a good cup of that healing wonder! Spirit Pacificator!
Revelations liberator!

Finally, Americus lost his patience and said:

-You wanted to tell me something? I am here.

My tongue made a first attempt to develop a response; babbled a few unintelligible words, then twisted, as well as a stake in a bonfire. My cowardice appeared claiming land, restricting it and subjugating it. My tongue surrendered immediately, did not even put up a fight.

But Americus is not one of those persons that surrender easily in the battles of tongues versus cowardice, so he asked again:

-If there is anything that is worrying you, I can help you, mi little girl.
¿Do you want to tell me what is it that is tormenting your soul?

Once more, before the warm caress which was Americus' word, my tongue revived and in a fragile insurrection attempt it got away from the cowardice lace and at last was able to whisper:

-You are right! There is something that is tormenting me and I cannot longer continue keeping the secret –I said with resolution.

And the words were expelled as the dammed waters of a dike, covered with the unique mantle of truth and repentance. This, my confession, was not a long time confession; it took me less than fifteen minutes the enumeration of my faults, but instead it took a lot of emotion, contrition and abatement. This exhalation of my guilt left my soul serene and firm. I spoke of my witch apprentice application; I spoke of Duprina's extortion and her evil plans of witchcraft and, finally, I spoke of my devotion to Leonardo.

The old magician looked at me with his compassionate eyes during the exhibition, and then he spoke:

-I already knew that your request was riddled with lies! That is not new for me! Wise men know to elucidate the false from the true. I was very intrigued at first, thinking about the reasons that led you to perform such an action and hoped that, when the time was right, you would come to me to talk about it. But every action has consequences and the price must be paid. I advise you that in the same way you confessed before me, you should confess before the Eisenbaum Mages Council. Incidentally, they will be in session tomorrow afternoon. They will study your case and issue a verdict. Go on your own, it would speak a lot in your favor. With regard to Duprina, do you have proof of what you say? The fact that she did not instruct you in the magic matters does not make her a black enchantress, just a bad tutor.

I denied with a slight motion of my head.

-Without evidence, there is nothing you could do -said with a sigh.

Moments later, his face was distended with a smile and whispered:

-As for my boy, Leonardo is an excellent person. A little stubborn, Yes! Just like his mother... but what are we going to do? He hardly shows his

feelings, but that is only in the crust. In love, he is a fool! He has spent so much time struggling with matters of the mind which has left little space for matters of the heart. And he doesn't know how to approach you.

I looked at him skeptically and said:

-I think you are wrong in your judgment. Leonardo treated me with courtesy, but there is nothing in his behavior that expresses that he is romantically interested in me. I would say that, sometimes, I could even brand him as indifferent.

There was some turmoil in his words:

-Oh! Girl, how little you know men hearts! Many times indifference is another disguise with which love dresses.

-Yes? But many times indifference is only indifference.

- And many times is love!

-Ah!... but it also can be indifference!

Americus laughed loudly.

-Just as stubborn as Leonardo. You belong together!

When they brought me dessert, released as I was from the weight which my conscience had loaded for more than six months, I could enjoy the tasting of the effervescent flavors of a Crème Brulee, and said effervescent because every bite I tasted seemed to bubble all over my body with the warm gurgling of the truth. The truth free, say, and I would add, releases, and extols the senses, especially that of taste.

-Have you learned some magic? -He asked.

-Just what Severa has taught me: concoctions, potions, and some amulets.

-Nonsense! I speak of true magic. What you are telling me are only recipes that anybody could learn in any book and which can be recited as the parrots recite, without knowing what they are talking about. I speak of true magic.

-No, I've learned anything since Duprina has not taught me.

-More nonsense! Not even Duprina can teach you true magic. That, the real magic, which is worthwhile to learn, is the magic that comes from the heart.

I was thoughtful for a moment, and then replied:

-From my heart nothing comes out; it only pumps blood.

Americus looked at me very tightly and I started to feel uncomfortable, then he said:

-Then that is because you are not listening well -and putting his hand right in a pocket of his robe pulled out two small yellowish parchments, put them on the table and with his index finger approached them until they were in front of my eyes. The parchment showed two figures.

-Do you recognize the symbols?

I looked at them carefully.

-This one -I said taking one of the scrolls- is David star.

-Also called Solomon seal –he completed my sentence- recognize the other?

I studied it. I wasn't sure of my answer.

-Is the Egyptian life cross?

-It certainly is! And you know what the relationship between the two is?

I denied with a nod and responded:

-I do not see what these symbols have to do with magic. For me they are religious emblems.

The old magician looked at me tenderly as one sees a five-year child when trying to appear older he begins to say calamities.

-Ah! My child, that's where you're wrong, Magic is related to everything: religion, medicine, psychology, mathematics, physics, and philosophy, absolutely everything. Everything in this world is connected and until you see and feel that connection in your heart, it will not be possible for you to learn true magic, you will be like those parrots that repeat and repeat meaningless phrases; speaking without knowledge or expertise. Look into your heart, your soul, your essence, only from those places come the true knowledge that neither Duprina nor Severa can teach you. Use your book. "The Keys of the Kingdom" is a powerful instrument that contains the knowledge of hundreds of magicians and prophets who have walked through this world and you did not even have taking the time to delve into its pages. All your energy has been diluted in that silly fight with Duprina. Leave Duprina alone and take care of you. The next time we meet, I want you to give me the answer about the connection of these two symbols. Do we have an agreement?

I nodded to express my acceptance, unable to find the words to refute his warm reprimand. So yes, Americus had put me, very subtly, in my place. I had been slapped with words and the feeling was more uncomfortable than if he had done it with his own hand. At that precise moment I learned the power of the well spoken words. However, the phrase "*Leave Duprina alone*" I was not sure I could do it. How to do it? If just thinking of her, made me feel like stirring the foundations of my bowels and emerge a huge desire of attacking her.

Americus said good-bye very affectionately with hugs and recommendations. Additionally he urged me to abandon my schoolgirl outfit for a more suitable for an apprentice.

A cart sent me back to the Severa's house escorted by the light of the moon that followed me all the way.

8

THE PERSECUTION

Away from where I was, Ño Josefina rose exalted by a recurrent palpitation in the heart. She wrinkled frown joined her two hands on her chest and sat on the edge of the mattress. Looked towards the window and found that it had still not dawned. Long time it had been since she was not feeling that kind of palpitations that was the way in which their ancestors, according to her belief, communicated with her to prevent from some catastrophic event, soon to take place. As she could, raised her great humanity from the bed and headed for the small altar with figures of Oshun and Yemaya, African gods of the Yoruba religion, which was at the back of the room, on a table covered with a large red lace tablecloth. She also lit a candle, a red one, to secure the good Saints protection over her loved ones.

Beatrice, Mariana and Salome do not concern her since she had them within reach of the hand and although each had their own peculiarities, their behaviors are framed within what is allowed and expected for three not very rebellious teenagers. Beatrice, was generally happy, providing she had rags and money; little Mariana, spent the days of her life surrounded by animals and trying to do good without looking at who and Salome was growing up surrounded by the love of her fictional sisters. However, there was one of the sisters that greatly concerned her: Camila. The girl was involved in witchcraft and Ño Josefina feared that sooner or later witchcraft will turn against her and catch her in the web of fate. She should not have let the boy wizard to convince her. Now, she was feeling these palpitations and was sure that very soon something bad would happen. She talked to her saints:

-Chango, please protect my girl. And you, Oshun, you won't be back. Put an eye on her -and saying this she began arranging the preparations for breakfast.

At the kitchen she saw assistant squeezing hardwood oranges to sneak the juice since the mulatto staunchly hated everything that was artificial, which contained chemicals and which came in a tin. She thought that if God wanted pasteurized milk he would have developed it so directly from

the cow, without going through so many chemical processes that subtract the nutritive properties that the own creator placed within the udders of the animal. As for juices, her saying was "from the tree to the cup, from the cup to the mouth", none of soft drinks or canned juices full of artificial preservatives that bitter the flavor and caused constipation.

When everything was in order and each dish properly in place on the table, the mulatto called loudly to the girls, which appeared, one by one, in the kitchen.

Salome came with her head full of goldilocks knotted with colorful ribbons and took her place at the table. Mariana and Beatrice were behind and also sat and began to swallow their breakfast with the voracity of adolescents.

Ño Josefina took the opportunity they were all gathered to investigate the whereabouts of Camila.

-Girls, do you know anything about Camila? Ha (*has*) she written?

Beatrice replied with half-chewed bread in her mouth:

-Yes, the last letter came a few days ago.

-Is she ok?

-Yes, all good. Why?

Ño Josefina opted to keep her feelings to herself not to worry the girls without reason

-Nothing! I just wanted to know about her. I miss her so much...

Beatrice was too preoccupied on her plate as to read the anxiety reflected in the face of the old woman; and Mariana and Salome did not know the strange art of human relations that is to discern the emotions of a face, a skill that, so far, seem to be focused only on magicians' scope.

So at the end of the evening, the three of them left to school and Ño Josefina stayed home with the assistants and the anxiety pang that accompanied her all morning.

For my part, I, away from Ño Josefina and immune to her palpitations, spent the night investigating the relationship between the two symbols that Americus had told me. My magic book had much information on both and the guardians were also helping me to understand the meaning of this symbolism. Very happy and satisfied, I felt for the accuracy of my reasoning and did not see the hour of communicating my findings to the old magician.

Dawn surprised me and I was eager to run towards The Fortaleza to confess my sins, once for all, before the members of the Wizards Council, hoping that this was the last time I had to enumerate the faults of my character. It is one thing to discuss the faults of others, and another, very different, to disseminate our own. "Others' faults" amuse us, fill with joy our recreational afternoons and may even be commented as one comments those famous Hollywood comedies, collected between friends and adorning them with scraps of truth; our own, on the other hand, are discussed in very

low voice, whispered, surrendering as a tribute to the confidence. Another reason why I wanted to go to The Fortaleza was my desire to meet again with Americus and discuss my newly acquired knowledge in relation to the symbols.

From my room, and while preparing for breakfast, I heard a sound, *toc, toc, toc*, as of someone strongly knocking at the door with his fists. The sound was relentless and had certain urgency tinges. Severa's steps told me she was heading for the door to meet the call. Then I heard an exchange of voices, then more steps that walked the hallway and stopped in front of my room. Then, again the incessant fists hit my door.

I went quickly to attend the call. Great was my surprise at finding myself face to face with Leonardo's indigo eyes. Behind him, Severa, with anguish reflected in her face. Still in pajamas I asked with amazement:

-What? What is the reason of so much hustle and bustle?

Leonardo came forward with the response showing signs of hurrying, Severa remained behind, silently:

-You must leave Eisenbaum immediately. Duprina gave you away to the Mages Council; she said you forged the witch apprentice application information and that you are initiating a conspiracy against her. The guards are on their way to apprehend you.

At such early morning hours my level of understanding was a little lethargic, as if I still were enjoying the fruits of a restful sleep. The surprise of having Leonardo stood in front of the door in conjunction with the news of an imminent arrest was still running through the corners of my mind. As long as Leonardo was present, the first words that came out of my mouth were babbling and incoherent phrases until the pride came in defense and took control of the situation:

-Ah... that is... you mean...

Severa took me by the arm and shook me; making with this small act that the neurons of my brain came back to life, and then, taking a small briefcase, began to place within all the tools that a fugitive might need.

From the hall, other steps were heard and the bizarre head of Batam-Al-Bur, adorned with a pink turban with green spots, looked out through the door.

-Oh, thank God, I arrived on time! You must leave now! -and joining Severa in the task of collecting my belongings, began to get into the case unnecessary elements, which were not even mine. Batam got a chandelier and Severa, on the other hand, took it out. He put a crochet pillow and a small bath mat; and again Severa took them and returned them to place. In a few moments, both were stuck in a brawl about what should or should not be in the suitcase.

-I do not understand -I said confused- I was going to confess with the Wizards Council any way. It would not be preferable to go and end once and for all with this arbitrariness.

The wizard looked at me with anger. It was very rare, in fact, his behavior. He seemed determined not to show his emotions; his eyes, however, betrayed him. For a few moments, nobody said anything. Then, Leonardo, taking control of the situation replied taking me by one arm and with the other hand holding the bag which was in the midst of the Genie and Severa.

-We have no time! We have to go already! I would explain on the way! - He said so authoritatively that I could not exercise my right to replicate.

He just left me time to embrace and say goodbye to the present with a quick kiss at the time that I was dragged by the rear hallway and went out to the street through a small door that I didn't even know it existed.

The street was deserted. Dawn had not yet delivered its guard and some star flashes were walking the gray confines that soon would turn into a blue morning. My old "friends", "Good" and "Wrong", were tied to a stake with a leather rein that the magician triggered quickly. He placed the load, and when I refer to "load", I mean both the bag carrying my belongings and my person. Both were raised in the air, without regard, tied and secured with straps on the back of Good, who grumbled with a whinny the rough treatment. Thus, tied as merchandise bales, I and my bag started the procession, following the wizard, who rode with pride and gallantry on the imposing Wrong.

Leonardo rode in silence. I was watching him with great indignation. However, since I was in need of answer, then, I started the dialogue to try to get it by him:

-Don't understand why I cannot stay and confront the Wizards Council -I said at last.

Again the magician looked at me with anger. He was obviously very irritated. It is difficult to describe the restlessness that I was feeling by the treatment that Leonardo was dispensing me. Then, turning to me, he asked quietly:

-Are you innocent? ... Or everything that Duprina said is a lie?

This time I could not hold his look. The most dreaded time of recent months had arrived. I was not so much afraid to face the Wizards Council as I was to confront him. Confronting a lion with the open jaws as a gladiator in the Roman Coliseum, would have been easy. Piece of cake, as the saying goes. But facing the fury of Leonardo's indigo eyes was like confronting the wrath of Poseidon, God of the sea and storms, shaker of the Earth. The trident in his eyes impelled my flesh with pain and taste to shame; and this shame whistling through my body from head to toes tortured me and drained my words but I was a word orphan with pride. I decided to drink the bitter beverage of my fault.

-Yes, I'm guilty -I said it without arrogance, with the humility of those who know are guilty and feel the desire to amend it; without the need of decorating the very act of confession with the artificial indulgence of

justifications. Crime never ceases to be a crime because it is justified; the sin never ceases to be a sin because it is confessed.

