A punishment beyond death.

Part I

The mysterious Grand croft mansion

I once felt as lonely as the books that were dusty on the shelf. There was a time when my presence upset my nerves, it was horrible to be locked up in that house. It only brought back vague memories of my painful existence. I was very important to a woman in this land. Or so I thought...

My hand continued to move by itself writing in italics, barely understandable. It’s only 30 minutes since I got to talk to him in this way. He took my hand somehow and wrote. I had already filled over forty pages with questions that were still in doubt inside my head.

It was a beautiful morning, the kind you know will rain any moment. I had worn the first thing I had found in my closet, jeans, a blue blouse, and my brown horse riding boots.

-“Don’t forget to bring a jacket, child, or you could catch a bad cold.

- All right, I’ll do it, mom.

My mother is a sweet woman. I adore her in every way, although sometimes guilt invades me for so many secrets that I have kept from her since I began to have a conscience. She said listen to me when all she did was look at me with those disappointed eyes and said, “you’re crazy.”

I took a piece of bread and ran off to school. Luckily, I live a few blocks away and can wake up a little later or even finish some of my homework before I start my routine.

School activity was a complete nuisance. Because ever since the new guy arrived, Karen kept crawling like the bitch she always was. Karen was the typical curvy girl who with no effort was blessed. And me? The only thing I have is the ability to draw.

It’s only been three hours and I want to go home. Mom promised to make fish broth and with this climate, a hot broth is like the cherry on the tip of ice cream. During the break, I always lay down under the biggest tree near the fields and where the “harpy” nest was. I know they spend all their time looking for ways to make fun of all the people around them.

-Hey, don’t finish it, won’t you share with me? -I stopped eating and turned my gaze to the source of the voice.

-Amelia! -I got up immediately dropping my sketches.

Amelia sat next to me to talk as she did at every break and every free hour of school. She’s been my best friend for over nine years.

Did you hear about the new guy? —.

-Everyone knows. I was chewing on a piece of sandwich.

-Aren’t you interested in meeting him? he looks interesting.

I looked sideways at the “harpy” nest. He was about 18 years old, wearing a black shirt with the Iron Maiden print on it. He doesn’t seem to have such bad taste in music. After all, it’s also one of the bands I hear.

He’s surrounded by snakes and cats, do you think he’d be interested in a crazy head like me and his friend whose father is king of the mafia? —.

A continuous smile of laughter appeared on Elda’s brown face.

-Who knows... you could use music as a topic of conversation or approach saying a nice morning, right? You could even recreate a classic Shojo sleeve scene. If you’re lucky, you can even be his type.

I touched my breasts with my palms open.

-what do you think? -I replied sarcastically.

It began to rain. I looked at the sky; the drops slipped down my face and a sense of freedom ran through every part of my body. The cold increased every time I stepped in a puddle and the water got me wetter. I was on my way home, had arrived at the door of my house to discover they locked it. Normally, the keys are hidden in the pot where my mother’s favorite tulips are. Surprised, the keys weren’t there.

I started shivering, hugging and turning around in search of a place to cover myself from the rain. My eyes settled on that mansion. The mansion of the old Grand croft family, which is still for sale today. Even though I was in front of my house, I hadn’t noticed the details on the pillars.

I noticed no cars coming and ran to its sidewalk. Long ago, where the neighborhood is now and much more, it was the entire property garden. The construction company left it untouched by rumors and old stories, although I believe it’s for historical heritage.

I climbed the stairs and sat next to a big pillar in front of the main entrance, took my cell phone out of my backpack and called my father a couple of time without response. After my third attempt, a squeal breaks my tranquility. I dropped my cell phone when I saw the door wide open.

-Hello? I peeped through the dark thickness of the place.

Despite the chills that invaded me, curiosity made me enter the old mansion. I walked just a few meters away from the front door as far as the street light could reach. There was a silence like a graveyard, the rain sang in the background and the sound of the wind whistling through every corner.

I was only two steps away from my visual limit when my body began to feel heavy. A gust of wind made the curtains dance, my hair crashed in my face and made the door closed at once. I was almost blind and without moving waited a few minutes for my sight to get used to the

the darkness of the place. A terrifying silence, so much so that my breathing echoed invaded the hall.

I moved a bit and walked straight trying not to throw anything away. I approached a staircase leading to the second floor.. When I took the first step up, the sound of falling metal put my hair on end. As much as something inside me told me to get out of there, there was another part of me that wanted to investigate. It seemed to come from the adjoining room and the closer I got the more I listened as if something heavy was rolling. A carpet fell from the second floor to my feet, it seemed as if the place invited me to walk through each of its corners.

I expected nothing and just smiled in a stupidly even though the fear came out of my body in the form of cold sweat. I ran up the stairs, continued to a room where I could barely see the carpet starts. I walked around the bedroom, saw a half-tender mattress and a desk. I approached the latter and there was an old quinqué still with oil. I never leave home without a lighter. I learned it when I went camping with my parents, and always a little fire is good for something. I turned on the quinqué and the room lit up slowly. It was evident that it’s been abandoned for many years, yet it remained intact. Everything seemed in place.

I moved the quinqué to the center of the room. I kept my mouth open when I appreciated all the paintings hanging on the wall. The decorative paper was crumbling a little, it looked abused.

I went back to the desk sculpting the drawers, looked for something I could use as a candle, and, uh, found candles. Now everything looked more decent, on the bed there was a thick paste notebook, it looked like a diary even though some pages were stained with ink. I took it.

I went on with my tour. The rain fell harder. It was strange a storm like that at that time, only a few drops fall.

I approached the door when it just slammed shut, extinguishing the candle I had with me.

-The wind... yes the wind. -I tried to give myself courage. I lit the candle again.

-I must hurry-.

I went out into the hallway. That, that wasn’t like that...

A door was open, a throbbing light appeared.

-Hello? -Sorry, I thought this place was just... Hello? —.

Every step I took became eternal. My jaw was shaking and my candle seemed to wear out faster.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was like a movie. There was an inkwell and a pen, an open book with blank pages and the chair moved to invite me to sit down.

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-You don’t look so good, Amelia touched my forehead.

-Do you have a fever? —.

-It’s not that, Amelia, I took her hand.

-So, what is going on? If you don’t tell me, how can I help you? —

Give me a big break.

-Do you remember the mansion in front of my house? —.

-The old mansion of the Grand croft, they say it’s haunted, wow! -She moved her fingers in a macabre tone.

-So... let’s just say maybe I went in and... -

-Her surprise came to the ears of everyone around.

- Ssshh! If.—

The students’ murmurs began to be heard. Talking about the mansion was like a taboo around here.

-What the hell were you doing there? -Amelia lowered her voice when she realized that most of them were looking at us.

-It was raining very hard and my parents weren’t at home. I stayed outside and took refuge in the porch. But the door opened itself and I don’t know... Something was calling me.

-That’s how horror stories start. What if something wants to eat you? -She smiled surprised.

-You’re still taking everything for a joke.

-What did you expect? So many years knowing me and barely realizing it? —.

Amelia embraced me with her thin arms.

-You’re one of the few people who haven’t ended up with a panic attack. Most have said they see faces everywhere.

-Maybe because there were a lot of paintings with old paintings, I said.

-and that whispers are heard in every corner.

-The air gets in everywhere creating sounds and the wood crackles at every step-

-And the doors close out of nowhere.

-That’s... um... Well, I don’t have an explanation for that. At first, I thought it was the wind.

-So if there’s something paranormal? —.

-Maybe it’s just the old, old thing about the mansion. The mind plays with people.

-But did you see anything? —.

- You could say that, but I want to make sure it’s not just an idea I made.

-You’re going back, right? —.

-Just to pick up something I forgot.

-This time I will not let a simple book and a chair that moves by itself surprise me.

Maximilian

-Wow! Look who’s back and I must mention I didn’t think he would. After the scare I gave him. Although, he’s the first person I’ve ever had a pleasant company with.

-You still don’t remember, what was the punishment they gave us? —.

-It doesn’t affect you at all.

-Do you believe that? If I’m you.

-Now that I think about it, you’ve appeared since that day.

-I am a consequence of so many years of loneliness so I am part of you, everything you do concerns both of us.

-You’re wrong. Just me.

-You’re still as selfish as you were many years ago.

-GET OUT OF MY HEAD! —.

Be quiet.

I opened the curtains. I could use a sunbath if only I could feel it.

-Hello?! - the young lady had returned.

-I looked down the stairs. Today, she was wearing a peach blouse with distorted images; they looked like pineapples. The young woman strolled but a little safer than the previous time.

-She looked beautiful, -Go down the stairs to meet her. -You won’t run away from me today? —.

She kept walking.

-How about a little chat? Come with me. I’ve prepared ink and a book. They told me a long time ago that this way I could communicate with people. -

The girl stopped, looked around. She gazed at the painting of honor. That’s how my father referred to that old painting, he said that our family maintained its reputation for the honor. My father was on the left, his right hand rested on his heart and with the other, he took my mother’s waist. Mom smiled and sat on his uniformed chest. My brother and I were on the right they designed our clothes just for that moment. We both inherited my grandfather’s red hair, but I had the old man’s eyes. My brother was luckier, he got the same sweet, angelic look from my mother. On that day, I couldn’t smile in front of the painter. No matter how much I try to sketch it, I didn’t get it and despite his attempts; he didn’t capture a false expression in me either.

The girl paid close attention to the painting, examining it from top to bottom as if she were memorizing each stroke. She moved suddenly from the place.

-Where did I throw it? -She said to herself.

-Do you mean my old diary? I put it in its place. It’s not polite to spy on someone else’s private thoughts. -She spoke hearing no answer. I don’t feel any different to when I’m alone. I wish I could have a conversation.

She climbed the stairs and continued her tour, looking at my room. She took the diary from my bed.

-Miss., that belongs to me. I tried to take it but kept it in her backpack.

She went out and headed for the studio. She flipped through the book and moved the chair back and forth. Will she still think there’s no one else but her? Now I remember, that was my father’s favorite chair. When I was little, I would climb on his legs, he would say that I would be the one to carry the weight of the family name. Although at that age I just wanted to climb trees and play with my brother. Like when we went up to the big acre in the yard. He was always worried we might fall and break a bone. When we hid in the mansion, he sometimes thought we were going out alone. I still don’t understand why he never allowed us to socialize with the employees.

She sat down. The chair cracked as it would chop. She took the pen and dipped it in the inkwell.

-Look, you walk into my room, steal my belongings and now you want to talk? —.

She slipped the pen into the old paper, made a lot of meaningless lines, vertical, horizontal and some curves. There was no specific order. Just lines. I’m not sure how long it’s been but that little girl has impressed me. She had drawn a face. That was me.

March 8th

Saturday at last. If Chelsea hadn’t come to get me up, I’d still be in bed after midnight. It jumped into my bed and moved the blankets with its snout. Every time it wagged its tail, it’d hit me on the legs.

-Chelsea! You’re drooling all over me. Aaagh. It’d lick me and crawled into my arms for me to caress. I love my Chelsea.

I still don’t know what kind of dog it is, it looks like a pit bull mix. I say it’s got some deer because it jumps too much for a normal dog.

I pulled the book I took from the mansion and headed for the kitchen. My stomach growled. I opened the refrigerator and took out the milk. On a plate, I served chocolate cereal and took it to the table. The book was covered with skin consumed by time. You could read a few letters on the cover. M.G. I guess the G’s Grand croft. But what’s the M?

I opened the book, went from page to page slowly. I was afraid to break a leaf by accident. I’ll finally get to know something about that place. More than just the name of the old Grand croft family.

The lyrics looked a little fuzzy but you could read with difficulty. I gave a spoonful of cereal and read.

I feel sick. I’ve been sleeping for three days, and I still don’t feel any better. My mother insists on seeing a doctor, but I’m sure this has to do with my mood. I don’t feel like anything. My father decided to take me to the hacienda, but I don’t feel enjoy seeing slaves and I can’t resist when I see the wounds on their bodies. Every time my father mentions it, I tell him about letting those men go free. They treat a horse better than five-year-olds who barely lift a bag of potatoes.

“You will be the head of this family and it will be sooner than you think,” he keeps repeating it. I’m only 17 and do I have to learn to punish a man just on a whim? Do I have to know how to take away his children from those black-skinned women?

I think now I know what to do and my father is right. I will be the head of this family and I will do it just to show him I need not be like him to have a dignified life full of riches.

I’ve been wanting to go on a trip lately. My brother \_\_\_\_\_the day after tomorrow told me he met a beautiful lady. He seems to have a desire to get married. I\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ still don’t understand. Mom\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_in each tree observed an outbreak of fruits. She loves fresh plums and orchids. Despite the beauty of my mother, it has a special aroma, I can not compare with the sweetness of the fruits or the smell of flowers, if I could describe it I would say it is the sunset on the shores of the Caribbean Sea. The first drops of a storm. The coolness of a morning and the light of the stars at night. It is a scent that hides through her dresses but that her blonde hair does not stop scattering as she goes.

There are several words I can’t distinguish. Every line I read makes my skin bristle. I need to know what’s going on, I’m as excited as a fiction book that I usually devour in my spare time.

Just as I turned the page, the image of a family came to my mind. It was a huge picture of the mansion. Here he writes from a brother, the author must be one of the two redheads.

-Daughter! Help me fix the kitchen.

-Yes, mom-.

\* \* \*

March 10th

-Nice tennis. –

I looked at him in the eye. He’s being over a month in school and it’s the first word I’ve had with him. He’s usually surrounded by girls in higher grades, but this time he was alone.

-Thank you.

-The red shop in front of Starbucks? —.

-Eh... yes.........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................

-I’ve been buying shirts there for years, and still, don’t know its name.

I think it has never had a definite name.

I was on my way to the library, the biology professor had asked me to return some books, and I still don’t believe that if I saw him, he would have spoken to me.

-Do you need help with that? -pointing to the pile of books.

-Don’t bother. I’m strong. I smiled and went on my way.

-You in a hurry-. The boy walked at my pace.

-A little.

-You’re Danna, right? —.

-I didn’t know my name was popular around here.

-Karen talks about you. Although I guess you don’t care about that.

-As a matter of fact. -I couldn’t get my attention off his voice.

It was deep and soft at the same time. I looked at him from head to toe in disguise. His hair was rattled under his ears and black. It reminded me of Amelia’s silky hair; I don’t know why it came to mind that it would have the same smell of wildflower shampoo. I had a slight laugh.

-Did I say something funny? —.

-No. I thought of something.

The kid looked at me curiously. He seemed interested in the nonsense coming out of my mouth. We got to the library, and I finished my assignment. Now with this, I can go home freely I have to finish reading that diary. I feel like I’m only a few steps away from...

-Tell me what you thought.

His voice interrupted my thoughts.

-It’s a silly thing.

-You just say it. You’ve aroused my curiosity, take responsibility.

-What if I refused? —.

-I don’t know. I didn’t think you would refuse yourself.

-Do you think by having a pretty face everyone will do what you want?

-Do I have a pretty face? -He vomited sarcasm in all his expression.

-Now not anymore. I stuck my tongue out.

When I turned to the front, I met the least desirable person.

-Oh! I didn’t know you were friends with that freak.

-I have to go.

-Wait.

-Leave her Eloy. The girls and I are thinking about going to the movies, Michael and his friends are coming too. Do you want to come? —.

I stopped listening as soon as I turned around in the hallway. I went to Amelia’s room as soon as they said cinema my mouth watered when I thought about popcorn. I’d like to see a movie at my house taking advantage of me not having homework. I went to her room, all the students put their things away and made plans for the afternoon. Looks like I’m not the only one without homework.

-Danna! -she threw herself into my arms.

-Amelia, do you have plans for the afternoon? —.

-Sorry. My sponsor came to my house earlier and said he wanted to talk to me. I think we will eat at a restaurant. I promise I’ll be there tomorrow, okay?

I sauntered home. It was windy; it seems the rain will return. I remembered when I first entered the mansion, I still have many doubts about that place and my desire to know why it ended up abandoned. Could it be that they moved in? That sounds obvious, though. But no, I’m sure it was for something else. I curse the curiosity that haunts me.

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-Danna. I have to tell you something. It was five o’clock in the afternoon and Amelia was standing at my door.

-Mommy came to Amelia! —.

-Hello Amelia, you had for a long time not visited us. -My mother came to hug her.

-Make yourself at home.

-Thank you very much, Madam. Excuse me.

We went to my room. When I opened the door, Amelia screamed in surprise.

-You... your room.

-What’s in my room? -I looked closely at my room. There was nothing different from other days. The walls were still blue; the quilt was still purple, my closet full of clothes, although I usually wear the same three blouses despite the ten that I have.

-Is clean.

-Ok? And tell me, what was it you had to tell me?

Amelia took off her sneakers and dropped into my bed. I followed her, took a pillow and settled on it. Amelia lay on me.

-I don’t know how to explain it.

-Is something wrong? —.

-So say horrible no. But, yes.

-Spit it out.

-Remember I told you my sponsor came from Europe? Well... hmm... I don’t know how to say it. -Amelia’s voice was breaking. Her eyes began to fill with tears.

-I’m going on a trip, Danna. I’m moving with my sponsor to England.

-WHAT?! I don’t believe you. This is a joke, right? -Amelia got up to hug me.

-It’s not. I’ll study there and work with him. Don’t bother, it’s just that it’s a great opportunity for me and my mom agrees too.

-I don’t want you to go! You’re the only one keeping me sane here! —.

-Danna............................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. —.