He looked at me helplessly as wanting to express with words a squall of emotions. I saw how he pressed his fists, but, ultimately, suppressed and only said sarcastically:

-I was hoping that you were innocent. In Eisenbaum, lying is considered a very serious offense. You cannot stay. You must immediately leave this land and cannot continue as an apprentice. A few months ago, at the Wizards Council a group of sorcerers led by Zoroastro has been sneaking, and seeks to change certain laws, especially those relating to judicial processes, such as yours. They have become powerful enough to achieve its mission. They recently passed a law to the Justice Administration Department, whose methods are similar to those of the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, which contemplates including torture and death penalty. My father and some wizards are fighting against the application of this measure so absurd and out of the current parameters. This situation is repeating itself in other citadels. Zoroastro and his people have caused clashes between different groups which inhabit the magical settlements. We must stop them, but the process has not been easy. Americus has not stopped to visit these sites by calling the population to sanity. It is a long and arduous work. Zoroastro has personally signed the order of your capture and expects you to be the first to be processed with this new law. My father asked me to immediately take you out of Eisenbaum. He does not want to take the risk that the verdict of your case is "guilty", considering that all the evidence is against you and that, as you've confessed, actually "you're" guilty.

I stared, speechless at the wizard with dismay. Zoroastro, again, following my steps and Leonardo, again, coming out in my defense.

Soon we moved into the thick forests of Venusses. It was close to noon because the sun was perpendicular; reigning over our heads and the heat was felt intensely in our bodies sweating like oranges in a sauna. When we entered the forest, the long arms of the acacias, which were raised on either side of the road and seemed to be hugged in the heights forming a vegetable tunnel, were so thick, so interlaced that looked like a curtain of leaves and branches. They hid us the vision of the solar rays and relieved us from the relentless heat. I noted that the road was little traveled and that the vegetation was growing denser as we advanced.

-Why don't we take the path by which we came? -I asked striving to calm me.

-It is guarded. We must reach Bourlox by other means. I can not use magic. At the time I use it, they'll know where we are.

We walked through strange passages about three hours until we reached a clearing, and there we stopped. I could finally get out of my horse and stretch my legs. My feet sank into the moist land. For his part, Leonardo located a sort of cave and unpacked whatever one need to spend the night.

Then, under the cover of a campfire, we dedicated to devour our humble dinner consisting of breads, ham and fruits. The horses had remained silent during the whole journey, however while roaming the area in search of pasture, I could hear them murmuring:

-I said that she was a criminal! -Said Good to Wrong -her eyes don't lie.

-You were right! With those eyes, she could not be otherwise -and while they thus spoke their tails were moving back and forward in order to move away the harassment of insects.

-What a poor opinion these animals have of me! -I thought to myself -I hope that Leonardo does not share their same thinking.

Certain figures which were formed in the flames of the fire seemed hypnotic and long time I was contemplating the illegal dance of flames moving frantically to the sound of the breeze, in an attempt to set aside the anguish thoughts that crowded inside me.

-Why did you? -Asked Leonardo sadly and looked at me as wanting to read my thoughts- you could have been a great witch!

Sadness was passing by the place and after snuggling up it came to snuggle into me. And this sadness was so great, so final, and so brutal, that wrapped everything that surrounded me, and even beyond, to infinity.

-I don't know what to say. At that time, it seemed like a good idea. But as soon as everything is ok, can I come back, right?

The anxiety in his eyes replied first than his words:

-You cannot come back, Camila -said bluntly in a way that bordered almost on the rudeness- at the time you put a foot outside the bounds of Eisenbaum, you can never return; unless you want to face the punishment for your actions...

- But... but... that does not seem fair -I protested with great vehemence.

The magician looked at me with fury and I could see how largely he contained the overflow of his rage, then he spoke:

-Not fair? Do you speak of justice? Is it fair that the reputation of my father is being questioned by complicity in the generation of false data of your application? My father has been a great ruler, but his opponents are taking advantage of this situation to attack and make him decline. Zoroastro is skilled in gruesomeness; and although at the moment hasn't dared, still, to rise charges, has begun a campaign to discredit Americus that can hurt him very much.

At that moment I realized the gravity of the matter; I understood the scope of my lie. Not only meant the final of my dreams as a witch apprentice, also meant the fall in disgrace of Americus and the final goodbye to Leonardo. And as I was not willing to give up Leonardo, I decided, then, to give up my sadness and giving up my sadness it came to settle the desire to be with Leonardo no matter the cost. And for that purpose I was counting on the help of Saint Jude, patron of the impossible cases, who had been the drive of all the innovative and avant-garde ideas

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that had occurred to me so far. Surely I would find a safe way to solve this situation. And if my will or Saint Jude fail, I still could count on Saint Antonio goodwill, the patron of lovers. Thereafter I had no more worries. The night fell and with it, all my troubles were gone.

9

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BRIDGE

If I could erase one day in my life, it would be, without a doubt, the morning after my confession. The magician was distant, and his facial expressions, gestures and attitudes denoted a great contempt for me, at least so I thought. In the early hours of that morning, Leonardo had collected most of the things to continue the journey. The horses were not there. Then, I felt an infinite solitude, that same infinite loneliness that drains the speaking from the hearts and souls. Well, I picked up my words and kept them under the guise of my shame. Leonardo's eyes, so beloved by me, were now accusing me and were the symbol of a fault that I had never felt, and suffocated me and tortured me, clutching my entrails and put me in the jungle of regrets. What color is the remorse? Good question, I cannot answer! Because being an abstract feeling it is not given to humans to see with our physical eyes the nuances so horrendous that they should have; which would make us run, terrified, as if a mountain wolf would be eaten our ankles. Ah! But... certainly for the eyes of the soul, it is another thing... deprived as they are of the prison of the flesh, nothing is hidden before it; scouring the depths of consciousness to deploy, in its entire monstrosity, the ferrous nuances of regrets. In that hidden place of feelings, there is no place for pretenses or lies; everything is shown in its essence, in other words, just as it is. So, I was before Leonardo's eyes just as I am; as if his physical eyes and the eyes of his soul were leaving me naked in the vastness of my lies. Four eyes were so many eyes to look at me; and to the overuse of eyes joined also the scarcity of his words, this inconsistency in eyes and words made me feel as a scrapped, contemptible and unworthy human being.

It was Leonardo who interrupted this diet of silence.

-We have to walk and follow another path. The bridge to Borloux is taken. I sent the horses back since it made no sense to take them with us.

And while thus he spoke, took two backpacks, threw one to me and the other settled on his back, then walked toward the dense forest, with a small machete that was holding in his right hand and began to curtail those shrubs, small and weak, that stood in our way.

-Is it possible for you to use magic to get us out of here?

Leonardo continued cutting mount and shrubs with a machete, with a brusqueness as accurate movement, plants fell sprawled on either side of the road, leaving behind us a vegetal carpet. When listening to my question, he stopped and turned to reply:

-At the very moment I use my magic, they will know exactly where we are. I cannot afford they discover I had something to do with your getaway.

For a good listener, few words. The rest of the way I kept quiet, just like him. We had walked a long time and I was exhausted. However, I did not dare to ask him to stop for resting. The heat was grueling, sweat ran down my body sticking to my clothes; the sound of insects coming in search of a good bite sounded in my ears. My face was red by the pumped blood from the heart to my cheeks. Leonardo continued cutting shrubs without question and seemed as fresh as a lettuce. Finally, the torture ceased.

We arrived to a stream whose waters jumping in choir from a gigantic rock, very high, were singing a melody while the crystalline liquid was downing the summit, full of harmony and freshness. After landing they joined to a small lake such a foam spring, serene and shy, which watched with envy the prowess of these intrepid waters. On the other side of the lake, there was only greenery, as large and vast as fields of a golf camp. The sun illuminated the lake giving it silver and iridescent sparkles.

-Hallelujah! -I screamed at the time I blew the heavy backpack on the grass and threw me into the warm waters with my cloth on. The lake received me with joy and freshness.

In those waters, my regrets were diluted. I admitted without shame: in the transparent fluid, I swam, jumped over, as if I were one of the very sylphs. I had forgotten the sweet that was being caressed by the tender and warm waters of a lake. I was particularly impressed by the harmony of the place.

For his part, Leonardo, far from losing control, like I did, he stayed accommodating the backpacks in a safe place, away from the water; joined a little wood to start a fire, and when everything was in order, he finally approached the water to cool off.

I was euphoric, and with so much joy and so much water, I was not prepared to let me influenced by the aloofness of the magician. I went to where he was and asked him:

-Are you human? Didn't you want cool water? We could have prepared everything as soon as we finished.

The magician decided to clarify his attitude and replied:

-It gets dark very fast here. It is preferable to leave everything in order now that we have light than at night when there is nothing cleared.

I approached as much as I could toward him, so close, that I could kiss him if I wanted it, but I repressed the impulse.

-Are you always so controlled? -I asked.

-Always! -It was his response.

-Have you ever felt the desire to get out of the rut and do something crazy?

-Not! Never!

I looked at him with anger:

-That is a lie! Everyone feels a desire to do something out of the ordinary from time to time; even wise men.

He looked at me with a cunning gleam and added:

-Ah! Then that's what you did in Saint Andre when you kissed me.

Oh! I had to admire the Leonardo's subtlety to bring up the subject to collation with such delicacy. What ability and what skill he had! What great adversary turned out to be Leonardo! It was low blow! I did not expect it! I knew that at some point I should explain my behavior; but not there, not that way. He caught me decentralized and without justifications. Fulminated my courage, I just had the attack for defense:

-That was because I was about to die and at that time I thought it was a good idea -I said trying to seem airy and splashing the water lightly with my hands trying to get away from him.

But Leonardo knew how to read people's souls and, especially, mine, and was not willing to let pass the opportunity to annoy me and continued with his verbal attacks:

-Tell me, Camila did you like the kiss? Because I must tell you that you took by surprise and... The truth is... I don't know if I did a good job.

For my part, I did not have even the gift of reading faces and couldn't get away from the place because Leonardo, anticipating my movement, had taken me by the hands and I had to stand there in front of him, sunk in the water and in the commiseration, trying to thread the precise words that explained that strange behavior. It is a thankless task that of threading phrases or sentences to justify the inexplicable actions! If I did not even understand why I behaved that way; much less I could explain to a third party the cause of such behavior. Don't get me wrong! It wasn't that I didn't have the answer to that question; it was an easy one. In my mind I had already responded to that question many times:

"Yes, Leonardo, you did an excellent job, the most excellent job with that kiss. The Excellency of your kiss haunts me day and night, and awakes me insomniac imagining how to continue stealing the caresses of your lips. You are asking if you did a good job? Oh! Without a doubt, so it was! Undisputed, so it was! And if it weren't for your indigo eyes, cold like the waters of a wasteland, glacial as the icebergs of the French Pyrenees, wild as the Amazon jungle sinking deep in the South America, long time ago I would have hung around your neck for snatch your kisses which are the longings of my soul."

While thinking, another voice bounced and resounded to the hidden corners of my head, rising like a shadow and imparting her teachings on morality: it was the Severa's voice regurgitating axioms and aphorisms about morality on decent ladies and good manners:

"But what forms of expression are those, Miss?" You don't know that a lady never expressed her thoughts in front of any gentleman. It is preferable to talk less than more and, when in doubt, it is always best to reach for modesty. Prestige preservation is the only guarantee for a faultless reputation. Any decent young lady would never speak of neither kissing nor eyes"

It was then that I decided to hide my indecency for the rescue of morality and dismissed all thoughts that involved kissing or eyes; and with extreme subtlety, I tried to divert the response against-attacking with another question:

-And what about Duprina? your psychopathic, shameless and boring girlfriend, that instead of honoring her role as tutor and teach me the magic for which she was selected, has been dedicated to enchant me with skulls spells in solitary cemeteries and in the light of the moon?

The wizard looked at me with surprise. Certainly he did not expect my answer and for a few moments I felt like a winner in this contest of wills and characters, but, as I have said before, in the issues of eloquences Leonardo is a well-trained opponent and quickly regained his composure and with much intelligence and audacity was able to thread his question with mine and articulated:

-Duprina, which by the way is not my girlfriend, never knew of the kiss you gave me, therefore I doubt that she had any reason to bewitch you with black magic, as you say. And given that at that time, you stole me a kiss; I don't see why I should deprive to steal one from you. So, in this way, we will be even -and saying this he approached me, so close, that I was able to hear the sound of his breathing.

And although within my head, both Ño Josefina's and Severa's cries echoed with all their pristine ethical foundations of decency, composure and integrity; I, always averse towards everything that meant obedience, duty or imposition, disobeying the mandates of awareness, self-consciousness, and common sense, and plunged my lips again as a sailor in search of fresh water. Ah! And it is that the mouth of Leonardo is not any mouth, not. And well it was worth the moral deafness that I held. And neither Severa nor Ño Josefina, of having been in present body, could have been able to dissuade me to renounce to those lips that were the gates to heaven, not. Oh! What bliss! What happiness are the sharing of the sweet fruits of love which are the kisses; as well as Ulysses and Penelope, as Paris and Helena, as Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as them, Leonardo and I.

Difficult it would be to describe the emotion of the moment, a soft breeze caressed the surface of the serene lake forming faint waves which joined with the white foam of the singing brook; the taste of fresh water from Leonardo's lips melted with mine under the bright rays of a sun that descended from the heights to fall upon our bodies buried in the serenity of those vibrant waters. And so we followed until the irruption of voices coming from the outskirts which made us understand that someone was approaching.

We interrupted, then, the delights of the kiss and immediately reached the shore. There, the magician told me with signs to hide in a part of the forest where the vegetation was very lumpy and thick. I replied that I would not go anywhere without him and that probably that site would be full of unpleasant creatures, insects and vermin, waiting of a live body like mine, to suck my blood like vampires.

However, the magician vehemently expressed he had no time for nonsense, so, with much emphasis on his words, uttered the following order:

-Hide already! I don't have time for trifles. They are not looking for me but you. Go away! Go already!

Judging by the tone of his voice, I considered obeying his order and running towards the place that he had indicated me. I hid in such a way that I could see Leonardo on the distance. He was sitting on a very smooth rock and acted as if he were on the verge of igniting a fire consisting of hollow trunks, termite-eaten, grouped in the form of a lump, to heat his dinner.

Soon a group of five guard soldiers appeared in the clearing. One of them, the senior, approached Leonardo and greeted him warmly. I watched the scene from a distance, they were talking, but I could not hear their words clearly.

On the other hand, as I had predicted, an ant's army was extended as carpet at my feet and an equal number of mosquitoes flying by weeds and crashing against my face and body. Before this brutal attack of nature I felt the need to stand up and hide myself somewhere else, but I sensed that the slightest movement would highlight my presence. In order to solve the contingency, keep capped my mouth with my two hands to avoid emitting an involuntary cry if the case. Then I tried to get up and walk away from the critters tangle that wanted me for dinner; but a stone in the way complicated my maneuver and I crashed right on the ground with a dry and dismal movement.

I immediately heard the guards ran to where I was and began to probe the area. One of them approached so much to me that I could see his boots at my face level. However, he seemed not to see me. Leonardo approached and tried to convince them he had seen a goat prowling the vicinity since last night and that surely it was the cause of the commotion. After a while of search and not finding anything, they decided to accept the theory of the

magician lost goat and came to the fire, which was already on, to rest before restarting the search. Thus, sitting all around the flames, cooking some sausages taken off a few cans, they talked with the wizard about the girl who had escaped from the village and had to catch.