It was ten o’clock; I wrote and drew until my hands hurt. I didn’t know how to remove my impotence. I’d have loved to go with her. It’s being 9 years that I shared my life with her, she’s the only one I called a friend and now she’s leaving. I’ll save the money I got and try to travel as much as I can with Amelia. Though somehow I knew something like this would happen. I don’t know her sponsor very well, I just know that he has lots of money and business all over Europe and in some parts of North America. He’s a widower and never had children. Every year he comes to visit Amelia’s family and I think he has always seen her like a daughter. Once he was hospitalized here and Amalia was always by his side. She spent the nights in the waiting room to his established room and the next day arrived at school without sleeping. One night I accompanied her, the hospital has a very depressing air but a cheerful look the same time. That’s where many people go and others come into this world. The stretchers would go out with people in blankets and at the same time, you could hear the cries of babies. At that moment we just wanted to avoid her sponsor’s trip.

I didn’t even get to enjoy a movie with her. Now the school will be a very depressing place. I don’t want it to be tomorrow; I don’t want to go back to school.

\* \* \*

It was dawn, and the airport was crowded. I walked with my mother through every door. I was looking for Amelia’s face before it was too late.

-I love you very much, Mom.

-Be very careful, child.

-Amelia! —.

-Danna!, -Amelia ran into my arms-.

Shedding tears on her shoulder. I wanted my arms to hold her here.

-I promise I’ll come all the vacations.

-And what shall I do now without you? —.

-Finish high school, then I will talk to my sponsor about going to college with me. Write to me about everything you see and tell me all about your adventures. Show me your new illustrations and creations. Everything you do is more interesting than my afternoons between papers. -She smiled, wiping my tears.

-Besides, there’s a mansion you have to explore.

-You haven’t gotten on the plane yet and I miss you already.

-You’re still very dramatic. -She kissed me on the cheek.

-Amelia, it’s time to go. See you later, Danna. Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of her. -The Lord said goodbye with a hug from Amelia’s mother. That mature man that Amelia so appreciates took her by the arm and got on the plane, they looked like father and daughter.

I was happy for her, but that didn’t take away how depressed I felt.

\* \* \*

-Is something wrong with you? -A shadow covered the sun that gave me directly.

You should move, you could get severe burns.

I brought my eyes to him. I got up taking my backpack.

-You’ve been like this the past two days. You don’t talk to anyone nor pay attention in class. What are you doing in your notebooks I see you writing? —.

-Are you that interested? Just drawing. I don’t feel well.

-Are you sick? —.

No--

-Do you want to talk? —.

-Tell me. Were you sent to annoy me? Be honest.

-No. I just think you’re interesting, I’m looking for an excuse not to be with that group of people.

-Really? I wasn’t sure if the dark-eyed guy was telling the truth.

It could be a trap to be the object of Karen’s mockery. I’ve never gotten along with her, it’s like we’re opposites. I have no reason to hate her, but I don’t like her that much either.

-Eloy, I’m sorry for being so rude. I don’t know you very well, and I don’t trust people easily

-Don’t worry, it happens.

There was a little silence.

-By the way, you still haven’t told me what you thought the other day. -I burst out laughing when I heard those words.

-Can I smell your hair? —.

-Huh? That’s what you thought.

-Not exactly, but I want to confirm something. May I? —.

-Go ahead.

I grabbed him by the shoulder, stuck my nose a little. His hair was as soft as Amelia’s but the smell varied a bit. It was like a male deodorant; I don’t remember the brand very well but the label was black with bright blues, my brother used it often.

-Well? —.

-Your hair doesn’t smell like flowers.

He laughed. Ever since I saw Eloy the first time he was always serious or showed very slight smiles, but this time it seemed someone had told him the joke of the year. Eloy offered me his hand to lift me, I didn’t hesitate to take it and we went to sit on one of the empty benches. There were only a few minutes left for the next class. Eloy told me about his family, his parents were rarely home. Both worked in different companies and each had different days of rest, so there was not much time to live together. He took care of all the household chores, even though he wanted to work to help them financially his parents convinced him to wait until he was in college.

-I’m not such a bad cook. My specialty is pasta.

He knew a lot about cooking and admitted that he had a notebook with over 500 recipes. Amelia was so right, he was an interesting guy.

\* \* \*

I miss you so much. You could read it on my cell phone screen. Amelia hasn’t stopped texting me since she got on the plane. Nearly twenty-four hours of travel, I imagined such a journey must feel like an eternity. It was 3:40 p.m., maybe I could take a walk around the mansion, find more books I can read. I went to my house, took a broom, the dustpan, and several black garbage bags. I know it’ll take forever, plus it's a private property. But I don’t think it’s illegal to clean up a bit and less if I’m going to start spending more time in that place.

I climbed the stairs to get to the front door with my hands full. I put aside the cleaning instruments and tried to turn the knob. It was closed. Damn it! Just when I was more determined than ever. Did they find out I went in without permission? I didn’t care and forced the knob unsuccessfully. After a while the sheet rolled by itself, it creaked slowly. I expected to meet

someone annoyed at the entrance, but only a dusty wind came up. I took a break and went into the big mansion.

I opened all the curtains in the main room and started moving the furniture to the shores. My goal was to accommodate it to get a closer idea of what the place would look like in its golden age.

- Are you thinking of cleaning up? This place has more than a hundred years of dust and you think in one afternoon you could get rid of it. HA! –

Turn a little, I thought I heard a voice in whispers. I was deciding, time flew by and so did the dust. The books looked beautifully arranged on all the shelves of the place. The red wall looked more alive with the sun. I removed the blankets on the furniture and left them lying in the windows. A little light and the smell of locked up will disappear.

It was seven o’clock, and it satisfied me to see the first floor fully settled. With my eyes, I gave the last tour to see if anything was missing. I had taken before and after photographs to send to Amelia. I’m sure she’ll keep telling me, I’m crazy, at least if this place is without owner I could use it as a secret base. Nobody dares to come in here, besides I could spend every afternoon reading here. I took my backpack and headed for the door.

I don’t know whether to be scared or just surprised by the inexplicable things I saw. The living room window was fogged up, and it looked as if someone had written with fingers: I WOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU TOMORROW AGAIN.

\* \* \*

I couldn’t sleep that night. Every minute I saw the big mansion through the curtains of my room. I opened the laptop on my desk, did some of my homework taking advantage of insomnia and curiously Amelia was connected in the chat window.

Danna: Amelia? This time?

Amelia: Danna! Shouldn’t you be asleep? It’s like 3:00 in the morning there.

Danna: I can’t sleep. But since you’re here, I want to show you something.

Amelia: Mmm? Now, what did you do? xD. Sending pictures. Wait, a moment until the images are uploaded.

Amelia: You must be joking! I can’t believe you cleaned the mansion!

Hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha. You even traded me for another friend.

Danna: Another friend? What are you talking about?

Amelia: Don’t fool me. Who helped you clean up?

Danna: No one, I was alone as always.

Amelia: And who is he? Look at the third photo that focuses on the edges of a door.

I had a hard time passing saliva. The figure of a man peeking out of the door was visible, a little blurred as if in motion. I switched pictures looking to see if it appeared in another.

Amelia: Danna?

Danna: He’s one of them.

Amelia: What who?

Danna: He sent a photo.

Danna: In the main room there’s a huge family painting. The mother, the father and then there are two children, both redheaded. One of them has to be the one in the picture.

Amelia: Danna... That’s starting to scare me. Do you think he’s a ghost who’s had since before Mexico’s independence roaming the halls of that place?

Danna: I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I think so. Even when I left the mansion yesterday someone wrote on a foggy window, “I’d like to see you again tomorrow.’’

Amelia: Danna, that’s serious! Someone’s following you.

Danna: I don’t think so. It is well known that anyone who enters ends up unconscious, it’s been years that they have done experiments, videos, documentaries and have tried to knock it down without success. Why not me? I’ve been going in and out about a week now, reading books and even cleaning the bottom. I’m sure there’s a spirit!

Just because the TV says that doesn’t mean it’s true.

Danna: But I’m experiencing it. I’ll find a way to talk to him.

Amelia: Danna, I’m serious. Stop that nonsense, it won’t end well.

Danna; It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.

Amelia: Remember, you promised you wouldn’t get in trouble. Besides, I’m already getting everything ready for the holidays. I’d like you to come. My godfather has taken me to endless places.

The conversation went on for as long as two hours. I fell asleep on the keyboard. When I got up, I only saw an endless line of conversation with meaningless words written. I know Amelia doesn’t believe in that kind of thing, but if it’s happening to me, maybe it’s a sign that they exist.

I opened the internet explorer, wrote ‘’How to talk to ghosts’’ and many junks came out than I thought. Most of them were talking about guides and demons, the truth is I didn’t know exactly what to look for. There were too many warnings about not making contact when one feels weak because the spirit could possess the body, not practice it alone, etc. In my case, I can’t take anyone else. Searched again in google the documentary about the mansion of the Grand croft, that video was the one that made it famous, besides all the videos of several Youtubers that tried to make the brave ones. The documentary didn’t exceed an hour and there are still two more hours before classes begin.

\*\*\*

-Danna? —.

I barely looked up. I know that even if I’m not sleepy; I have to force myself to sleep at night if this doesn’t happen. I was lying on the grass under the shade of one of the school trees.

-Hello Eloy. What time is it? —.

-Don’t worry, the last class is yet to come. You’re lucky to have two hours off.

I got up a little and carved my eyes. I gave a big yawn when Eloy laughed sitting next to me.

-You didn’t sleep last night, did you? —.

-How do you know? Are you spying on me? - I smiled.

Eloy’s look felt different today.

-No, but the Internet doesn’t lie. You were connected when I went to sleep and when I woke up; it was still the same. Mmm. What’s that? — . Eloy was pointing to my notes.

-Yesterday I was watching several videos, and I wrote some important facts.

Eloy took the leaves and started reading them.

“Strange apparitions in a city mansion.”

Five people and the cameraman came in. Every time they went deeper into the mansion the air became cold. Some doors were completely blocked. At first, people were excited, saying that it was a mansion built in about 1780 and belonged to a certain Maximilian Grand croft, heir to a great fortune and many lands throughout Mexico and Cuba. They had finished their three-story tour when they approached the door leading to the basement. When they realized it was closed, they tried to force it The glass began to crack and you could hear the whistles of air. One of the people began to get dizzy, telling his classmates he wasn’t feeling well. A woman who went with them tried to reassure him and brought him to one of the armchairs. The chair moved backward from nowhere. The cameraman begged them to leave the place, but the other man insisted on opening the basement. The dizzy guy fell to the floor in convulsions, then the young man who was closest to the man forcing the door, grabbed his head and ended up on his knees

with a lost look. The cameraman ran out but stopped at the door. A figure stood his way, the strange man’s eyes shone with the light of the camera and out of nowhere everything shut down.

They mention that when the recording crew came looking for them; they were all lying on the floor in the same place they stayed on the recording.

After that incident, they tried to sell the mansion at a price that was an offense to the historical value it had. But time passed, but no one was interested in a “haunted” mansion. Several government agents concluded pulling down the mansion. They took machinery to knock it down from the outside and several workers began to feel very hot. The demolishing crane was already in position, when it was about to give the first blow, inexplicably, the crane went out and the giant ball fell to the floor creating a hole that they filled in the next few days. Fortunately, no worker was injured. The next option was to blow it up with dynamite and it just didn’t work. The bombs didn’t detonate either. Finally, 30 workers came in to destroy it from inside, nobody knows why, but not even 20 minutes passed that they had entered when they ran out in terror. They swore to have seen a man with a smile who politely asked them to leave the place. They said that one of the employees approached him to tell him they had orders to tear down the house he was to leave the place. “I can’t do it. If you don’t do what I tell you, he’ll get annoyed, he’s never liked visitors,” said the strange, smiling man. “Too late, already been annoyed,” the man walked down the hallway as the room’s wallpaper ripped in the presence of everyone. Specifically, one of the employees - his name was Luis - tried to convince the others that they were just someone’s tricks to keep the place from collapsing, the workers were getting closer to the main entrance. When Luis saw this, he threw a blow to one of the walls with the mallet, despite the force he did not touch the wall and Luis could not move it. He let it go away doubtfully, the other employees ran away leaving Luis behind. An hour had passed when the head of the company arrived asking why the mansion was still standing. They explained to him what happened, and he entered the mansion furiously. He found Luis unconscious with the sledgehammer on his back. When he was taken to the hospital he had broken ribs and several blows to the body. He regained consciousness two days later.

Interview with Luis Galeana, an employee of Alhaja demolitions and excavations.

Police: Mr. Galeana. Tell us what happened during the demolition attempt.

Bobby: I’m not going back to that damn place!

Policeman; No sir, I assure you, you won’t. What happened to him when his companions left him inside the mansion? Who attacked him?

Luis: When my companions left, the smiling man returned. He kept smiling at me, those gnashing teeth, I still hear them at night.

Luis held his ears as if he could hear the sound. he was talking to someone. he told him he could not end a human life, that is a violation Dinorah’s rules, I heard the mace fall to the ground and when I turned a redheaded man gave me a blow on the torso with the mace.

Police: Could you describe the smiling man and the redhead, please?

Luis: The smiling man looked about twenty years old. He had short black hair with a style similar to today’s young people. He wore a black T-shirt with an image of Batman and worn jeans. I don’t remember what he had on his feet; I don’t even know if I looked at his feet. -Luis was having a nervous tic in his eyes.

Police: Don’t you remember any other features? Skin color? Eyes?

Luis: HIS EYES! -Luis was getting more and more upset. One was blue and the other was purple, but not so dark.

Policeman: Sir, calm down, everything’s fine. -At the scene, two nurses were trying to put Luis back to bed.

Nurse: I think you should save the questions for later, Officer.

Police: One more thing. What about the redhead?

Luis: He has no body. I could only see the hair and the mace hitting my torso.

Eloy looked a little surprised, I could tell he had goosebumps in his arms. He slowly lowered the leaves.

-It’s the mansion documentary. Have you been inside? — . Eloy passed saliva.

-Yes-. I nodded.

-The truth is, I just thought your friend said it as a joke. But how? Then all this is false.

-It’s not. When I was inside the mansion there was something, but nothing happened to me that happened to these people. Things moved I saw nothing. Well, except for this. I took out my cell phone putting up the image I had sent Amelia.

-Did you take it? It’s, it’s how they describe it in your notes. A redheaded guy, but what about the smiling man? Have you seen him? —.

-That’s what I miss the most. I haven’t seen him. Maybe it’s because they wanted to demolish the place and he was just protecting it.

-Let’s go to the library.

-To where? —.

Eloy shook the ground and the grass. He helped me pack my stuff and took his backpack.

-Before solving a mystery, it is good to know its origins. We need to know more about the owner of the mansion, let’s find out who Maximilian Grand croft is.

Neera

Part I

The air whistled differently this time. The trees were shaking to the rhythm of the wind, somehow they seemed to dance from one side to the other showing off the thickness of their foliage and leaving behind some flowers and colored leaves that flew beyond the reach of my eyes. The rain stamped on my face, leaving a cold imprint on every punch. I moved a little away from the paved road, moments like this should not be lost and thinking about it, leaving myself in solitude would not hurt me.

I went quietly down a steep slope trying to hold on to some exposed roots. When I was halfway down the road, one branch broke and my sandals couldn’t stand the slippery moss. I tripped and I don’t know how many turns I made until I reached the deepest part of what on sunny days would be the clearing. I got up from the muddy ground observing the damage that my dress had suffered and scratches that the fall had caused me in my small knees. Something was wrong.

The wind stopped singing, and the raindrops had become hot. The trees stopped moving gracefully, their branches waved violently, and some thunder echoed in the sky. I walked a little deeper trying to get out of the mud. I was trying to wipe my face a bit when I stopped in my tracks and heard that whisper.

The squeaking of strings swinging from side to side. A flash of lightning illuminated the landscape, allowing me to admire three silhouettes floating in front of one other. I stood still, now I understand why the forest was so agitated. The smell of death was spreading.

\* \* \*

Neera was the name I was given when I was handed over to the arms of my new family. At that time, I was 5 years old and according to my mother; I spent more than a year talking and another half in regulating my diet. I remember nothing and I only keep, until today, a few pictures of me when I was nothing more than a mouse with a gray-haired speck on my head. I looked scrawny, and it seemed any false move would break me.

My new home has been an inhospitable land. It was a huge house surrounded by a forest and many types of grass that grew on the walls. The coast was just a few minutes away and overboard you could enter the thick green.

When I first met my new home a woman waited for me at the door along with two other creatures a little bigger than me. A pair of chubby redheaded twins who shared a beautiful blue gaze full of innocence, who over time discovered more than just tenderness in her lap and a forbidden passion running through her skirts in the empty service rooms.

Every morning I had breakfast at 7:30 a.m., always on time to start the housework while my mother’s new husband went out to work in the mines. It was my turn to wash the floors and feed the cows, because of my size, one of the twins ended up helping me load the bucket of ruminants. Around 5:00 p.m. until nightfall I had my freedom. I went out to play with the butterflies of the meadow, at that age I was still afraid to venture alone into the depths of the forest so I limited

myself to just bordering the first trees, spinning around them until I learned to move between their branches like a monkey in the jungle.

-Look at what you look like! -Mom would scold me almost every day.

When I came back from playing, I didn’t notice the mud stains, nor the missing shoe or the scratches in which the blood poked through my skin. The twins only looked sideways from the living room. Every time I was yelled at and spanked three times, leaving marks for a week. I went up the stairs crying and made a little ball in a corner until the twins came up and huddled me. I didn’t understand what I was doing wrong, is playing bad? Although I must admit enjoying the warmth of being between the skins of her arms and her voluminous breasts. They told me stories as they acted them out, brushed my hair, and helped me put on my evening clothes. What I liked most was that they stayed until I fell asleep.