-Why are you after her? -asked Leonardo pretending curiosity.

One of the guards replied:

-For fraud. She lied in her application to be accepted as an apprentice witch. The situation is delicate. Americus is being questioned by the Board, for being the sponsor of the young apprentice. Meanwhile, a member of the Council of Elders is taking charge of Government while your father faces the complaint.

When he heard the name of his father, Leonardo paid more attention.

-My father, is he ok?

The Guard rushed to reassure him:

-Yes, there is nothing that can make against him due to his rank, but for now he is no longer head of the Government.

-Who is in place?

-Tiarano, one of the elders of The Ciudadela, who had been transferred to Eisenbaum recently. He promoted the temporary removal of Americus while the matter is resolved. However -and then he whispered to Leonardo, with a voice that was barely a whisper so that his companions could not hear him, said- I think that is a ruse to take your father from the road. What happened does not keep proportion with the failure. On another occasion, he had just gotten enough with an explanatory and nothing more.

The wizard scowled.

-I share your opinion. Tiarano is one of Zoroastro's disciples and had been trying since long to take possession of any of the Government positions from the wizards and witches settlements that are in the hands of the brotherhood. Eisenbaum was the last towns missing to have total control. They now govern all settlements.

The guard looked at him with concern.

- And now what awaits us?

-Knowing Zoroastro I would dare to say that nothing good.

-We have received order to remove heaven and earth to find the girl. Isn't it strange? So many resources to find an apprentice who has not even finished her teaching? This is odd, if it were up to me I would leave her. Don't you think? Why they want her?

From my place of detention I also wondered: *"Yes, why they want me?"*

-I don't know -said the magician- I don't know.

While they were talking, I was still lying on the damp ground, very close to the soil where I could see the furrows made by those watery and transparent creatures that inhabit almost every corner of the planet, so disgusting, that are earthworms. Whatever the biologists say! Without detracting from the laudable work of these creatures that scholars praise for

their role at Earth; making it suitable for farming, loosening roots and compressing soil, by fertilizing the land, and if this were not enough, as ultimate sacrifice, they serve as food to birds, mammals and reptiles; the truth is, it must be said, that nature behaved with them as a cruel tyrant when it comes to lavish her gifts. If you see closely to a worm, as I saw it while I was in that uncomfortable position, you will realize that it's a "chubby middle line walking". They do not have eyes, no legs, no mouth, and is very difficult to distinguish what is front and what is back. At least, without disrespecting the opinion of biologists in this regard, that was my appreciation at that time: without grace, very ugly without glamour. Prowling the same ecosystem a few brown grasshoppers were also jumping from there to here, as if they were lost, unable to find their way back home, and clutching a tiny little spider entangled in its own web.

In other words, there were worms, spiders, mosquitoes, grasshopper and all kinds of unimaginable creatures; flying or crawling all over in that piece of land that had become my prison. Ants returned to the attack and were trying to get on my clothes. I had to repel them constantly with sudden movements, hoping that my attempts were silent. Mosquitoes for its part also joined this biological battle and went whizzing by my ears with the fury of a twin-engine airplane.

In the distance I saw Leonardo, quiet, conversing happily with the guards, as I lay on the moisture of the Earth, exhausted of so much biology, so much ecosystem and mosquitoes. Suddenly it crossed my mind that the guards, maybe, decided to spend the night there and a huge panic started to take over me. What if that happened? What would I do? I began to shivering cold since my clothes were wet by the bath in the lake. Fire, in the distance, emitted hot flashes and I could hear the sound of the stems singing; and I felt the immense desire of being huddled by its hot flashes.

One of the guards walked away from the group and walked in my direction. For a moment I hold my breath. He apparently intended to urinate and then I began to pray to God that the urine thread coming had a different path from my head. Seconds later, apparently, the mercy of the Lord heard my request and the guard walked away a stretch beyond and there, ditches!, released the thread. That was it! The situation was unsustainable!

If Leonardo did not come to my aid in a few minutes, I would get up and walked closer to the fire, and only God knows how to solve the conflict. Fortunately, this was not necessary because as soon as the individual emptied his bladder and the pants were accommodated, the other guards stood up and enlisted for leaving.

As soon as they were gone, Leonardo approached my lair and helped me lifting and shaking the ants to the ground. I was so cold, paralyzed, that the words were numb and remained jammed in my mouth. So I had a lot to claim him for leaving me alone in the bush for so long, but the only thing

that my body and tongue were doing was shivering. Then, the wizard took off his overcoat and placed it on my body. I was lifted up into the air, something very timely since my legs refused to respond, and I quickly was placed near the fire. Leonardo very cleverly fueled the fire with two trunks of the surroundings; this immediately seized power and begins to frantically dance. He came to me with the backpack and said:

-Remove your wet clothing and change.

I turned red by modesty and said.

-I can not do that!

-Why not?

-Because you are here.

The magician, fun at the situation, stepped to the edge of the lake, covered his eyes, and shouted:

-Now I'm not there, so please change your cloth or you're going to catch pneumonia.

I took some clothes of the backpack; and changed as quickly as I could.

-Now can I open my eyes? -He cried after a while.

-Yes, you can.

Back, we sat on a tree and he handled me a cup with brandy.

-Drink -he ordered- it will warm you up.

After the nasty potion tasted with Severa, I feared that this was another worst-tasting.

-What is it? -I asked while sipping a tiny portion of the liquid tasting its flavor.

-Brandy: a cordiality gift from our beloved guard.

As it toured my throat, the liquid was producing a burst of heat, the same as if you were swallowing a piece of the fire that burned. I, who was awake enough to recognize the benefits of good liquor, held the cup affectionately.

Leonardo seemed satisfied with my response, then added:

-I will leave for a few moments to look for some dry shrubs to revive the bonfire. What we have it is not enough for the night. Do you promise you will behave well?

A huge smile sailed my face.

-I promise -was my only answer.

As soon as Leonardo left, I served a little more of the fire amber liquid that was in the bottle. I sipped a small volume at the beginning, but in the end, I increased the flow rate of the drink. At first I was cold but some minutes later I began to feel a strange and pleasant drowsiness similar to joy. And since joy is something very precious to have, I continued pouring small amounts of this joy in my bulky cup. But, seconds later, not seeing the need to waste time serving it in the cup, I started taking it directly from the bottle. Because what was the point in wasting time? Best from the bottle to the mouth! And the more I drank, the more I felt the urgency of singing

and be happy. But here's a bizarre event: the words of my mind were not equal to those that came out of my mouth. The words, so thin and articulated in my mind, came to resound as distorted by a prism which afforded them a tombstone resonance to my phrases and sentences; until the tone turned serious and irregular as a soprano attacked by a winter cold. Then the fire figures began to jump by the bushes, doing stunts and antics, which made me laugh so much as if I were in a circus.

When Leonardo arrived, instead of one, I saw two Leonardos; and it was very difficult for me to focus my eyes on any of them, because they jointly moved as if they were twins. Very surprised was the magician to see how little of the amber liquid remained in the bottle.

-Did you drink the whole bottle? I cannot turn my back because you surrender to drink?

I was laughing for all the things moving around me, equal to a fair merry-go-round; even Leonardo, looked like forming part of this objects carousel that danced by the surroundings.

The two Leonardos approached and took forcibly the bottle from my hands and threw it out to the fire. I tried to get up to stop him from doing this but it was too late. The flames covered the bottle and I didn't have enough balance to keep me standing; so trying to get up, the weight of my body succumbed to the effects of gravity and I fell backwards, landing back on the wet earth that had previously received me roughly. I stayed there a while until the magician rescued me, since I had no forces to stand on my own.

From afar I heard Leonardo's' voices scrubbing in my face his vapid reprimands; but my spirit intoxicated by the brandy ethyl fumes exalted my mood for the alcoholic beverage, and I could little elucidate the coherence of his words.

Yes, I have to conclude that this was one of the most shameful episodes of my life; and the reason I left for good the bad habit of tasting, with so much pleasure, the alcoholic beverages. At present, and in strictly necessary cases in which by social conventions it is mandatory to savor ethyl concoctions, the most I taste is a passion fruit juice or a tamarind infusion, in order to preserve the honor and integrity of my reputation.

At that time, my only audience was Leonardo and as good gentleman, has refrained so far, commenting on my dishonorable conduct.

The next morning the hangover awarded me with a blunt headache; those that seem that an African tribe had entered clandestinely in our eardrums, accompanied by drums and timbales playing together at the same time an unchained melody. Leonardo had already collected all our stuff and was waiting that I was awoken to continue our path. He seemed willing to forget what happened and spoke with great confidence:

-Are you ready to continue? -He asked me at the time that handed me a giant cup of coffee, black and very loaded and, then, in son of derision, he

continued:

- I am sorry not to have that drink you like so much, but I'm afraid that you finished it all yesterday.

I drank the coffee without question; in order to save me the shame and got up to continue the journey. We crossed the lake; on the other side it was a landscape of long extensions colored in different shades, and in the background, spotted on the greenery I observed a few brown squares of ploughed land ready to receive seeds to harvest. The thick forest was left behind, now it only remained the green plains.

-How long would it take us to get to Bourloux? -I dared to ask.

-About an hour. We still have to cross the plain and then we'll see a small forest bordering Bourlox Bridge and would have to wait for the night to cross it. We will go through in the northern part, which is where the water is higher and there is less monitoring. I have friends who will be waiting for us and will provide us a vehicle to take you home.

I looked at him with anxiety:

-Is it dangerous?

He smiled to encourage me:

-No, if you do what I tell you and follow my instructions.

After a while, we reached a wooded place from where I could see the bridge connecting Bourlox to Eisenbaum. There were eight guards stationed at the end of the viaduct; with their regulatory uniforms, red with golden gallons, and large boots to his knees; they were tall and handsome boys that were requiring documentation to all who passed from Bourlox to Eisenbaum and vice versa.

-Will wait until nine o'clock to cross -the magician repeated.

I looked at the river. It was very deep and plentiful; its water, surely, very cold. We will soak getting to the other side. However, the presence of Leonardo gave me warmth and courage. The minutes elapsed until it was nine o'clock. Leonardo took me by the arm and told me:

-It's time!

I got up silently and followed him to the shore. On the bridge there were five guards, entertaining in smoking and talking. At this point of the night no one already crossed the bridge. In silence, the magician entered the waters, and I did behind him. The coldness of the water received me as if electricity current was striking me down the bones. My teeth started shivering but I could not define whether it was by cold or fear. The dark moonless night sheltered shadows of bushes that surrounded the river and rose as wraiths and ghosts on the verge of jumping on us. Leonardo held my body, strongly, avoiding the waters from taking me. When we were in the middle of the river, we heard a flurry on the bridge, then soldiers running, then shooting. With my heart in my mouth, I thought: "we had gone so far to be discovered!" Then, Leonardo speeded up the step and dragged the dead weight of my body. The waters waved as if it they were a

fabric. Leonardo managed to shorten the gap that separated us from the other side. For a few moments, exhausted, we took time to stop to recover our breath. Later, we ran to the small hill where it was assumed some guys would be expecting us to give us a vehicle. My heart was pumping in a hurry by adrenaline and threatened to go out my mouth. The magician seeing my unease whispered:

-Quiet! The shots were a little distraction to move the soldiers to the other side of the bridge so we could cross without problems.

- And you could not let me know earlier? -I said almost dying and regaining my composure.

The wizard looked at me and said in derision:

-But what a bad fugitive you are! And I thought that the brandy had improved your temperament!

I stared at him a while, speechless. Then a car came and parked a few blocks away from the hill where we were hiding. Seconds later a flashlight began to make us signs.

-Come on! -Said Leonardo- our transportation has arrived.

We got up quietly, I turned slightly my head toward the bridge, but the guards were no longer there. I ran to the car behind Leonardo and once inside, the car started.

The meeting with my sisters was plagued with hugs and sentimentality. Beatrice, with her perfume aura decorating the environment by distilling beauty and self-esteem, cuddled me with hugs and kisses. Mariana, with Bartolomeo in her arm and Nicanor in the other, proclaiming welcome witty phrases, and Salome, my adoptive sister, with a big smile cuddled with my lovely phrases of affection. To my surprise, Batam-Al-Bur also was there. He had brought my magic book and some other things that I didn't have the opportunity to take with me because of the urgency of my departure. I can't deny that it was a relief to go back to civilization and electricity.

I asked Leonardo to stay, at least for dinner before leaving, but he replied that the circumstances required his immediate presence in Eisenbaum. I asked him to send my regards to Americus and to tell him how sorry I was by what happened. The magician hugged me and said goodbye with a slight kiss before disappearing within the same vehicle that drove us home, but not before dodging the barrage of claims by Ño Josefina on the occasion of my escape.

It was very difficult for me to see him go; and to the joy of the reunion with my family also joined the nostalgia for a lost love. I felt a huge void in the heart; as if someone had taken something that already felt it was mine. Sad is the sadness of a lost love! It is sadness different from all the other sorrows of the world. It is a void that settles in the soul, huge and black, which daunted the spirit as the eternal wandering souls in purgatory; no rest or peace, prowling the corners in search of that so precious and lost. How

sad is the sadness of love! Has no consolation, but in the presence of the loved one; orphan joy brimming with sobs and melancholies.

It took me little time to update my sisters in what had happened in Eisenbaum during my stay. Batam-Al-Bur also provided some details on the subject.

- And what do you think now? -Beatrice asked- although I must say that I am delighted that you're here and won't become a witch. You know what I think about witchcraft and paranormal events. The best thing you should do is to put your feet on the ground and leave all that. As Ño Josefina says, none of those things brings good things. And she should know that, since she has statues and saints hidden in her room.

I looked at her but did not answer. I had no mood. They all spoke at the same time telling me events occurred during my absence and that had no time to communicate by letter. At the end of the night, I excused myself and took the book that the Genie had brought me and walked to my room. There, in the privacy of the four walls that surrounded me, I began staring the pages of "The Keys of the Kingdom", the only souvenir left of my contact with magic. I stared randomly. And while doing this, something strange happened: as I passed the pages I had the "certainty" of the content of the book before I read it, it was as if the knowledge passed to me through the ether or some other means. This was a great revelation.

In the subsequent days this strange 'power' was increased to the extent that the spells and incantations from the book came to me without my reading; they were only in my mind. It was as if the book and I were one, united in flesh and spirit. Attached to this mysterious knowledge it also came a kind of "insight"; scenes that were taking place in other cities around the world came to me in flashes and then I confirmed their occurrence in the headlines of newspapers or television news. This authority, far from scare me, made me glad; it was as if I was directing a strange supernatural force despite the discredit that I had suffered in Eisenbaum.

One night in particular, when an icy blizzard forced me to take refuge in the comfort of my room, before the appointed time for sleep, I stumbled across a spell that it would be very useful for the events to come. A spell, "The way of the Mirrors", showed me the way to move to any place on Earth through mirrors, invoking a special mantra that opened the seal of these dimensional gates and allowed me access to any place of the globe where a mirror exists.

Elated by this finding, I made short excursions on the outskirts of my city, but I did not tell my sisters. I visited my neighbors' houses and some shopping malls. However, I did not stay long in those places since I felt I was invading their privacy and violating the free will of these people.

In the subsequent days I adapted to the routine of the house but I seemed to be living in two different worlds at the same time; the real world

of my city and that other world, mystical, mysterious and magical.

Batam-Al-Bur visited me frequently, bringing us news of The Fortaleza and Leonardo.

-The situation has become complicated –The Genie said in one of our meetings seated in the chair that belonged to my grandfather Gennaro in the middle of the studio while we were sitting at his feet hoping news.

-Americus was displaced from The Fortaleza and is isolated in a property located on the north side of the cliff. He has not been able to attend the Brotherhood meetings but clandestinely some members have managed to circumvent the surveillance of the guard and keep him informed of the affairs. Tiarano has taken power and Zoroastro has begun to be seen by The Fortaleza.

The Genie paused and placed his fingers on the temple and giving a light massage delivered:

-I have a strong headache; don't you have some rum over here?

I got up and headed towards the first aid kit.

-No I'm not going to give you liquor; that will not help you. Believe me; I say this from experience -and I reached him some aspirin, which swallowed without the aid of a glass of water.

Then he continued:

-Leonardo has been visiting other settlements calling for wisdom and understanding but Tiarano and Zoroastrians have done a good job putting the population against the Brotherhood. With all their partners governing other settlements it is little what the Brotherhood can do. There will be war, I say to you that there will be war -concluded the Genie.

Beatrice rose from the floor and went to sit on the sofa to be more comfortable:

-I can't see why it is important to us whatever is happening in Eisenbaum. That war of wizards and sorcerers has nothing to do with us. If farmers in those regions chose those rulers, then, they deserved them. I don't see why we need to get involved. It is their issue, not ours.

For a few moments I felt anger and rage against Beatrice; how could she be so insensitive?

-It happens, Beatrice, that in those settlements I have very dear friends and it hurts me badly what they are going through.

Beatrice looked at me incredulously:

-Now you are going to play the role of charity nun! We are well and have nothing to worry about. We have enough money to live without working up for three generations and, believe me; I think to enjoy in this life every penny of our heritage.

Mariana, due to her attachment to humanitarian causes understood a little more my concern against the injustices and immediately joined my cause as my ally:

-In this world we have to care not only about us -she said- it is our

duty, also, to help others.

Beatrice looked at her with amazement and opening her huge eyes replied proudly:

-What a foolish thing! If you want to help others, send him clothes or pennies. I tell you, those people are accustomed to live as they live and do not want foreign interference. Leave them alone, if the world is as it is, any reason there should be.

-I swear I do not understand how you think -I said.

Beatrice shrugged telling me that she did not care if I understood her or not and left the room.

Batam-Al- Bur, who had been silent during my conversation with my sisters, continued:

-The settlements are divided; Zoroastro has managed to infiltrate his people among the peasants and other creatures of the Kingdom. He has shifted to those who are sympathetic with the Brotherhood: snatches their lands, takes away their jobs and anyone who threatens his Government is being judged with false testimony, blamed and thrown into the dungeons.

The news that I was receiving were worse than I had expected. There would be war, I had seen it in my visions, but I had no idea of the magnitude of the problem that Tiarano and Zoroastro have created.

- And Leonardo? -I asked anxiously.

-He is at the head of the Brotherhood activities. I tell you, it is only a matter of time before Zoroastro invent any trick to undo his power. He has not been able to do it because Leonardo's trajectory as a magician is flawless, but I know from a good source, that he has a team working on it.

A slight chill swept through my body. If Zoroastro found out that Leonardo helped me in my escape, he would have the perfect excuse to throw him out of Eisenbaum. I prayed to God to protect him and that nobody knew what happened.

Beatrice returned to the room and heard the last sentences pronounced by the Genie.

-I do not understand, if they are magicians and can live in any place of the world, why haven't they moved already?

Batam replied:

-Mages can live anywhere else in the world but they love their region and will remain there to fight.

- And is it worth fighting against the half of a population that does not want them? That hates them and that the only thing they want is to make them disappear from the face of the Earth?

Batam meditated his response:

-Yes, it is worth fighting for the other half that is being robbed and their property taken away. Yes, I think that it is worth.

-Very well -said Beatrice- I want to understand. Did Tiarano or Zoroastro have done something illegal? Are they in power by force?

-No, everything has been, apparently, very legal.

-I still do not understand.

-If you come to power and change the laws to your advantage, put your friends in key government posts and make sure to place some members of the Brotherhood in those same institutions but in smaller amount, taking care that they never exceeds yours; do you really think that you are ruling with freedom? If a part of the population has no voice or vote; do you think that the ruler is representing all of the inhabitants?

I had never seen him speaking that way. Very focused was the Genie in his opinions. So much so that Beatrice understood the dynamics of the issue.

-What would you do, Beatrice, if you had something to say and all of the institutions to which you should supposedly go were in the hands of your opponent? Who do you think they would favor, you or Tiarano?

-Tiarano is a Zoroastro's puppet -I spoke.

-But why a part of the population is supporting this? Something good should have Zoroastro's proposal! -concluded Beatrice.

-The humble population is very easy to handle. You just have to give them clothes or a few pennies, as you say, and they will be charmed by the hand supplementing and will be waiting for more. And those others who did receive neither the clothes nor the pennies will be captivated by the promise that they will receive it very soon.

-You should not generalize, Batam. There are humble people who are part of the Brotherhood -I said resolutely.

Batam corrected.

-You're right! Ignorance, not humility, is the evil that afflicts our societies. And while Zoroastrians continue to give gifts I do not see how Eisenbaum can get out of the morass in which it is located.

At that time Ño Josefina and Salome interrupted our conversation bringing us snacks and soft drinks. Mariana played with Bartolomeo on the carpet, Beatrice rushed to the tray to take a seasoned sandwich with bacon and Batam also appropriated some snacks. When we returned to the conversation, it dealt with other topics.

-Tell me, Beatrice, what happened with the young neighbor of whom you wrote in your letter? -I asked with curiosity.

Mariana left aside the caresses that Bartolomeo was receiving and replied:

-That love lasted very little. Only until the instant that she saw him eating fried chicken with his bare hands and observed that frying fat was dripping vertically by his arms.

Beatrice turned a deaf ear and whispered that she had never felt inclination by that young man and that the rumor was started by people who wanted to discredit her in the eyes of society. There was no time for further comments. Then I smiled, Beatrice would never change.

10

THE COMEBACK

Three months had passed since Leonardo had brought me home and the only news that I had from him and Eisenbaum were the ones that Batam-Al-Bur provided me in his weekly visits. The magic remained in me and continued strengthened my knowledge every day. It was towards the end of the second week that I shared the secret with my sisters and Ño Josefina. Their reactions were diverse; my sisters and Salome celebrated the fact, on the other hand, the old woman scowled in signs of concern and each day, in the early hours of the morning, covered me with sermons about the proper use of the occult arts and told me a lot of stories about characters who had succumbed under the effect of poorly made sorcery.

The subsequent days were busy in our residence. I appropriated the basement and installed my witchcraft center there. With the help of Beatrice I experienced the pleasures of credit card purchases and had to be consistent with her appreciation that one of the most satisfying earthly pleasures is precisely the use of credit; of course with modesty and restraint.

I bought a huge crystal ball which perfected my clairvoyant faculty, an oak table that occupied the southern end, from wall to wall, and on it, my magic book, invaluable companion, always open as my thirst for learning was never quenched. I bought wands, bought crystals, bought herbs, bought incense, in the end; I bought everything that a witch can buy for her work and spells. And to my newly acquired library I added some books posted by prestigious wizards and witches of recognized trajectory. It was not easy to purchase those books since they are not sold in shops; I had to figure it out how to buy them in antique shops and from collectors.

I spent afternoons in my "workshop" experimenting with all the elements: herbs, powders, flowers, rocks, runes, tarot cards, etc. Severa's teaching had not been in vain; I continued maintaining correspondence with her since the Genie was in charge of transporting my letters. I had no news from my secret admirer, the verses ceases so I deduced that my lover had to be a resident of Eisenbaum, who did not have my current address.

As I said before, Ño Josefina did not see with good eyes my newly acquired hobby and tried to dissuade me from the practice of magic engaging me in other occupations. However, the magic had opened me an unknown world that I had never dreamed of: communication with magical beings, which only I had heard in mythological stories and now it was a

reality for me. In the garden I conversed with the water fairies and elves toddler who lived and jumped in perennial movement all over the place. Nobody in the house could see them, except me. Sometimes, they arrived at dusk and, while studying my magic book, sitting on a bench under the shade of a dreamy acacia, they surrounded me and began to tell me stories of their experiences and mischief. My old friends, guardians of the book, Drefno, Cirila and Petrarco also joined these evening talks in which all these wonderful creatures wanted to participate. Sometimes, they came with floral gifts and aromatic herbs, acclaimed for their medicinal properties, others with exotic mushrooms and roots; they sang and danced during the time shared with me in the garden.

During the days that rain kept me locked up in the basement, then, they appeared there, visited me and talked. It was at that time that they told me of those other dark creatures that roamed the Earth spreading calamities and misfortunes, and advised me to get away as soon as I saw them on my way. Against these beings had also prevented me Severa "*Avoid fear*" -told me on one occasion- *these creatures feed on human weaknesses. If you keep yourself balanced, they can never touch you. Remember that anger, resentment, envy, and everything that embodies evil in this life are fear's daughters. Stay away from them!*" And the truth is that Severa had taught me well since during my wanderings with the inhabitants of the magical world, I had never encountered any of them, except, of course, Zoroastro's creatures I found in Saint Andre.

One afternoon while I was experimenting with the properties of pink quartz and sea salt, my crystal ball became opaque as if it were containing blue clouds inside, equal to the phenomenon that had taken place in Severa's house. It would be like six o'clock in the afternoon and the external light began to wane. I turned on a lamp and quickly approached the ball already beginning to dissipate fog. A vivid scene was before my eyes: Duprina and Zoroastro were talking in one of the rooms of The Fortaleza. I saw the picture but could not hear the sound at all. They were altered. Duprina was showing a document and gesturing with her hands. Zoroastro was trying to contain her, screaming and gesturing also. At the end they seemed to agree, Duprina was calmed down, let the document and left the room. Then the crystal ball began again to acquire its usual transparency. I was so much worried about that image.

The same night I met with my sisters and informed them what I saw in my vision:

-I am sure that the document that Duprina was holding has to do with Leonardo; something is plotting.

The four were together in my room, away from the eyes of Ño Josefina that was thinking that we were already asleep for those hours. These types of meetings were becoming increasingly frequent in the room.

Beatrice began to indict:

- And what do you have to do with it? There's nothing you can do! These wizards are very powerful. You are just beginning to know about magic. For some reason Leonardo left you here. Do you remember what Batam said? Those people are preparing for a war. How can you think of going to Eisenbaum? What would it happen if while your being there explodes the confrontation?

At that time, the little patience I usually have when I spoke with Beatrice, had begun to run out, so had no choice but to respond aggressively, i.e., without the condescending tone that the kinship ensures:

-I have the thinking that in some way what is happening to Americus and Leonardo is my fault. It was for my solicitude that Americus had to leave his post; and Leonardo is also paying the consequences of my action.

-Look! -I said pointing at Bartolomeo and Nicanor who were sleeping together on a carpet located at the foot of my bed -if they are in peace why there cannot be peace in Eisenbaum?

Ah! But Beatrice, entrenched in her reality, in those moments, the well of her patience was also dry and did not see with good eyes my outbursts of altruism, thus also she verbally attacked me:

-You're so foolish! -Said Beatrice- they are asleep because they are very tired. You'll see as they begin tomorrow with the old complaint. And besides foolish, you're stubborn! I know you're going to Eisenbaum and that there is nothing we can say or do to make you stay.

Fortunately it was little what Beatrice could say to make me stay, and as she had predicted, I had already decided to return to Eisenbaum.

Mariana, who by her generous nature was much more akin to my ideals, approached and whispered:

-Take care of yourself!

-So I do it! I do not expect you understand me. My return to Eisenbaum is the only way to be at peace with my conscience.

After my speech all was composure and silence; after a while, they left and I put up on plan.

I arrived in Batam's room through the road of the mirrors. The Genie slept peacefully in his fluffy bed, under a heavy quilt made with Egyptian cotton and satin, decorated with a geometric design. His rhythmic breathing raised the quilt in a gentle motion of ups and downs, emitting a soft hissing out of his mouth to become a snoring. Knowing how scary he was, I slowly went to sit at the edge of the bed and watched him for a long time deciding the best way to wake him up. Carefully I placed the palm of my hand on his shoulder and practiced gentle pressure; Batam woke up screaming as if thousand coals were severing it from the arm.

- But what are you doing here? Are you crazy? -He asked with wild-eyed and wiping away to clear the view.

-Leonardo is in danger and I'm here to see how to help.

Batam arose and I barely could contain my laughter watching the blouse, fuchsia and yellow, long up to cover his heels that served him for pajamas. Batam was very fond of the rich and vibrant colors and never was repressed by using them.

- But you could well announce you as a normal decent person and not appear in the rooms as well as if you were a ghost.

-There was no time. In addition, I am not normal or decent. I had a vision and I know that Duprina and Zoroastro are preparing something against Leonardo.

-Leonardo returned yesterday from the Arayas. Tiarano and Zoroastro cited him before the Council. It is rumored that he will be interrogated in relation to your escape. They already interrogated Americus, but they could not prove anything.

-Is a public questioning? If so, I should be there.

Batam put his hands to the head. He wasn't sure that my decision was correct and was worried that my presence could stir up some kind of commotion in the Court. It was not the first time that I got him into trouble.

-Yes, it is public - answered- I imagine that you will know that at the time that you put your feet in that room, you will be arrested.

I ignored this possibility and I kept questioning him:

-When is the audience?

-In the early hours of the afternoon.

I went to the window. The city of the Magicians was shocked. Some farmers began to crowding at the gates of The Fortaleza to be present at the interrogation. The guards struggled to contain them since the Court space was not enough to locate them all.

-This is becoming a circus -I said ruefully recalling the Eisenbaum just one year ago. The friendliness of people and respect for each other seemed a distant memory now.

Finally, the Genie decided to help me.

-If we are going to attend, you must camouflage -he said- No one can go dressed as you are!