The next morning there was no proof that they were in my room, except for the vanilla and cinnamon scent they used every day, that scent permeated on the walls and my clothes. Every morning was the same story I sniffed my nightgowns and passed them from my cheeks to my chest. Somehow during my early years in that house, those twins became the main part of my world.

Time passed and barely grew a few inches while the twins had pronounced hips and large, round buttocks. With milky skin, they became more attractive and beautiful women of the town. And the sweet scent they leave behind. Their names were Karida and Clementina, preferring to shorten them to Kari and Clen. It’s easy to tell them apart when they’re in the shower. Since Kari loves her hair loose and Clen prefers to braid it.

On their 16th birthday, my mother had me accompany her to the market for dinner ingredients. I enjoyed going to the market. It’s filled with people and ladies screaming as if they were singing. Every time we went, Mom would buy me a multicolored tasty palette that lasts me for more than a week which would be the next time we would come to the market.

The journey through the stalls was longer than normal. Mom had said that she would prepare her special meat and seafood stew and that she would need many ingredients, especially the two most important of all, southern prawns and cocoa. After Mom bought my candy, we went to a stall full of fruits and vegetables. The apples looked exquisite and the color of the peppers made them look like a toy. When Mom was talking to the owner, I saw strange green eyes, brown skin, and ragged hair that looked like the ocean waves had dragged him away for a long time. He’d fill a potato sack, they seemed heavy from the way he frowned every time he lifted one.

Without realizing it, my mother was pulling me by the hand, moving further away from the boy who captivated me with the naked eye.

It was around six o’clock in the evening and the stew was boiling inside the boiler. Almost every family in the neighborhood had come to celebrate the twins. It was kind of obvious; Those two were pure goodness, they didn’t know how to say no when someone needed help and they have never disobeyed our mother. Even the father of the church claimed that they were angels who had come to save this earth, and I agreed with him. Those angels protected me and offered me

the love that mom forgot to give me, even that night they made me feel more than that. It was a little prank or so I want to think.

The party lasted as long as the night. There was not a single person seated, everyone danced to the music that was played live. The screams, the falls, and the drunk men made the atmosphere light and very pleasant. The fun didn’t stop, Mom wouldn’t stop laughing, people wouldn’t stop eating, and I fell lightly asleep at a table. I could feel someone lifting me taking me to one of the extra service rooms. They removed the red slippers I wore for the occasion, along with the dress, leaving me only in panties. I observed two silhouettes closing the door as cautiously as possible.

My curiosity hurt my desire to fall asleep in bed. It made me get up and walk to the door. I opened it with the same care; I expected the lights to be on but there was only darkness in the corridor. I began to hear laughter and the springs of a crunching mattress. I stopped in front of the door where the voices came from, opened it slowly. My eyes got used to the darkness, and it was then I noticed how two shadows moved in the darkness playing in the sheets of the service bed.

-There? —.

The voice sounded familiar. Was it Kari?

-A little lower. They whispered.

They were playing with each other, I couldn’t see much, only saw them entangled in their arms and legs.

I pushed the door too far and noticed how they noticed my intrusion. The twins stopped and came down from the bed a little shaky.

-Neera? —.

-Kari... discovered us.

-Shh! -.

-Find out? What were they doing? — . Ask.

-We were just playing Neera, Mom will be mad if she finds out we were playing at this hour. We have so many duties that we don’t have time to do it in the day.

-Tell me Neera Would you like to play with us? -Clen asked.

-If you don’t tell Mom we promise you that the next time you’ll be part of the “prank” -.

-All right.

-Now go to sleep it’s late, we’ll also go to our room. Yea, we love you Neera. - Karida and Clementine kissed me on the forehead.

I went to my bed, now that I think about it I would never betray the twins. Even if they had excluded me, I wouldn’t be able to sell them out. I love them very much. Thanks to them I could adapt quickly to life in my new home. But what kind of game was that? Maybe they were hiding things in their clothes and betting on finding them. Is that why clues were given? And in the dark. That makes sense, plus it sounds like fun. I can’t wait to play with them next time.

\* \* \*

-Kari? —.

The door to my room was opened. A woman was standing on the edge of the entrance. She moved her head slowly from side to side.

-Clen? What time is it? - I got up a little by carving my eyes.

The woman turned around and walked down the aisle.

-Where are you going? Wait! — I jumped up and ran to meet her.

-Neera? What’s going on? -Kari peeked out of her room.

-Did I hear you speak to me? —.

-Me, it’s nothing, Kari. I’m sorry I woke you up.

-Don’t worry. Goodnight. She was about to close her door.

-Kari. Could I sleep with you? —.

-Well, you know I do.

Today’s breakfast was boiled eggs with yesterday’s white rice. I avoided the egg, I never liked it cooked, I can stand it scrambled with ham or fried with red sauce.

-Neera. Today I need you to go meet Mr. German. I ordered two kilos of food for the chickens.

-Yes, mom-.

-Mom, Mr. German’s house is very far away, and it’s several kilometers through the jungle. Will you let her go alone? —.

-Yes. She’s 13 now. It’s time for her to learn how to get out of the house more. Take Neera.

-Mom extended her arm and gave me a fifty-peso note.

-You must have ten pesos leftover and as a reward for running the errand. Now finish your meal because it’s getting late.

Kari and Clen walked me to the door. They put the sandals, the leaf hat, and the blue bag on me to carry the seeds.

-You’ll go through some houses before you get to the jungle. Don’t talk to strangers or accept anything from anyone. Don’t stray from the cobblestone path, you could get lost and there are lots of poisonous animals. - Kari made it clear.

-Like snakes and scorpions. Clen said.

They were saying goodbye to me from the door. They seemed worried. I imagine it’s because I’m her little sister and it’s the first time I’ve ever been so far from home, I’ve never been beyond my mother’s land.

The sun was burning, and the heat was increasing. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning, barely have I arrived in town and was sweating as if I was melting. I stopped in front of a store, went in and bought a bottle of water. Now I only have five of the ten pesos Mom gave me. When I pass back I’ll buy chocolates, one with almonds.

The entrance to the jungle was very clear, the people kept it at bay; it seemed as if an invisible wall prevented all that set of vines from swallowing everything in its path. There was humid air coming out, and it was heavy to breathe, now I have a few kilometers to go. I gave my water bottle a drink and began to enter the thick green.

-Hey! -I kept walking ignoring the scream.

-Hey! Girl, I’m talking to you! -I could see who he was when he stood in front of me.

He was the green-eyed kid in the market.

-Hello.

-You’re going in alone? Really? —.

-Yes. I have to go see Mr. German.

-That’s far. I am going home. Do you mind if I go with you part of the way? —.

-Eh? Well, well.

We walked in silence. The drops of sweat ran down his face, his hair was a mess, there were scratches on his arms and dirt all over his body. He seemed to have fallen off a cliff and could barely shake off the dust. The song of a great diversity of birds echoed, it was difficult to guess which direction they came from. I only knew the macaws, many arrived and rested on the roof of the house. Once we discovered a nest on the roof, they were very chatty and made noises all the time. Mom sometimes cursed their annoying sounds.

-And why are you going to meet Mr. German? — He attempted to break the ice between us.

-My mom ordered some chicken food.

-I see. Have you tasted the pumpkin bread his wife makes? —.

-Just once. When it was Clementine’s turn to buy the seeds, she sent us a whole loaf of bread. It surprised me at how huge it was.

-I never told you my name. My name is Joel and you? —.

-Neera-.

-What an unusual name. But that makes it more special. Joel sketched a smile. It looked like the moon had come out of his mouth.

We spend our time talking about the town. I found out he also likes apples as much as I do and my mother’s special stew. He said no one in the world knew the recipe. He said only a strong woman could make it, there were lots of vegetables to cut and lots of meat to beat to make it soft.

Joel said goodbye to me when the road split in two.

-I live in that house. He was pointing. -You’re welcome anytime.

-Thank you very much.

-It won’t be long before you get to your destination. Be very careful.

He walked away quietly. I also went on my way, lost track of time. The trees covered the sun so I couldn’t figure it out by the shadows.

I drew a silly smile on my face. He’s a good boy, despite how dirty he was. A chill ran through me, It was the first time I had heard so much silence and so much noise at the same time. There was no screaming of animals and it was deep in the jungle that there was no noise of civilization. The trees were desperate; I felt the crunching of their branches and the leaves move from one side to the other; the wind disappeared. I tried to ignore that feeling, but it was in vain. I heard whispers.

-He lies, he always does.

-Who’s there?! —.

I walked a little faster. The trees were moving more; I thought they’d fall on me.

-You listen. Listen to me. Don’t ignore it.

I ran. Fear invaded me and my legs went numb. I ran and ran, I couldn’t think of anything else but that, Escape. The whispers went through my eardrums.

I looked back and there was nothing; I stumbled on something. I had a knee injury. I was on fire.

-He’ll pay for it.

I don’t know how to describe it. He spent a few seconds in front of my eyes and disappeared. Blue skin? I don’t know exactly what it was; it looked like a person, at the same time an animal. His jaw hung down, and it seemed as if his limbs were stitched with a very thick thread.

My heart was going a thousand a second. I have to calm down. I stood up and shook myself. I tried to walk as if nothing had happened, but my hands trembled and my breath cut off. I need a hug and thought about being in the twin’s chest helping them braid their hair. If I see some flowers, I’ll pick them and make a tiara. Step, step, drop, step, drop. Tears come out, combine with sweat and fell to the floor like large raindrops.

I finally saw Mr. German’s house. I need to see people. I knocked on the door and no one heard. No please, don’t do this to me, I knock louder.

-Hello! Please open up! Mr. German! -Nothing.

-Don’t go. Don’t go! -was heard in unison. They were like two voices.

Not again. I knocked on the door; I didn’t dare to see that strange being again.

-OPEN! —

The door suddenly opened, and I fell to the floor by inertia.

-Neera! Are you okay?! — Clara, Mr. German’s wife took me in her arms.

-German! -she shouted. Mr. German came out with an ax in his hand.

-There’s no one outside. Neera, what happened? Were you being attacked? —.

My breathing was still agitated. They closed the door and led me to the living room.

-I made you something for the scare.

-Neera. Please tell me what happened.

-I saw something very ugly. I’m not sure what it was, but I encountered it from Joel’s house, think he was following me. I’m so scared. -I started to cry.

-Don’t cry anymore. It’s all right, we’ll walk you back. How much seed your mom gonna want? —.

-Two kilos to the score, please.

Mrs. Clara came back with a glass of cold milk and oatmeal cookies. I took a cookie and dipped it in the milk, this was the second time I came to this house. Although the first time, I didn’t get past the orchids that covered the entrance.

Mr. German’s family was nice. They only had one son. On the walls were photographs of his son’s first communion, his eyes were barely visible, and his hair well combed backward. He had a bible on his arm and a candle in his hand. In another picture you could see Mr. German fishing with his son, there you could see he was bigger than he looked like he was my age.

-Are you looking at the pictures? — Mrs. Clara was questioning me. -They are very nice memories that we have left. This is Felipe. -He took a picture and gave it to me. -He’s been studying in the city for a long time now. I hope you haven’t forgotten your old ones.

-You came two months ago, didn’t you? —.

-Yes. Do you remember? It’s very good to see, several times Doña Teresa’s daughter asks about him. There’s this girl since she was seven years old that likes my Felipe and I get gray more and more and that boy just does not want to give me grandchildren-

-He told me he first wants to finish his career and look for a job. Felipe will be in charge of this family.

Clara. -Mr. German put the two kilos of seeds in her bag.

-Come on, Neera, you have to go back to your mother. Clara joined us, it’s past three o’clock, and I felt like a toast with a mole from the market. –

-Just let me get my bag.

I felt safer walking hand in hand with Mrs. Clara. Mr. German didn’t leave his machete for anything. Once we were told that he found a four-meter boa constrictor with a bundle that was still moving. They say Mr. German had a hunch and opened the reptile in half finding nothing less than a four-year-old boy. I don’t know if it’s true because I didn’t dare ask and at home; the neighbors take many anecdotes of everything that happens in the village.

The journey passed quickly and as soon as we left the jungle I let out a sigh of relief; I gave a last look of the jungle. I squeezed Mrs. Clara’s hand harder. It wasn’t just a voice; I see it now. She had blue skin, blond hair full of garbage and dirt. She was drenched and released water from her mouth, her jaw swaying as she spoke.

-You have to help me... -.

\* \* \*

-Do you want to play? —.

A week had passed, and I didn’t leave the twins’ room. I can’t sleep alone. I’m terrified to see her again. When my mother saw me holding the hand of Mrs. Clara and Mr. German with his machete, an expression of fright appeared on her face. She kept wondering what had happened. I heard them narrate my desperation to enter Mr. German’s house and the wounds I had on my knees. I ran upstairs, came to my room and cried. I cried releasing everything I’d kept since I left the jungle. I don’t want to go back there. Karida did not stop asking what had happened and Clementina offered me Dulce de leche, she said sweets always cheer a bitter time. I embraced

Clen’s waist with my trembling arms, she was wider. her flesh sank in contact and her perfume created an explosion of sensations in my head.

It was nine o’clock and Mom had already turned off the lights. I was in the bathroom, my bladder was full after such a busy day. Urinating reassured me, I liked the sensation that ran through my belly after I took out all the yellowish liquid. I had a habit of thinking, sometimes it lasted up to fifteen minutes and my legs ended up numb. I opened the door, in my nightgown with a toothbrush in my mouth, heard Karida and Clementina talking.

-I don’t think we should do that to her.

-Why not? We know it’s nothing bad. It’s just a game, isn’t it? –

-But Kari... She’s thirteen years old.

-We are sixteen now and have had this since we were eleven.

I spat out the toothpaste and rinsed my mouth with water. There was a taste of peppermint left in my papillae. I came out of the bathroom and went with the twins. They had been silent as soon as they heard the door open.

-Sorry to bother you again. -I looked down. I felt guilty about making them sleep together with me.

-You don’t have to apologize. Neera, do you want to play? —.

-Play? Oh. [Chuckles] You mean what you were playing the other night. –

-Yes, answered Clen.

-Maybe then you can forget your bad experience outside. We promise we’ll never let you go to any errand alone again. Kari claimed.

We went into the room and they locked the door.

-First, you have to promise something Neera. We’ve always trusted you and we love you very much. -Kari- continued. But what we’re going to show you is something... I don’t know how to explain it, hmm... it’s something normal and strange at the same time.

-But you’ll like it, we promise. Clen hugged me.

I smiled at those words. It made me feel good to have so much love and trust from the twins.

-Take off your nightgown.

It sounded like an order. The twins were standing in front of me waiting for some action.

-What are you waiting for? Take it off or do you want us to help you? — A smile

was drawn on their round faces.

Kari looked at Clen with approval and approached, removed the straps of my nightgown and dropped them over my shoulders. The cloth came down when it reached the level of my chest by inertia I held it.

-Let it fall Neera. Let’s see how beautiful you are.

-I understand nothing. I moved my arm, and the garment fell to the floor. I was only in panties. Kari ran her hands across my face, stroked my neck and came down to my chest.

-Don’t be afraid, this is just a game. Neera -and a show of affection.

Karida kissed my forehead, the tip of my nose and the surface of my lips, repeated the last two times but each time lasted longer in contact.

-Open your mouth a little.

Now the kiss became more pronounced. She introduced her tongue and caressed the edge of my palate. It tickled. At first, I didn’t know how to respond, but I understood that it had a rhythm.

Clen put her hands behind my back.

-What soft skin you have, Neera.

I could tell her fingers were slipping and a little wet. Every time a shiver bit me, it passed between my legs. There was also tingling in my belly.

The kisses got wetter and Clen’s hands ended up on my buttocks. She squeezed them while the other massaging my back. Kari’s mouth went down my neck and then my chest. I had never paid attention to the tips, Kari licked and sucked them as if she was eating an ice popsicle in summer. She crossed her gaze with mine, bit my lips and let out some sighs. What should one do when one has so many sensations in one’s body?

Clen unbuttoned his nightgown, Kari took off her panties.

-You saw how Kari touched you. Now do the same to me.

Clen took my hands and made me rotate the tips. I squeezed them, trying to imitate what Kari had done. Her chest was round and pink. Every part of her milky skin looked silky to touch. Sucking, moderating and licking. It tasted sweet, like vanilla and cinnamon. Clen’s face looked pleased, the chills spread across my back.

Kari watched as her hand was hidden in her crotch.

-Tell me Neera. How do you feel? —.

-Do you like it? —.

I just nodded. I felt a little embarrassed, Mom wouldn’t let us touch our chest or between our legs, she said that was a sin. That God watched everything we did, but if God is watching, I hope he likes the stage.

Kari approached and gently lowered my panties. Kari and Clen exchanged glances as if they had already practiced everything we were doing at the time as if they carried a headcount of one, two, three. My panties were down. One, two, three. She ran her tongue from my crotch to my belly button. I let go of the twins’ arms. I don’t know how to describe the feeling I got from that simple contact.

-I’m sorry.

-Would you like us to stop here? —.

-No. I want to keep playing.

There was a soothing smile on their faces.

-We’ll teach you something simple. -Clen put his tongue through my mouth.

-Open your legs. -Kari ordered.