And searching his belongings he found a black coat with hood, very long, ideal for clandestine activities, which he threw me for my use. I tried it and was perfectly adjusted to my size. Then, we waited together until the scheduled time.

Arriving at the room, we were located in one of the banks of the first row. Five magicians were on the podium, dressed in red wine and black layers and seated behind a huge oak table which held at both ends chandeliers whose lighted candles bathed the room with a strong smell of burned wax. A container full of coals sprang a faint smell of frankincense and myrrh. The wizards faced a file of papers; they seemed engrossed in his review and stared and commented on each other.

Suddenly, a double-leaf door opened and Zoroastro entered, and another man, identified by the Genie as Tiarano; they walked to a podium to preside over the ceremony. Some peasants, who had entered the enclosure, joined the wizards and sorceresses congregation and took place on banks located on the sides. The noise was deafening.

Batam, beside me, sat and warned me with caution exclamations.

-Beware! Don't let them see your face! Stay still! Do not breathe! Don't move! Do not watch out! I think that you are watching!

The truth was that I couldn't do much for hiding my face, as I was looking for Leonardo all over the room; it was very difficult to keep the cap on my face since it was so large that it continuously glided up to my back. After a while I saw him entering the room, he seemed taller than usual, with the facial glow as white as the snow and the firm steps of winners. If there was something to refute it was the companion hanging on his arm: Duprina, who in her winding walk, was constantly whispering phrases to his ear and laughed with the rural charm of a partridge. She had, as it was her custom, a pronounced cleavage wearing a sleeveless blouse and a skirt in gauzy fabric, adhering to the legs outlining her figure; and my fury would have exploded if I hadn't seen Leonardo trying to get rid of her stubborn embrace with a grimace of annoyance. However, I could not help to remove from my mind the following thought: *What attractive harpy Duprina is!... and what subtle movements she has! The same as a snake before releasing the bite!*

Arriving Leonardo at the podium, he was conveniently located in the seat appointed especially for him, in order to observe Zoroastro's intervention. Zoroastro was not a great orator; he lacked the necessary skills to be a good verbal architect and neither has he movement fluidity. He did not know the grammatical or moral laws that should be observed in order to take thoughts and convert them into words, to communicate exactly the message one wish to disclose. His stiff gestures discredited the ostentatious position that as Regent Magician was exercising. Zoroastro openly hated Eisenbaum, the Brotherhood and all that it represented. The only thing that his sick ego wanted was power and was willing to get it at all costs; and what he could not get with magic he would get it by dint of traps and tricks. What a good consortium magic and traps were!

I thought that this town was very naive to be cajoled by his boasts and lies. However, time would make me understand that I was the naive and that all people are susceptible to deception by uttering the correct lie; in other words, by hearing what they want to believe.

Zoroastro monologue continued its course; legal terminologies made some peasants yawn and scratch their head in sign of misunderstanding. He had drafted a document needlessly decorated with too much adjectives. Had browsed dictionaries, encyclopedias and some items of famous writers, and extracted from each what he thought it was better, in order to give his writing the strength and prestige of a legal document. However, the

completeness of his work had been lost in the labyrinth of legalisms that confused rather than clarify, as it had been his pristine intention.

He spent two hours talking and at the end of his presentation other magicians had their intervention; but theirs only lasted a few minutes. In short, they claimed that Leonardo had helped with the escape of a suspect accused of fraud and false testimony, but at the time of the contribution of evidences, none presented any by which it was concluded that it was a rumor without solid foundations for its checking; circumstance that was convenient, in my opinion, since the magician was free of all suspicion.

For his part, Leonardo was indeed prodigal with words and eloquences and launched a speech, as lawful and forceful that even I was very convinced that the wizard had nothing to do with my escape. What a good speaker Leonardo was!... by means of words and forcefulness left the poor Zoroastro exposure made smithereens and from his skybox he was glowing from anger and impatience.

Soon after Americus arose and there was great excitement in the room. In any case, you could see that he still had much support from the people. He approached Leonardo and gave him a large and enthusiastic hug. Both were happy that their names had been cleaned. I wanted approaching them to be part of their joy but Batam stopped me advising me caution and prudence; so, much to my regret, I could only absorb the scene from afar.

I was going out of the enclosure when I felt the pressure of fingers that stuck to my forearm. I turned, and to my surprise, I found the figure of Zoroastro, smiling in a sarcastic manner and retaining me against my will. Seeing the scene, the Genie, who was next to me, became pale and on the verge of hysteria, and for a few moments, I thought that he would fall to the ground.

-The fugitive is here! -enacted Zoroastro shouting.

When he delivered those words both Leonardo and Americus turned their heads in my direction and I could distinguish the astonishment face of both. They immediately approached the center of the commotion.

For my part, I was trying to get away from the horror fingers, but his hand were like claws and was very little what I could do.

-My plan succeeded. I knew that as soon as you knew that we were going to interrogate Leonardo, you would be here.

At that moment I realized that everything had been a trap orchestrated by Zoroastro and Duprina to reach me. Leonardo and Americus intervened and tried to mediate in my favor, but Zoroastro, who had already planned the scene had everything prepared and had given the order to the guards to escort me to the dungeon; and as the Genie had been with me at the hearing, he was also accused of complicity and stopped next to me. Within minutes, both were locked in the stones dungeons just where we had been a year earlier.

-It seems that history repeats itself -I said trying to seem funny and downplaying the matter.

The Genie was disconsolate and frightened, clung with both hands to the rails trying to move them, but these have not yielded.

-Oh, God! I am sure that something bad is going to happen. They will surely want to lynch us in the central square to give the example. Oh, God! And what if they broil us at the stake? I don't know what I would do if that happens. Or if, on the contrary, lead us to offshore and throw us into the ocean with our hands tied to be devoured by sharks.

-Would you please calm down? -I said with resolution- all I need is a mirror to get out of here.

The Genie looked at me with eyes of despair.

-Ah, No! You won't let me alone here. Will you?

I looked at him with sweetness and put my arms around his shoulders.

-Of course not! I will not go anywhere! I don't want to be fleeing. I want to continue with my teaching in witchcraft and face the charges I have to face and pay what I have to pay. It may not be so bad.

-Don't know. These magicians are so strange. One of these nights while I was going to the dining room in search of a sandwich, since I had not eaten well and began to have a slight tingle in the pit of the stomach due to lack of food, spotted Zoroastro conversing with Duprina at the foot of the staircase that leads to the rooms in the north wing. They could not see me because I hid me behind a column to hear their conversation. There I heard when Zoroastro told Duprina that he must capture you because he required that you were on his side. He said you were a weapon and, as war approached, it was convenient that you were on his side; also said that if he was not able to convince you he would destroy you.

-Me? A weapon? What would he mean with that? -I was really intrigued.

-Don't know -he said- but as soon they cleared the staircase I immediately retired to my room and held the sting until the other day. I didn't want they thought I was spying on them!

I sat on a small stone stool to sort my thoughts. If anything was certain was that I would never be on the Zoroastro's side. The Genie also sat next to me listing all the atrocities that could be happening, if they declared us guilty.

Leonardo and Americus immediately appeared at the top of the small staircase leading to the cell. Americus was calm but Leonardo fumed me by the eyes and looked very upset; approached reprimanding me for having ignored his recommendation to stay in my house and accusing me of being stubborn and indomitable for not measuring the consequences of my actions. Also accused me of dragging Batam to a situation in which he had no fault. And while he accused me, Batam nodded.

And as the list of accusations remained and continued, I opted for

defending myself against such assertions. It seemed as if Leonardo's head had been accumulating the fumes of his impatience towards my conduct and at this final act he had surpassed the limit of this virtue. However, I was not a person to stay quiet while my proceeding was being questioned, moreover when I was only defending his reputation. A wave of indignation took me by assault and started to refute each of his accusations:

-I was not at home because I had friends here who were going through bad times and I thought that I could help! I could not stay doing nothing while they paid the consequences for my actions! And if that makes me stubborn, then yes, I'm stubborn and indomitable, and with great pride. Batam was accused unfairly and I'll get him out of here, I assure you.

Tempers were exalted. Americus had remained silently observing the interrelationship between us. In the end, he participated to appease us.

-You must stay calm. Fighting will not achieve anything! -said in a jocular tone and instantly ended the confrontation.

-What will happen to us? -I asked Americus who had approached close enough to take my hands through the bars.

-Tomorrow the Committee will meet and discuss disciplinary measures. Neither Leonardo nor I can attend but I have good contacts that will keep me informed of everything that happens in that room.

-Do you think that they will use that kind of inquisition that Zoroastro is promoting with us? -Asked Batam on the verge of panic.

-I don't think so -he said in a conciliatory tone.

Leonardo was quieter and all he did was looking at me.

-I have a concern. Batam heard Zoroastro when he told Duprina that I was a weapon. Do you know what he meant with that?

-Oh, Yes! You're threatening him. Didn't you observe to what happened today? In the courtroom?

I denied with a slight nod.

-As you were guarded, farmers staged a small tumult and rose up in your defense. You did not see it because guards pulled you quickly out of the lounge. Zoroastro has long been working with certain people in the village and thought that he had them in his possession. Then he imprisoned you and all the support he had accomplished was destroyed in a jiffy. You are a weapon in power! You have the gift of leadership, the power of magic and the power of the world of men. I bet the magic has already started to develop in you, without intervention from us. You are learning from the very source. A power like that does not know limits, which are the reason why Zoroastro will do everything possible to have you on his side... or destroy you.

Then he paused long and changing the subject asked me:

-The last time I saw you, I left you a task.

-Yes -agreed- the task of the symbols.

- And you know what they mean?

-Yes, the symbols are material representations of forces or abstract powers.

Then, he looked at me sweetly and very pleased he said:

-Bravo! You should never forget it. Repeat what you just tell me.

-Symbols are material representations of forces or abstract powers.

Then, he nodded.

-You would have to spend the night here -claimed the old man- we should leave but will return tomorrow.

Then they parted.

I never liked confined spaces, and much less, with Batam reciting out loud all the possible scenarios of the worst things that could happen to us in the following hours. It was lit the dawn and we remained still waiting for news.

About nine o'clock in the morning, Leonardo hastily entered and clinging to the gate, with a face that denoted urgency, he began to say:

-I do not have much time. So pay a lot of attention. There will be no Committee meeting. The decision about you was made last night in a special session. You will be taken to the Febo's Island along with five others convicted.

-Febo's Island? -Interrupted - and where is that?

-It doesn't matter where it is! It sounds ugly! -Batam, said.

-Listen without interrupting! Febo is a giant of nearly two meters and abundant red hair. He has always lived on the island and the only time he gets out to the outside world is to steal magical art objects for his collection. He is not very intelligent but is very strong and rough. Years ago he stole the Abundance Horn from the Rome Brotherhood, and no one has been able to recover it. Many inmates have landed on the island but never survive. Do you understand?

-Of course she understands! We are going to die! -Shouted Batam trembling with fear.

-Listen! Febo's mansion is around the center of the island. You should go there and bring the Horn. With this act, all your faults will be purged.

-What fault if I don't have any? -The Genie said.

Leonardo continued:

-You must very be careful with the "grelis" which are little goblins, which abound on the island and are very evil. Do not trust anyone. Febo's mansion is walled and the main entrance is cared by two large creatures with the body of a lion and the face of an eagle. Under no circumstances you should enter the mansion by the wall but by the main entrance.

-What? Are you crazy? -Batam argued - if those creatures are there as you say, we will be shattered.

-Listen! Please, pay attention to everything I say! The boat will leave you on the island at twelve noon and they have to pick you up tomorrow at the same time. If you are not in the dock at that hour, the boat will go and

will not return. After twenty-four hours you will forget who you are and even if I were to rescue you will not recognize me and would see me as your enemy. From the first moment you step on the island, your memories will start to fade little by little. Zoroastro is counting on that so that you do not remember your magic.

-God! That is a lot of information what you are giving me. Batam, I hope that you're listening too.

- But the more I hear, the more terrified I am –responded.

Leonardo pulled a reliquary out of his pocket and handed it to me; told me that there was a talisman inside that would help me to pass unnoticed in front of the creatures guarding the giant's gate.

-Put it on your neck and it would make you invisible to the eyes of animals. Remember not to stare directly into their eyes since you will be shattered if you do so; as long as you do not watch them, they won't be able to damage you. As for the ogre, use your knowledge on Botany, there are enough herbs on the island. If you have to sleep, sleep one at a time. There are many other creatures on the island and some are even cannibals.

As Batam heard the word "cannibal" the thermometer of his fear raised.

-Ca-nni-bals? -Repeated- they are sending us to an island of CANNIBALS AND HOW DO THEY EXPECT WE RETURN. CHEWED?

When I was about to ask him if anyone had survived this so dreadful punishment, the door opened and Zoroastro, Duprina and a group of guards entered.

-Wow, Leonardo -he said- now I see that you are not wasting your time sticking your nose where it does not concern you.

Leonardo moved away from the gate and answered with pride:

-Of course! I am part of the escort that will take them to the island - and saying this he handled the authorization which had been signed by the Committee. Zoroastro took the paper and read it with contempt, then returning it to his owner, said:

-I see that you still have influence in the Committee.

Then they opened the gates and the guards took us and made us walk down a long hallway, where gradually were incorporated, one by one, the other inmates up to five. I was the only woman in the group. In addition to Batam, there were two young thugs, dirty and smelly-like, two men of advanced age, with little mobility making a great effort to walk and one even older that eventually had to stay because he could not ride onto the cart that would take us to the pier. Us, inmates, were in an outdoor cart, so that persons of the village could observe us for more derision. In one of the corners, I saw Severa, who came to the cart moving and threw me a kind of small stone which landed in my lap. The stone had attached two tiny bags that I later recognized as tea bags. Then I remembered our jasmine and

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orange tea afternoons and wanted intensely go back to relive those delicious evenings in which the unrestrained gathering accompanied by sweet doughnuts refreshed the heat of the day. I also thought of my sisters, Salome, Ño Josefina, my grandfather Gennaro, Bartolomeo, Nicanor, the Victors, Leonardo and Americus. And after thinking and thinking, I decided to save the tea bags and concentrate on the present moment. The wagon went out of town and turned toward the dock. Leonardo and the other escorts followed by horse. Duprina remained in The Fortaleza savoring her triumph, and of course, Zoroastro was also part of the escorting caravan.