The look of the twins changed, they pierced me and between each rubbing between our skin; I lost more and more in those sensations. The bites, the laps, and scratches that we provide among the three of us. It’s a new feeling. It was like when I stayed in her empty room and sank into the scent of her clothes. She had her hands on my crotch and intended to do the same. Although they still had their panties, I put my small hands between the folds of lace and their thick skin.

-Right there, Neera. There were moans and smiles.

-Don’t forget me. Clen took my hand, directing it under her panties.

Her breasts shook, I licked them every time they approached my face. Our bodies rubbed against each other, sweat and moisture was emanating from our crotch, it was sticky but my fingers slipped easily.

My body became numb, and the twins squeezed their legs. Their groans were extinguished with each kiss and the provocative gaze was limited to going through every point our hands had touched. This is better than dancing among butterflies.

\* \* \*

-I believe that been hidden between the sheets of their room has been my greatest sin. But not only was I wrapped in them but I caressed them and in my mind passed so many ideas that introduced me to a world where the fabric was part of their skin. Tell me, father, do you consider it a sin? —.

The father was silent for a moment; he seemed to have fallen asleep after the whole story I told him.

-Did you say you want it carnally? —.

He still thinks I’m talking about a man. No matter how many times I tell you, they are my sisters, even though I have never told you they are the twins, I cannot tell anyone about our secret.

-I didn’t know you could yearn for a person like that.

-How old did you tell me you were? —.

-Fourteen.

I’m not going back to the temple. I have to find someone who can help me solve my mystery. I didn’t know whether to talk about it directly with the twins, but there is something inside me that made me tremble, imagining the reaction they would have. It’s been a year since we started our secret game and I think I’m getting confused. Telling Mom wasn’t an option.

Their faces are lodged in each of my thoughts, their beauty is reflected in every flower I plucked from my mother’s garden, their eyes stand out among the details of the butterfly wings. Is it love? Just like in the scenes on television? Mom spends every afternoon watching them. Sometimes she gets emotional, cries, sighs and even smiles when karma affects the evil one who does not let the couple in love be together. If that’s love, that’s not my case.

I came home still thoughtful. When I looked up I met Joel, I didn’t expect to see him here.

-Oh, look! There’s Neera. Daughter, Joel came to greet you.

Joel greeted me quietly. As soon as Mom got home Joel seemed to relax, maybe he’s shyer than I thought.

-How have you been, Joel? I haven’t seen you in a long time.

-Yeah. My old man’s been doing a lot of trading in the city and it’s up to me to help him,

more now that we’re on vacation at school. I imagine you’re very busy here, too.

-Don’t mention it. They bring me back and forth in the village, although I try to get as far away from the jungle as possible.

-Yeah, I heard a little about that. What happened? —.

-You won’t believe me if I tell you. –

-If I bought you ice cream, would you tell me? –

His look was nice. Despite the few months I had without seeing him, he was taller and stockier. His hair was shorter but equally agitated, there was a mixture of sweat and dirt in his arms and parts of his face. I had the urge to remove it but held back; I don’t know how he would take it.

We walked to the only ice cream shop in town. I ordered chocolate vanilla and he a lemon. Looks like he was hotter than he was craving something creamy. We sat near the pier, I could feel the breeze of the waves on my bare skin. That day I wore a strap blouse with a short that used to belong to Kari, I was a little loose but for the warm season; it was the best.

-I know I didn’t ask about the incident before, but I thought you were still scared and wouldn’t want to talk. –

-You were right. Just for the ice cream, I’ll tell you. I smiled at him. -Just don’t judge me crazy. When I told my mom, she said I was just hallucinating and called me ridiculous.

-I won’t. I know strange things happen around here.

-Well, the moment we split up on the jungle path, I began to hear a voice. It seemed like a mixture of three voices, one calmer than the others. They sounded like cries of despair. They said he was lying. What if he listened, he’d pay for it? I don’t know who he was talking about. Asked him not to leave her. -My hands began to tremble.

Joel ran an arm over my shoulders.

-Don’t be afraid. I’m right here. -Somehow his words calmed my impulses.

The warmth of his body calmed my tremors.

-I think the most horrible thing was what I saw. -Joel was paying more attention to me.

She was a half-naked woman; she looked beaten, her extremities badly sewn together like palm leaves. Her jaw was hanging down and hair loose. It got tangled all over her body. One arm amputated and running. She was running towards me, that’s why I was so desperate to get into Mr. German’s house. I was so scared.

Joel’s hug got a little stronger.

-The most horrible thing is that I think now I know who the woman is, as she stands in front of my door and watches me at night.

Joel’s look froze in my eyes.

-You’ll hate me for what I’m about to tell you but won’t leave me alone until we find the origin of it all.

-Don’t say it.

-We must go back to the jungle.

Hickerland

I sit in the park-like every afternoon around 6:00 on the same bench. That was special, it was the only place where you could see the small lighthouse built directly over the kiosk. Just waiting, quiet and still.

A dove landed on the tip of the lighthouse; moved his little head from side to side till our eyes met. Veronica smiled, jumped for joy and climbed the stairs to the kiosk. The pigeon fluttered landing on one of the iron bars surrounding the construction looking for a way to meet the little one face to face.

\* \* \*

-Veronica! —.

-Misshio! I had a lot of time and didn’t go through the garden.

-I’m sorry, Veronica. It’s exhausting being a messenger. I have to be in 15 places at once and this pair of old wings don’t give me enough to get my job done on time.

Misshio waved his wings dropping some feathers. Maybe he was right. his feathers fell like an old man’s hair.

-Before I forget, here. Misshio gave me a package wrapped in skin, smelled like burnt.

-What is it? —.

-Open it if you want to know, I don’t know what you’re waiting for, beware that it has a letter from our Dinorah.

I loosened the ribbon and began to undo the delicate folds of burnt skin.

-A notebook? —.

-Use it. Write everything you see and don’t forget the letter. Well, I’ve got to go. These letters don’t deliver themselves.

\* \* \*

Veronica looked at the pigeon blankly. She touched his plumage delicately and smiled. The people in the square looked at her strangely. A young woman among them approached her.

-What are you doing, little one? - she smiled friendly.

-He brought me a message of royalty.

-Well... sounds interesting, too bad the bird’s dead.

-Dead? But if he’s smiling, how can a dead man smile?

-The same way someone alive can cry.

-That doesn’t make sense. Veronica tilted her dubious head.

-I know, child. Nothing in this world has.

Veronica looked beyond the young woman’s eyes, she smiled. She kneeled at the girl’s level and touched her head in a gesture of affectation.

-What’s your name, little girl? —.

-Veronica-.

-Is your mommy around? —

-Dinorah? —.

-Veronica! — A woman in her early 20s came out of the crowd.

-Is your mother Veronica? —

Veronica looked up, her face did not change of any emotion when she looked at her.

-It’s Mrs. Mcphire.

-Are you all right, Veronica? I was so worried about you.

The woman wiped her tears; she lifted Veronica by holding her tightly.

-I’m so sorry, miss, thank you so much for taking care of Veronica.

-Don’t worry, be more careful; something could happen to her. –

-I know, thank you.

-Do you need help with anything? —.

The woman left with Veronica without hearing the young woman’s offer.

They came home. The wooden door always cracked when opened and more in cold weather. Veronica took off her coat and hung it on the lowest arm of the coat rack.

-Veronica- Mrs. Mcphire looked at her tenderly. -That’s the third time you’ve escaped.

-I’m sorry, Mrs. Mcphire. Veronica intertwined her fingers behind her back.

-Why do you call me that? Haven’t I told you several times I am your Mother? What are you holding in your hands? — Mrs. Mcphire took Veronica’s arm trying to see what she was hiding.

-It’s just a letter, Dinorah sent it to me.

-Would you ever stop making all that up? —.

-I’m not making anything up, ma’am.

-Call me, mom! — Mrs. Mcphire shook her shoulders. There were tears on her face, they were not of sadness for over 3 years those tears fell daily, every time she saw the eyes of her daughter. She never called her mom. She couldn’t have a normal relationship at school. She was disappointed.

She let Veronica go to her room. Mrs. Mcphire walked into the living room and lit the chimney, tiredness overwhelmed her, and the coffeemaker whistled. She thought a cup of coffee would lower her restlessness, her head was full of bad memories.

-We can’t do anything with her. It may be a case of schizophrenia, leave it under observation. There’s a demon inside the body struggling to get out. Your daughter is very rare, you should go to special services.

-What do I do? —.

\* \* \*

I had waited a long time for Dinorah to reply to my letter. It’s only been a week since I sent it to her, but it felt like a millennium.

My little,

You can’t imagine how I longed to see you, but it’s not time yet. You should keep my existence a secret, honey. No one can see the words written on this paper, nor the gifts I made especially for you. Obey Mrs. Mcphire and behave yourself at school. I would like to know more about your friends and family as you never mention it in our conversations. It will be nice to live with more humans like you.

With love,

Dinorah.

Friends and family?

I threw myself into bed leaving my shoes on the floor.

-Where is he? Where the hell did I leave him? —.