11
FEBO'S ISLAND

Zoroastro's Machiavellian machinations, I must say, were much more macabre and twisted than I would have ever been able to imagine. And if I express myself in these eloquent terms, so little flattering towards him, it is because irrefutably, and in a fairly short period of time, I had to suffer in the flesh the reaches of his overwhelming revenge. Zoroastro was a despicable and resentful being flooded with a false sense of authority. As enemy was brutal and treacherous, he implemented grotesque actions, thinking them, analyzing them and carrying them out, without any sense of proportion, with the sole purpose of inflicting the greatest possible damage to the recipients of his punishment. Everyone knew his relationships with ceremonial black magic. However, no one dared to defame him or denounce him, taking into account that the few that tried, ended up buried six feet under in the depths of the Death Valley or missing from the face of the Earth. Feared, more than respected, he was considered the Lord of Shadows and he acted with absolute impunity governing the creatures of the dark side of magic.

However, as I learned later, Zoroastro hadn't always been like that: the terrible creature that transits evil and violence fairways, by distilling sorrows and calamities everywhere he goes. No! There was a time in which he was a child so tender and delicate as any other, whose loops, gilded by the sun, abundant, hung from his head as grapes from a French vineyard in harvest time; and with the smooth face of an angel, as the one emulated by Raphael Sanzio hands in his wonderful painting, "The Two Angels". With respect to his parents or relatives, no one had never heard of them; and of his childhood, very little was known. What strange force led him along the paths of evil? What was the cause of his undoing? It was a mystery.

When we finally arrived at the port, the ocean was calm and serene, in contrast to the anguish sea that I was feeling inside. A handful of gulls dipped in the blue, alternatively, to re-emerge from the heavy waves then, victorious, with the fishing product hanging in their beaks, which would serve them, subsequently, as food. The silhouettes of some planted coconut trees along the coast, leaning by the action of the wind, in pitiful attitude, bent as if they were carrying a heavy load, folding in reverence as

sympathizers of our unique destiny.

Leonardo approached the cart to help me descend. Batam and four other inmates were behind me. We had our hands tied with a thick and strong rope with a knot in the style of the sailors, which were greatly hurting our wrists. I felt the same as an African slave, transported by pirates to be sold to the highest bidder in the new world, back in the days of the colony.

The boat was of an exuberant theatricality, all conditioned to cause more fear and uncertainty as possible. The sails, hoisted, wilted and yellowed by the harassment of saltpeter and time, were raised, weak and lazy, almost about to collapse over the bare-bones boat. The obsolescence of the ship was reflected, unfortunately, in the lacerations of the wood which composed it; dirty, black, rotten and wet wood that threatened to capsize the boat at the smallest provocation; the old musty smell and oxide stains were everywhere in sight. All there creaked: the floor creaked, the rails creaked, the chairs creaked, the mast creaked; even the members of the crew, creaked. The captain was a middle-aged man; very outlandishly dressed, tanned face by the excessive sun, a fluffy beard covering a mouth that was missing some front teeth and made his smile looked like a corn which had been amputated some grains. Seeing the boat and crew condition, I sensed that Zoroastro's intention was that we wrecked in transit, before we got to the island.

Already shipped, the magician took away our ties, after a heated discussion with Zoroastro, who intended to keep us tied, as sheep, during the journey. And it is that Zoroastro's machinations had no price. Sailors were not very happy with my presence on the boat. Being a woman, they considered me as bearer of bad omens and, possibly, as a cause of a likely shipwreck. Batam was very scared, since the moment we climbed on the boat he sat on a bench, as had been told, and did not move, either by fear or because nausea wouldn't allow it. At all times, Leonardo was next to me, repeating his recommendations and encouragement words.

Suddenly, as a confirmation that my presence was bearer of bad omens, a thick fog began to cover the boat, and the sailors, afraid, blamed me for that natural event! As if I had the power of Jupiter on bad weather and tides! The sea, serene when we sailed, now was enraged, powerful, enormous, shedding the sails and turning them into broken strips hanging from the mast with an undulating motion that looked like the tongue of a dark monster making woods creaked even more, incessantly, as if Neptune were splitting the ship with his two hands. During the period of time that the storm lasted it was all movement and confusion. Sailors ran everywhere carrying straps and ropes to ensure everything that could be secured. Batam had risen from the bench and clung with a hug to my waist, and with this simple action he almost put me on the verge of strangulation. On the other hand, Leonardo made every effort to protect me from the intense wind and

deafening noise. The wind was so strong an intense that we could hardly move in search of a better site. Zoroastro, meanwhile, in the cockpit, spit orders over the sailors who couldn't do anything else but rather run, tie and hold objects that the wind flew through the air, fast, to crash in the swirling waves that roared with ardor. We, at plain rail, stayed together, crammed and soaked, tasting salt water that the waves threw with fury and without mercy upon our helpless faces. After a few minutes, the storm stopped as quickly as it had begun; but the hostile look that the sailors gave me made me fear for my life.

Fortunately, at sight, the silhouette of an island was approaching: Febo's island. Both Batam and other defendants stood up and walked to my side, for better observation of the island that soon would be our final destination. It was not very large but very populated by coastal vegetation: stylized palms, dunes and intricate shrubs. A necklace of white sand surrounded the entire island. In the distance, I spotted the outline of what was the pier built with a bunch of stones united by some agglutinant element. The beach looked very beautiful from the boat, the same as those warm waters beaches from the Caribbean Sea. Leonardo approached to whisper to me:

-Do not be fooled by the beauty of the surroundings. In this case, beauty is a trap. You should be very careful!

Batam also listened with attention and stealth; then he began to tremble.

As soon as we disembarked, they drove us to the shore; I could see, much to my regret that the sailors were very pleased to leave me there, in those conditions so unfavorable to any human being.

Then, Zoroastro, acting in his capacity as judge and executioner of the judgment, took from his pocket a wrinkled and old paper sheet and using that tone of voice so tyrannical and authoritarian that dictators use when targeting people, he recited a few hypocritical words of encouragement; and once he had spoken, gave the order to the bodyguards and staff to embark the boat again.

Leonardo came to me. The farewell scene, as all the real-life drama, was punctuated with a touch of cunning and comedy. And this touch was starring by Batam, who at the very moment to set his foot on the white sand, collapsed, falling on his knees with a vanquished resigned attitude; but in a very theatrical and dramatic way that emerged the smile on the faces of everyone. Other inmates ran deep into the depths of the jungle, ignoring my recommendation that we worked as a team.

Ah! But Leonardo in his farewell prepared me a surprise that left me full of amazement and excitement. The surprise was the words that he whispered in my ear, and that I would remember forever, even years later, whenever I was facing so drastic and final situations such as the ones I was facing there which merited the aid of a foray into the joys of life. After an

embrace that lasted many seconds and while I was still in his arms, then, he whispered these words:

-All the verses that you received were written by my hand. Please, Camila, come back to me! Promise me that you won't let anything wrong to happen to you.

<*Please, Camila, come back to me*>, these words, which had also been sealed with a kiss, echoed in my mind minutes later when Leonardo, hurried by the frantic cries of Zoroastro had to embark the boat and disappeared from my sight.

Batam urged me to walk towards the center of the island, as the other inmates did. We had lost sight of them, but lost as I was in the flow of my feelings, I did not quite assimilate what it just had happened: my dream, the novel of my imagination, whose main protagonists were Leonardo and me, jumping up to reality, came true.

Batam watched me worried:

-Camila, do you really think this is the time to reflect? Get off that cloud!

-But I'm happy, happy, and happy -I replied with great emotion- Leonardo loves me, do you know what that means? -I smiled so wide and to appease I had to give small jumping on the sand.

-Yes! It means that if we do not mobilize soon, instead of being happy, happy, happy, we'll be dead, dead, dead.

I immediately fell on account of our situation. There would be time for the musings of my mind and love affairs! Then, I looked around. It was a beach with white sands. The waves breaking on the shore, gently, leaving a trail of refreshing foam. Nothing seemed to insinuate that it was an evil, sinister place, but rather a tropical beach where at any time tourists may be sunbathing under the caresses of the oppressive sun.

-Come on! -Batam said- the others went over there -and pointed to one direction.

The indicated address did not inspire me confidence. The vegetation was very intricate and probably plagued with "grellis". I warned Batam that we should go another way.

-We must find coconut palms with toucans fluttering around their leaves.

-Are you sure? The scene that you painted looks more like coming out from the cover of a travel pamphlet than to reality.

-Trust me, Batam.

The Genie scrunched his pants to the knee, took off his shoes and tied them up by their braids to his waist and began to walk with me along the bay. Ah! Batam on the premonitions and hunches issues relied much on my common sense! After an hour of searching and not finding the trail, Batam was beginning to show signs of impatience.

-If the ogre mansion is in the center, any way we take toward the

center will take us there.

I tried to appease him with words:

-I am just trying to find the way with less danger. Do you remember what Leonardo said? "Grelis" are evil and I know they prefer intricate paths to ambush unwary walkers who cross them. And neither you nor I want to be those walkers, right?

The sense of danger never left us during the time we were on the island; especially when we heard the cries and screams of inmates when they were under attack. Cries so spooky and terrified as those only are heard in the torture rooms of some dictatorial regimes, cries that are recorded in the soul and won't be forgotten ever, much more, when you hear with the conviction that you can't do anything to help.

Batam, from a jump, stuck to me, preventing me from walking. He was terrified and overwrought.

-Calm down, Batam! We must continue, we can not spend much time in one place in order not to be tracked or we will be in trouble.

Embraced, we walked a few meters further and spotted a trail with coconuts clumps and toucans hovering around them, the same I saw in my vision.

-Oh thank you, God! -Batam said- I am very thirsty. Perhaps, if we move a bit we could find a river.

-We have no food or water.

The Genie stared at me a long time, then said:

-Ah! Haven't you? What you have tied around your waist looks like a water bottle and hopefully it contains water.

I looked down and there was a small water bottle tied with a multicolored ribbon to a few chocolates melted by the intense heat. Surely, Leonardo had placed them there when he gave me that wonderful hug that came attached to his love confession. With intense emotion I praised mentally the good sense of the magician, we took a bit of the wonderful nectar that water is and saved a little for later. Also saved some chocolates, although melted and glued to their packaging until hunger were more pressing.

All our forces were being drained by the walk and the sweltering heat. Batam dragged his feet sinking in the sand. Now we hardly talked. In this catatonic state in which we found ourselves, I had the feeling of being watched. As the time passed, the feeling became stronger and more forceful. I went to Batam with caution and I told him my feeling. Soon, he was alarmed:

-Oh, this cannot be! -He said scared- could it be an animal, a bug or a creature? Are you sure? Is it not that the heat is making you imagine things? What if they are cannibals? Oh, God! I don't want to die bitten and full of saliva! What are we going to do?

-Anything -I said- we will continue walking. We need to find a safe

place to spend the night.

The Genie walked quietly, looking on either side of the road.

-Do you think that it is one or more than one? -He asked concerned.

-Don't know. Do you remember when we met? When I asked what a genie did, do you remember your answer?

The Genie said yes and shook his head.

-I want you to do exactly that! Color Fog! And when you do, I want you to run towards the cave that is behind that tree, do you understand?

Again he nodded.

-Well done! We will make it to the count of three, one... two... three!

Batam showcased a thick black fog; so thick and dark that until we had problems to mobilize and find the cave. This trick was an excellent because allowed us to escape from the "grelis" who began their attack at the precise moment in which the Genie began his act.

Already under the protection of our cave and after a quick inspection of the site, we looked out and dedicated to studying the strange creatures that Leonardo had mentioned: the grelis. They were small, hairy and with unpleasant aspect; had huge eyes that occupied half of their face and moved in herds. They seemed taken aback that we had escaped.

-They must be very concerned their dinner escaped -Batam pronounced.

Then we heard another scream; it looked like one of the young thugs who had embarked with us. The "grelis" dissipated and ran towards the place where the scream had come.

Batam-Al- Bur was frightened. Fear would not let him think; and this fear condensate in his bowels extended its claws over his body and gave him a pale grayish color to his complexion. I felt sorry for him, that he would have to go through such a situation because of my fault. He was such a good friend that was not even expressing loudly the disputes or misfortunes he was experiencing.

I decided that the cave would be a good place to spend the night.

-We'll spend the night here, Batam. The "grelis" do not approach caves. They are afraid of confined spaces; I could see it in their eyes. Don't ask me why I know it, but so it is.

Batam leaned back on one of the stones that were abundant in the cave. Mentally I had already outlined a plan to bring me to the Febo's mansion, but could not do so with Batam. His fear paralyzed him, instead I, a little more trained in issues of survival, would take me half the time in the coming and going to the mansion, if I achieved the Genie remained in the cave: I will try to rescue the Prosperity Horn by myself.

I took the chocolate and shared it with him; it was melted and sticky but tasted as an exquisite delicacy. I took some water from the bottle, and elsewhere, pour the tea Severa had given me and offered it to Batam. I knew that it would put him to sleep for a while and that would be very

good in accordance with the guidelines of my plan; at least while I go and come to the ogre mansion. That was the plan.

I booked another sachet for the big guy. Then some minutes later, as soon as the Genie took the tea fell asleep on the same rock where he had been sitting moments before. I settled him as I could on the cave hard surface and he seemed to be quite comfortable given the smile emerging on his face. Due to the rudimentary conditions of the place, I took his turban, made a ball then placed under his head as a pillow. I hid the entrance to the cave with a few leaves from fallen palms that I took from the surrounding and left him a written note in the sand detailing my plan, just in case he wake up before my return.

After having fulfilled all these considerations, I left and a starry sky greeted me with passion. The moon, with her round face, smiled at me from the heights, illuminating me very well the path. I squeezed Leonardo's reliquary in an attempt to emulate his proximity, but in doing so, it opened and a slight line of light joined the one emanating from the moon. The magician had thought of everything. With the light of the moon and the light of the reliquary I could walk without problems in the deep dark of the night. Then, I smiled.

Meanwhile, in Eisenbaum, a very different scene unfolded at Americus' residence. Leonardo and his father talked about current events and the concern was reflected in their faces.

-I know Zoroastro, father. I know that he will do everything within his reach so the inmates succumb on that island. They won't have the chance to come back. I must do something: so I would take advantage of the darkness of the night to sail there and make sure I bring Camilla and the others back.

Americus scowled; he was aware of the dangers involved in a raid on the island, and despite the fact that he did not want to expose his son to these dangers, also understood that it was the only way out they had to rescue us.

-You are right! But must be very careful as Zoroastro and his team are expecting you do precisely what you are planning to do in order to accuse you of conspiracy. I am sure that we are being watched. There are two men stationed behind some bushes in front of the house these days.

Leonardo stepped restless by the reduced space that was the hall, ventured up to the window and looked out to see what his father had informed.

-I knew it. That is why I cannot use magic, but I have a plan.

When Americus was going to ask about the plan, a dry sound announced that someone was knocking at the door. Immediately, the magician went over and opened it. Severa and the Victors were gathered at the gate frame.

In the small hall of the house, the magician informed of the plan. It

was simple; and precisely because of its simplicity, it had many chances of success. That night they would have dinner and would act as if nothing was happening; in this way they would make believe to the spies that Severa and her sons visit were purely a courtesy. After evening, Severa would leave and Leonardo would leave the house as if he were one of her sons, Victor Rafael would remain with Americus, taking the place of the magician, so dressing Leonardo's outfits until the next day. Once the group had left the residence, Leonardo would rush to the port where one of the members of the Brotherhood had been advised to make arrangements to transport him to the island and wait for the group to bring them back to Eisenbaum.

At nine o'clock in the evening, he began to execute the plan. They dined without delay, as main dish was served orange chicken, seasoned with anguish and uncertainty, accompanied by a creamy puree and glazed carrots; as a beverage, a wine, Château Margaux, enough moderate doses availed not to breathe the clarity of the understanding and played some music pieces from the father of the Symphony, Franz Joseph Haydn, very proper for the occasion.

After a reasonable period of time Severa followed by her sons headed toward the porch and began walking slowly toward the cart, as planned. The night was cool and the moon faintly outlined their silhouettes. A cool breeze was squeezed among the cedars and pines on the East side and directly hit their bodies, increasing their amazement and distress.

Zoroastro's spies lagging behind some bushes witnessed the scene. Meanwhile, Severa, Leonardo and the remaining Victors contained their breath and without much flaunt, rode in the cart; Americus and Victor Rafael waved their hands from the door as a sign of farewell, covered by the penumbra of the porch. Once the wagon pulled away, they relaxed and entered the room. The escape was underway.

Hundreds of miles away, I still struggled to find the path that would lead me to Febo's mansion; but the visibility was zero because a thick fog had blocked my step and vision completely, forcing me to crawl along the sandy ground and probe the area with my bare hands. I would not advance much in this position. However, it was the only way I had forward at that moment. After a long walk dragging, I felt a presence. "Something" was near me. That "something" was crawling like me, producing strange sounds; I paid a lot of attention trying to decipher what it was. Then, I thought it might be a reptile and fear started to take shape in my mind.

-No "grelis" please! -I begged.

However, I did not stop my dragging and continued as I could. After a few minutes, my hand stumbled upon another and my cry was joined to the other, and my stupor was joined to the other, thus my anguish, so my fear. In front of me, despite the fog; the silhouette of a young man drew slightly and nailed me with his eyes as if they were two daggers. We saw each other for some seconds and when both recovered our composure, the mutual

interrogation took place:

-Who are you? -I could barely ask, rescuing the soundness of my voice. The other person took his breathing and said very emotionally:

-My name is Freitas and you must be the woman on the boat, right?

I recognized one of the young offenders whose appearance did not inspire me confidence.

-That's me! My name is Camila. Have you heard from the others?

-It is only us -was his only response.

I sensed that everyone else had died; but I didn't want to hear the details of those terrible deaths, so I didn't ask.

-Do you know that only one of us will leave the island? -He asked with malicious and intimidating tone rising and shaking the sand from his clothes.

-Yes. I know.

-I am glad you know -he continued sarcastically- because that'll be me.

I tried to control my nerves. I knew I couldn't trust him but didn't want to have him as my enemy or openly confronted him. I looked at him with indifference, also incorporating me until my eyes were at the same height as his. We seemed two foxes trying to calibrate the ferocity of the other.

-If that is your decision, I respect it! But we can make a consortium and help each other to get to the mansion, once there the best will win -I expressed conciliatory.

The mist began to clear up so I could see his rustic features and scars coming from side to side his cheeks.

-I agree -he added- Let's walk; have no time to lose.

And he wanted to seal the pact with a strong handshake; so he lengthened his to find mine. But his was dry, full of calluses and abundant cracks squamous, weeping sweat; and mine was so soft, despite have been dragged through the sand, so rosy, so full of life, which in no way wanted to crash on the one waiting on the other side. However, for the sake of survival, I tried to control my repulsion and placed mine on his. It was not time to go with presumptions. I immediately pulled back and stopped a few steps away. His eyes, fixed and challenging, rested on me; for my part, I walked away a little bit more and started walking.

I wanted to know a little about him and asked the reason why he was serving sentence. He looked at me again, and spitting at the side of the road, put his two fingers over his lips cleaning the remains of saliva, then paused and answered:

-I killed two peasants and you?

His fierce eyes looked at me waiting for my reaction to his response. I should reply, without showing signs of fear; as if what I just heard had not torn the limits of my sanity. I took a few seconds to ponder what my answer would be. Then I said:

-I killed four.

He smiled, as if by the affinity of our crimes we became, instantly, best friends. My answer seemed to satisfy him greatly, because from there on we traveled the path without major setbacks; as if an intricate code of honor had amalgamated us in the same level of crime.

It was almost seven o'clock in the morning when we arrived to the vicinity of the mansion. A walled house stood on top of a sandy hill, not very steep. The walls were stone solid, not very high, so one could see most of the structure of the building. Hidden under the cover of the now squalid vegetation, we looked carefully for the best way to go.

We were hiding behind some shrubs but they did not cover us completely. Ah! But it was there when Freitas brought out the truth of his dark intentions; with a loud bang that he punched in my ribs, he left me lying on the ground while he rushed toward the wall with the intention of jumping it. My warning cries announcing that the only possible entrance was the front door were in vain. He thought that it was a trick to take him to a certain death. I heard his footsteps unchecked until the wall skirt; I listened as he took a momentum and jumped to the other side of the mansion; and I also heard, a few seconds later, a strong terror cry that confirmed me that he was being attacked, but there was nothing I could do. Then, there was only silence.

I stood as I could with my sore ribs; walked with much pain, dragging my steps. Freitas' hit had been strong; it had taken my breathing and speech. I walked hidden among the plants in parallel line to the wall to locate the main entrance. Just a few meters, I spotted it; and along with it I also spotted two winged creatures, with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle, located on either side of the entrance, in rest position. Their oblique eyes seemed to have a 180 degree view amounting to encompass the entire perimeter. I remembered the wise words of Leonardo: I should use the talisman and do not look at the eyes' creatures. I took my hands behind my neck and, to my dismay; the reliquary was no longer there. I checked my clothes hoping that it had fallen and engaged somewhere, but nothing. I had lost it, but where? Would it be possible that Freitas had snatched it? No, it was not possible; I had been careful enough during the whole journey and neither had he approached me to get it without my knowing. There was no time to go back to look for it; I had only five hours to fool the creatures, enter the mansion, locate Febo and put him to sleep, find the Prosperity Horn, locate Batam, escape and go to the beach to be rescued by the boat, without Febo and the creatures even noticing. Too many tasks for such a short time! And without the talisman I had to find a way of entering the residence without being seen. I had to think about the best strategy to achieve my task.

Wit is definitely the mother of all inventions. I remembered having seen, a few meters away, a handful of "pazote", an herb belonging to the

same family of parsley, which Severa taught me was a very aggressive irritating to the nasal and ocular graves of some animals. I thought I could crush them and spread them on my clothes, taking care of protecting my eyes and nose to avoid irritation, and with this small gadget I might cheat the monsters if they had nostrils as ours.

I quickly ran to the place where the "pazote" was, but when I got there, found that a herd of "grelis" had waghered in the place. They were seated in small circles and communicated with a strange language that came out with a throaty sound. A "grelis" of dark and pointy ears, apparently the one of higher rank, gestured and produced strange sounds at the center of the circle. The rest was winking and clapped at the same time.

I went face down on the ground, in a strategic location that allowed me to see them without them noticing me and kept that position for a long time. After the meeting, they all gathered to eat; and a very old greli loading a large pot served a kind of muddy mixture with remains of green leaves with a ladle on dishes of very rudimentary manufacturing. They devoured all in seconds with their bare hands. After the meal, each looked for a comfortable place to romp and sank into a deep sleep.

The group was not very large, eight grelis at the most. Few minutes past, I started moving slowly, step by step, without making any noise; I wanted approaching until the "pazote" crop was. As I walked I observed more closely these strange animals, they looked like squirrels but had long, curved hooves and long, sharp teeth as the walruses.

When I arrived at my destination, the group was still asleep. I carefully began to pull up the plants from the root; I didn't want to accidentally let escaping the irritant liquid from the leaves. I took a handful and tied it with a rope around my waist and started walking along the same path that took me there. When I already thought that my task had been successful, one of the grelis woke up and began to scream at an alarming rate, announcing my presence. Others joined screaming and tried to catch me. Ah! But I was very fast and, of course, more intelligent and wasn't going to let me caught by those rats-otter, nature scarecrows creatures. I wouldn't let them. I ran with a zigzag movement that apparently confused them and running as I was, turned to look back from time to time to appreciate the distance that separated me from them. Given that neither the race nor the distance diminish the determination of these 'things' to reach me, I resolved, squinting my eyes, go crushing the "pazote" and go releasing it while running with the mythological agility of Achilles.

I must say that this trick was an undisputed and simple success. The creatures began to roar as soon as they smelled the grass and began crying as hungry little babies, giving me time to disappear from their view and return to the road towards the mansion. However, I was not entirely unscathed; my own eyes were reddened by the irritation. With much effort I found a few steps away that other herb, very praised by Severa for its

healing qualities, which was the "plantain", very popular and widely used as remedy among the low income population for irritation and bleeding healing. Ah! How I congratulated myself for paying attention to Severa's classes and having conquered the secrets of Botany!

I started crushing the leaves against two stones as a mortar, crushed the delicate flakes until a green liquid began to spurt by the corners. I placed the sinuous liquid over my eyes, and then ditches! The light was made. Ay! Wonderful nectar! How wonderful the remedies of nature! The relief was instantaneous, and my eyes returned to have the sharpness of a sunny summer day.

Without loss of time, I kept a little of the remaining sumo in a huge banana leaf bended to contain the liquid and placed it in my pocket, where I saved it for later. Then I started with the crushing of the "pazote". To my surprise, and due to the plantain fluid I had in my eyes, the "pazote" did not irritate me. So at the end, I also wrapped it in a banana leaf, and also put it in my pocket. Another lesson I remembered was the one of the symbols by Americus: the material representation of abstract forces. I thought that it well could serve me as additional protection, in the event that the "pazote" failed; so taking some dried branches, and joining them with vines and lianas, I drew a David star and an Egyptian life cross. And if the "pazote" and the symbols failed, I would have to trust that the strength of my two legs were nimble enough to take me away from the creatures before they destroyed my life. With my arsenal ready, I steered toward the mansion.

I spotted the creatures a few meters away. As I walked, I prayed unceasingly, hoping that the grass and the symbols will work with them. If not, I would be lost, and, in addition to lost, dead. The beasts were placed one on each side of the door. They seemed to be asleep. I remembered I should not look them in the eyes. I downed my head and put me on the road in such a way that I only had to walk in one direction: forward and right. I gave a few steps, very shy at the beginning, with my head in that so uncomfortable position; the only thing that I could see was the land I was leaving behind. At a moment the dirt road finished and began a stone path that was the route to the house. I walked towards the entrance with fear and the banana leaves huddled inside and my hands in my pockets, ready to release the "pazote" when it is necessary.

I kept walking and walking. My breathing was choppy. The minutes were eternal, heard only the sound of my steps and my breath. Suddenly, next to these sounds others joined: that of creatures coming out of its lethargy and preparing to attack the intruder which I was. Without diminishing the passage, I kept moving. Felt, now, the footprints of the cats, coming up to me. I must not look at them, I don't look at them, not... -I repeated again and again inside me. I squeezed my eyes strongly. Do not open -I ordered them.

And while I was praying this rosary of denials, I thought that the only

instruments I had as guidance was the sense of smelling, hearing and touching. Hearing told me that the creatures were approaching. I kept walking. Smelling indicated a foul smell around me. I kept walking. Now the touching was the only sense missing. Touching indicated me the nearness of the creatures; and if I could feel them with my hand, it would only mean that I was within seconds of being attacked. I squeezed much more my eyes. A fluttering in my right ear told me that it was the “pazote” time. But poor me! Tragedies always come when you least expect them! The elusive banana leaf that I took out from my pocket, slipped from my hands, as silk slides on fingers, and falling with a movement slowly, slowly, went to crash on the floor. That action, the slip and the crashing against the pavement, was not witnessed by my physical eyes, which were closed following Leonardo’s recommendations, but through the eyes of my imagination. And as the physical eyes should remain closed in order not to fall into the spell of the beasts, the eyes of my imagination took their post: but they showed me only the musings of my mind and were not very helpful at that turning point of my life where I should find the banana leaf.

I knelt, trying to locate the leaf with my hands feeling the surface. Creatures bellowed, growling and throwing terrifying shrieks. I felt a flutter of their wings around my body and their movements. I was terrified, I could die in seconds. I was still groping and groping until finally, the elusive banana leaf found my hand and I could tear it without delay. Instantly, the first steamers were diluted in the atmosphere and in seconds the screams and movements became more serious and ferocious. The creatures fell to the ground and emerged bellowing much stronger and then fell again and did the same act three or four times more. This “pazote” dance as I named continued for fifteen minutes with me in the middle of the dance. Then, there was just total silence.

I, who was paralyzed by the situation, was afraid to open my eyes; so I continued moving, dragging across the pavement, until my hands touched the intricate wrought-iron grilles. I pushed it and it gave way easily. I gave three steps. Still silence. I plucked up courage, opened my eyes and turned my head slightly. On the other side of the gate two bodies lay on the paved road: two horrendous creatures turned into stone. A sense of relief invaded my body and I could see without discretion Febo’s mansion. It reminded me very much sorceress Zarnia’s mansion. It was a structure built with huge stones that gave it the appearance of a castle. Long windows enclosed in a very peculiar way, the edges were adorned with cherubs and gargoyles statues. And speaking of gargoyles, these were a recurring theme in the entire mansion. There was a long row of them on the roof top, crouching and looking down as if they were about to jump into the void. Another group, much smaller, was gathered on the left side of the porch, and had other in the flooded gardens of weeds. The house looked grim. Moss, fungi and humidity had drawn grotesque forms on the lock walls by the scourges

of time. Suddenly, one of the gargoyles moved and I assumed that it was one of the creatures that attacked Freitas. Fortunately, he did not see me.

-What else would I find? -I thought- walking gargoyles!

I went up to the house and peered through one of the windows of the first floor. None seemed to be living inside. I took the handle of the front door and with a gentle motion, I turned it. When it opened, chirped a little as an old sore; when I entered the hall a strong and unpleasant smell humidity hit my face. Entering Febo's mansion was like entering Madame Tussauds Wax Museum. Hundreds of objects were stacked all over: armors, statues, sculptures, figures, wax, etc. Many of the objects were works of ancient art; some furniture were mutilated and thrown on the floor, and other, newer ones, were covered with yellowish sheets that distilled the same smell of moisture.

Objects made very difficult for me to walk the place. The gargoyles from abroad were also here but these were sculpted in bronze and placed randomly around the room. I entered into what seemed to be a dining room and at the corner I seemed to see a person. After the initial shock, I realized that it was another bronze gargoyle.

-This Febo needs an interior decorator -I thought.

I continued with my inspection but nowhere had traces of the Horn. Then, desperation began to flood me, I spotted a large staircase, Baroque style, which dominated much of the stay and sighed. Of course! It could not be easy, I will have to climb; surely the Horn is in the superior rooms -I said aloud.

I wanted to find the blessed Horn and get my way out of there as soon as possible. That house was gloomy on the outside, but inside it was even more; because to the furniture and the gargoyles show that seemed to have their eyes fixed on me, also joined to the spectacle the gloom that seemed to hold unimaginable beings about to attack at any time.

I began climbing the stair accompanied by the sound of my footsteps. The stair was wood-made and the same as the wooden boat was black, damp and rotten, and could give up at any time. So, I was climbing slowly, clutching my rail, and only when I was completely certain of the strength of the floor, I took the next step. After a few minutes which seemed an eternity, I finally reached the upper floor. A long hallway stretched end to end, but as it was so dark, I couldn't see anything. Now, I had to come back down in search of a light and I regretted not having thought about this previously.

I went down again. This time, as I knew the way, it took me less time to get to the kitchen. On top of the stove, I got some matches and from the table a kerosene lamp. However, I had no time to light the lamp because a noise from outside told me that I was no longer alone. Scared, found a place to hide. There was no place in the kitchen; everything was too small to serve as a hiding place. I remembered the furniture under the sheets and

it seemed a good idea sheltering me there. I ran from the kitchen but couldn't make it to the room, so I had to hide in the dining room, under the covers of a cabinet full of dust and termites.

The heavy footfalls of the ogre rumbled throughout the house. He had encountered his guards turned to stone and suspected that someone had broken into his residence. After having revised superficially and have not found anything said to an old decrepit woman that came with him:

-Surely the creatures attacked each other and ended up becoming mutually stones -he growled.

Apparently they had not seen Freitas' body, or conversely, maybe the gargoyles had devoured him. I found this thinking very discouraging. The witch said:

-Now you will have to get another type of monsters to keep away intruders! These ones did not seem convincing. I could even say that they were a little silly: great body and little brain. At this moment we are unprotected.

The ogre scowled and sniffed the air and returned to the hall in search of strangers.

-Do you feel that smell?

-What odor? -Asked the old woman.

From my hiding place I could see Febo's figure. It was a giant of long reddish hair, populated and abundant eyebrows just like curtains that escorted his eyes. His arms were so solid that they surely could split a tree in two. The thunder of his voice resounded through the house corners growling insults and curses by having to waste time revising the house rather than enjoying his dinner.

The witch accompanying him was the opposite, small and fragile stooped, with hooked nose and warts on the face. She wore black, dirty and faded rags.

-It smelled of herbs outside and also in here -promulgated the ogre from the rooftops.

Obviously, the "pazote" had not had effect on them.

-Herbs? -The crazy woman said- you left the windows open again? Haven't I told you that they must remain closed because the gargoyles get in here and cause damage?

And they started a brawl in which each blamed the other of neglect for having left open windows that allowed the entry of unpleasant odors.

The woman headed to the kitchen to prepare the food and the ogre headed towards the stairs and went up to the upper floor. Meanwhile, the time ran out; I, hidden, under the protection of a few sheet scraps that were my only protection against these beings, remained obscured by the thought that yet I had to confront the ogre and the witch and find the Horn.

From my hiding place, I saw the witch in her kitchen, preparing a thick soup. She added roots that looked like ginger, an extract of crushed leaves,

a pair of beef eyes, four frog legs, a pinch of cumin, among many other things that I did not recognize. Then, I saw her humming a song, which sounded more like a lament, and shaking the concoction that was on the stove, whose fumes flew to mix with the smell of mildew from the walls. Then she took two huge bowls that looked like basins, and filled them with the soup that had just freshly prepared. Then dragging her weak body to the dining room, placed the bowls on the table and returned to the kitchen. It was my chance. I took the tea bags that Severa had given me and leaving my hiding place put the tea within the two soup bowls, in equal parts, which I frantically solved so do not leave signs on the surface of this additional ingredient. Immediately went back to my shelter.

To my surprise, when the ogre returned, he brought the Prosperity Horn with him. It was a piece of exquisite beauty carved completely in gold. The flashes of the candlelight made it shine even more in a mystical and mysterious way. I was captivated by its beauty.

The ogre took it and placed it next to the table; among the soup bowls and a stunted vase holding a branch of artificial flowers with effort.

-Are you going to settle again this thing on the table? -The witch moaned reluctant- come on! Not again!

Febo changed the conversation.

-I still smelled of herbs -He growled.

The old woman returned to attack him, calling him fussy and maniacal. He defended saying her decrepit and cripple. And after an exchange of insulting adjectives, they sat down to eat.

-This stew knows bizarre—the man said.

-Now are you going to insult my way of cooking? -the hysterical woman shouted.

-¡Enough! -Shouted Febo finally- let just eat in peace.

Spoons were just an accessory because Febo sipped the broth posing his lips directly over the bowl, without using this wonderful civilization instrument which is spoons; and taking pieces of eyes, legs, leaves and vegetables, with his fingers sucked them with excess of pleasure. The scene was grotesque and gave me nausea just looking at it. The witch ate little and retired minutes after leaving the giant in the dining room.

The minutes passed and I saw no signs that the numbing tea was doing its work. Suddenly, it happened, the giant slumped over the bowl to sink his face into it.

Taking advantage of this contingency and the fact that the witch was absent, I left my hiding place, took the Prosperity Horn and began running to the door. Already on the porch, with a quick glance I made sure that there was no errant gargoyles nearby which could hinder my way; then, I ran, and ran my heart out; the same as if a Bengal tiger was chasing me.

Then, in the distance, after having crossed bars and the stone creatures, I heard the cry of the witch and slightly turned my head towards

the house. I spotted her at the window. I had the certainty that she also saw me. So I undertook the running. My breathing became more rapid and the adrenaline began to supplement the breath that was missing. I didn't want to stop; not now that I had in my hands the object that would redeem all my sins. The Horn meant my return to Eisenbaum, the continuation of my apprenticeship as a witch and the return to Leonardo's arms.

And while I was running and thinking, I felt that something fluttered in the heights. When I turned to look, I observed that the witch was flying on a broomstick after me.

-God! -I thought- Why haven't I learnt to fly on a broom?

The witch screamed loudly, insulting me and calling me with incoherent phrases. Now I was the recipient of her insults! In addition, she was very agile with the broom and holding a stick she tried to hit me in the head. The only thing that made it difficult her maneuver was the height of the trees, since she had to go up and down to avoid crashing into any of them. This strategic location of the trees, on the other hand, favored me.

I was running since I still had to look for Batam and arrive to the coast where the boat would collect us but the old witch continued with her rod trying to boot my brains. I stumbled upon the roots of a leafy tree and fell. The Horn ran away from my hands and rolled up to a sort of gutter, dusty and filled with dry leaves. The witch took this fall to land and pounce on me, but wisely so bad that when she was about to catch me, I turned away and she fell to the ground. I got up, picked up the Horn, and kept running. The witch returned, took the broomstick, and continued to chase me through the air, throwing punches at random with her rod. This situation was already beginning to get me angry.

And as if this were not bad enough, I came across the group of "grelis" which had received my treatment with "pazote" and recognizing me as the author of their misfortune, joined the witch in a hunt in which I was the only prey. As I ran, the sweat and tiredness were taking over my body; I panted like a thirsty dog but my persecutors were treading my heels for what I could not give in to exhaustion. I continued running.

Already approaching the cave where Batam should be expecting me, I entered a twist on a terrain covered by thick vegetation. With this small trick I was seeking to cancel the witch persecution in the air. There she could not follow me on broom because the trees would prevent her, and being an old woman it was impossible for her to reach me on the ground. This maneuver would also move me away from the "grelis", whose sharp teeth would be entangled in the vines that hung from the trees of that small forest and would desist to pursue me. My plan succeeded because after a few minutes I didn't hear from the witch or the "grelis"; by which I went back to the road and walked confidently towards the cave.

I went into the cave, still out of breath, but there were no signs of the Genie. A strange anxiety seized me. Where had he gone? Have he been

captured? If so, by whom? I prayed for him. I thought about going to the coast, if the Genie was well, I would probably find him there. I came out of the cave, and at that moment found myself surrounded by the witch and the "grelis". I looked around: there was no way to escape.

The scenery was beautiful, lush vegetation, the immensity of an open-sky exhaling its wonderful clouds as cotton flakes sheltering all of us, as if we were receiving a special bubble bath. However, despite this visual wonder, disappointment arose in my mind gushing and flooding the hope I had to come out alive from this meeting. The witch approached, a slight breeze lifted her skirt and twisting her hat in a move that seemed of mockery. The "grelis", for their part, also were sieging me. Death was around... and greeting me from afar. Death was walking towards me and it was close, very close.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I thought of my sisters; wished I would have spent more time with them. They didn't even know that I was there. I thought of Bartolomeo and the wonderful life he was living in our home. I felt remorse for having brought the Genie up there, in an adventure that was not for him. I thought of Ño Josefina and Salome. I thought of Leonardo. He had told me that he loved me, and I wished I would have had more time to enjoy this love. Oh! Poor me! Having found love and not having time to enjoy it! At least, I had won the battle to Duprina. But what follies was I thinking? With my disappearance she would surely return to the conquest; and she will be closer to Leonardo to provide him comfort with her skirts, necklines and Carnival dolphins parading through her breasts. Who wouldn't succumb to an arsenal like that?

And while I was thinking, sad and fainting, since there was no time to run or hide as I was trapped in the cave with no way out, I waited, resignedly, that my bloody destiny might be fulfilled.

But then... thanks, God!... like a speedy bird, something intervened between myself and my persecutors: a beam of white light, as white and blinding that flooded the jungle with the clarity of the sun, the moon and the stars, all together, in a single saving clarity. The witch and the "grelis" were paralyzed by the shock of this clandestine luminescence which granted me and Leonardo the precious minutes for our escape. Meanwhile, for my side, I only had time to observe, amazed, the agility and cunning of my savior hero, my medieval knight! As Romeo! As Tristan! And me as his princess! His Juliet! His Isolda!

We ran heart out towards the coast and Leonardo told me the Genie was waiting for us at the boat. I later knew that the wizard had come to the island, in his own ship, and while he was looking for me, had found Batam, terrified, desperate, on the verge of a nervous breakdown and on the verge of hysteria. He also said that it took him a lot of work to calm him down but Batam was ok waiting for our return. He sadly informed me that the other inmates were killed and that the only survivors of that nightmare were

the Genie and me.

I was so happy to know that the Genie was ok. Guilt and regrets hurt my soul and I could not live if the outcome would have been another. We ran toward the coast. It was almost 12:00 o'clock. Leonardo was going forward, pulling out the underbrush with his right hand since his left was interlaced with mine. With my free hand I embraced the Horn: my freedom and my redemption monument. We finally reached the sea. The sun was soft and sparkling, as the hope emanating intensely within me. The whitish sand glowed as if it was salt. And, quickly, we continue running towards the pier, where I watched only a boat.

-Where is Zoroastro's boat? -I asked.

Leonardo looked at me with his beautiful eyes, so worshipped by me.

-Zoroastro wants you dead. He never intended to send a boat for you. He thought that you would perish here.

Then he smiled and with a mischievous look by placing his fingers on my chin, added:

-He didn't count on the skills of my lovely witch! -He said smiling.

-I would have failed without your recommendations -I said in a burst of sincerity.

And as such soft words flooded my soul of a vast and profound romanticism, as the one that flooded the history pages at the end of the 18th century, I opted to ask him for the poetic verses that I received from him and from which I was the inspiration.

-Would you still write me verses?

Then he answered:

-Now that you know, I think I won't -said funnily.

I pursued him across the sand, because at the conclusion of his words he had advanced some steps away from me but I reached him.

-Why did you keep the secret? Do you know that I thought that the verses were Dorian's?

Naming Dorian, the factions of the magician changed completely. I immediately regretted my comment.

-Dorian is a human being unable to have any honest feeling, much less love for another person. Your judgment surely was clouded by his attentions towards you. I would recommend you keep your distance in the future. You will not get anything positive from that relationship.

I protested vigorously:

-I don't have a relationship with him! -I cried vehemently- I also think that you will never get anything good from Duprina and yet, you're always with her.

-Duprina is a good friend.

-Duprina is a leech that just wants to be near you to throw her dolphins to your neck. And although you don't want to believe it, I assure you she is a black witch and I would find the way to prove it.

-Dolphins? –He looked at me intrigued.

However, we had to interrupt this magnanimous and philosophical conversation since we were called from the boat.

Batam thrill when he saw me cannot be described with words. I received hugs and kisses; he had tears in his eyes. For my part, I hugged him and thanked him for all his help. After our enthusiastic demonstrations of affection, I asked:

-Where do we go now?

With a much more relaxed face, Leonardo replied:

-We'll go to Eisenbaum before the Elders Council. I can't wait to see Zoroastro face when he sees you are still alive and with no accusation on your head. Of course, you will have to keep secret my intervention in this matter.

It was then when I took the liberty of relaxing. It was a reality. We were going back to Eisenbaum.

Batam-Al-Bur had taken refuge in one of the cabins as he started to throw at the first movement of the boat swing. Fortunately this crew was much friendlier than the previous one.

On the deck of the ship, Leonardo and I saw the strong glare of the sun interlaced with the cotton domes that were the clouds and the white wake the boat was leaving when hurting the indigo waters with its bow. His brilliant eyes called me, whispered and chased me and I answered them with the silent touch of my hands and the sweetest nectar of my kisses. What divinity is the requited love! Such precious feeling can only be accommodated in the fertile space of two hearts. Yes! Satiety and fullness!, so compelling love, that even in the full light of day, my eyes were able to look at the brilliance of the stars and the glittering of the sun and the moon together.

The old life and the old history were left behind; and although my premonitions stated the certainty of war, I decided to dive into the love phrases that Leonardo was whispering to my ears in those few hours that separated me from the other coast that awaited me in Eisenbaum; and leave for another day the misleading shade of war.

Other days will come, so other nights, as well as other hours, in which we will have to deal with the devastating battle against evil. Meanwhile, only love was present.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Perez is a Venezuelan writer dedicated to the genre of fantasy literature. She was born in Caracas, 28th June 1960. From Venezuelan parents, the eldest of four children, showed since very early years a marked predilection for the genre of novel and short stories.

In 2011 published her first novel "The Two Books of Saint Andre", which is part of a trilogy composed by "The Witch Apprentice" and "The battle of the Magicians".

Her style of narration, full of descriptions and variety of anecdotal situations give to her characters a magical realism that urges us to continue reading her works.