I peeked cautiously at the sound of that voice; it looks like it was under my bed.

-AAARGH!! Why did I take this job? Everything was easier in the garden! —.

-Hello? —.

-Human! —.

I reached out to catch the little creature.

-Let go of me, you filthy beast, he shouted and kicked.

He looked like a man 30 centimeters tall. He had green eyes and orange-red hair that glowed with the light of my room. There was dirt on all his clothes. When I lifted him, his hat fell to the floor. I could barely hold him with his baby arms.

-The creature stopped fighting for a few moments.

—I want to help you.

-Can you help me? Please don’t make me laugh, brat. You couldn’t do anything, not even Dinorah’s powers affect this.

-Do you know Dinorah? —.

-Do I know her? I work for her, girl. Can you put me down? —.

I put the little man on my bed. I was looking at him closely.

-Tell me what you’re looking for and maybe I can help you get it.

-The box of Poux-.

-What’s it like? —.

It’s a box about the size of your hand, covered with ropes and a wood locks. It has an inscription on the front with the name of the sender and only one piece of shiny metal on the lid.

-Hmmm. I don’t remember ever seeing anything like this in my life. -How did you lose it?

-I was a few tongues away from the weeping willow and slipped through a hole. That’s how I ended up here, underneath this big, musty-smelling thing.

-That thing is my bed. I sleep there every night.

-Well, it’s strange, we used to sleep hugged underground. But

that’s not the point. The box was with me, it’s got to be around here.

Veronica and the little man moved everything in the room. Dolls, sheets of paper accumulated with drawings of years ago made of crayons. Every time she saw her old stuff, she started to feel melancholy. She had some fuzzy memories of people in white robes and pills that Mrs. Mcphire made her take. Maybe her life wasn’t so bad, maybe it was all a misunderstanding and as Dinorah said in her letter, no one can see the same way as her.

A glow blinded her for a moment from books piled up in a corner. Veronica moved the pile and found a small box. The Poux’s box.

It was more beautiful than the little man described; it had on all sides images of little people and winged beings. It was quite a work of art, especially the wooden locks. I touch the metal part and automatically the strings began to yield, the little locks turned and with a click, the box was ready to open.

-Hey girl. Did you find it? — The little man approached.

Veronica didn’t listen when he called her, she took the lid and began to open the box slowly.

-No! Let go of that! —.

When opened completely, a black thickness invaded the room. It revolved around Veronica and entered wildly through her mouth. Veronica wanted to scream, the pain was unbearable. It felt like her throat was burning and eyes wanted to come out of their sockets. She lost consciousness and felt a liquid slipped her face and ended up on the floor. The little man closed the box preventing all the contents from being emptied into the girl.

-Oh no. Girl, girl! Hey, you can’t do this to me! Girl! –

He climbed on her trying to find some signs of life in Veronica’s inert body.

\* \* \*

Open your eyes. My child, open them a little. He sighed.

Veronica felt her body heavy. There was a feeling of dirt and grass between her fingers. He tried to get up a little. The last thing she remembered was the little man and a strange box.

-You’re finally awake. The little man threw a small sack on the ground. -Try not to move much, I still don’t know how much damage the box did to you.

-The box of Poux. Where is it? Where are we? —.

-Now it’s just a broken and empty box, but that doesn’t matter anymore. Welcome to Hickerland - The little man made a gesture pointing around.

.

-How do you feel? —.

-A little dizzy.

-Have some to eat. The little man gave her the sack.

Veronica took out some seeds and berries of various colors. She reminded him when Mrs. Mcphire bought her packets of lunettes, Veronica emptied them in her mouth and created a mixture of chocolate and saliva.

-By the way, I never formally introduced myself. My name is Thomson.

-I am Veronica.

-It’s a pleasure, I think. Although it wasn’t very pleasant for us to have met in a tragedy.

-Dinorah once wrote to me that the best friendships come from bad things. Veronica smiled.

-Well, that was enough rest. Let’s go.

-Where are we going? I don’t even know how you brought me here -

I’ll just tell you that you weigh more than you look and that your bones protrude through your knees a lot. We’ll go south, find the sender of the box.

Thomson shook the dirt that permeated his pants, they had a very peculiar opaque green color. Sometimes, Thomson went unnoticed when he worked in the garden. Veronica got up with some effort, she still felt nothing at all. She began to feel a strange tingling in her right arm, soon turned into pain. I walked ignoring that feeling.

-I honestly can’t see anything from here. Do you mind if... WOA!!! —

Veronica was on the ground face up, from her eyes emanated a dark air that penetrated the skin of her arm. Branches began to come out, her skin broken, and blood flowed everywhere. Thomson didn’t know what to do he was trying to approach and cover the wounds, but his efforts were in vain with his size compared to hers. Veronica’s cries drowned in her tears. The branches stopped growing and the pain slowly disappeared, though not completely.

-See... Veronica? —.

-Thomson. It hurts.

Branches of a tree that was beyond human knowledge had consumed Veronica’s arm. It was not as thick as an acre, nor as dark as the cocoa tree.

-Can you walk? —.

-I think so.

-We have to hurry, Thomson came up for Veronica’s clothes.

-For beech. We’ll go through the city first.

\* \* \*

In the last few weeks, some neighborhood ladies began to worry about Veronica’s strange behavior, so they went home and talked to her mother. They said they had heard her scream in her room and threw things around. One lady said she saw her jump off the roof of her house, fall to her feet and run towards the main streets, around midnight. She just nodded and to calm the fumes just said: I’ll take her back to the doctor.

Little Veronica played in the backyard of her house, her mother saw her smile, jump from one side to the other, memorized her steps, the voices made when she spoke or made up her stories. Those moments made Mrs. Mcphire smile, moments when her daughter played like an ordinary girl.

-Veronica, you have to go back to school.

\* \* \*

The city was lit with thousands of tiny lights. It looked like a forest full of fireflies.

-What are you looking at? -Thomson grunted. -Come on, if we don’t hurry, I don’t know what might happen to you. You’ve never seen a city at night? —.

 -Not this kind of city. Veronica was having a little trouble walking. The branches of his arm dragged and sometimes got stuck with some roots that sprouted from the ground. Thomson was on the girl’s shoulder.

 -You don’t seem to get out of the house much. Thomson held tightly to her brown hair.

-I have never left Nördlingen.

-Is that your birthplace? —.

-No. Mom said I was born in a hospital.

-A hospital? Mmm... and what’s that place like? —.

Veronica under the gaze.

-It’s one of those places you don’t want to remember.

Thomson closely observed Veronica’s reaction.

-Oh, look! We’re almost there.

They reached a wall a little bigger than Veronica, she could climb without a problem. It looked concrete with embedded obsidian stones and some with unnatural shapes that compared to the size of the citizens you would think took years of work.

-Stop! What’s a human doing here? A little citizen in shiny armor stood up to Veronica.

 -I... -.

-Make way for the great Veronica good man! Thomson recited from his comfortable view.

-We have come from the human world looking for Dinorah. As you can see, Veronica is under the effects of the Poux box and needs quick help.

The branch of Veronica’s arm was growing a little more, they were opening more and more way through the flesh. Veronica complained about the pain. The guard was a little shocked looking at the girl’s arm. Poux’s box was well known, no one had dared to even look at it, wondering how such an instrument had ended up in the child’s hands.

-What is a citizen doing with a human? —.

-The name of this humble citizen is Thomson. I’m a meadow gardener. Our Lady Dinorah entrusted me with bringing the box of Poux to the scarlet-eyed man, but my carelessness led to horrible consequences for this human.

\* \* \*

-Did I ever tell you I hate being kept waiting? Well, if I never did, I think this is a good time for you to know.

-But Grandma, aren’t you going to finish telling us your story? —.

-Yes, honey, but your mother doesn’t rush those cookies! — The old woman waved her cane at the same man who shouted curses into the air.

-Why don’t you go on with the story to kill time? —.

-Time. Time is the least you have in my condition. Although, this isn’t the first time I’ve fought against it.

\* \* \*

In that city, the citizens were small. There were many just like Thomson of different colors and sizes. They looked on in amazement at those gigantic feet that went down and up with great delicacy and care. Some people laughed out loud thinking the giant was dancing. Who danced without music?

For citizens, dancing without music was one of the best jokes you could act. Act?

The citizens kept coming out of their homes; the children shouted to get Veronica’s attention. Sometimes she turned and waved her branches as a sign of greeting.

-No one had ever welcomed me this way.

-Concentrate, girl.

Thomson tied a lock of Veronica’s hair around his waist. The way he shook himself, Thomson lost his balance and was afraid to fall from where he was.

-This is nothing compared to what awaits you in Hickerland. Thomson looked at the sky, It was reddish.

-The scarlet-eyed man is already at work.

-Who’s that man you’re talking about? —.

-He’s the sender of the box. I don’t know how to talk to you about him, I can’t describe him because we all see him in different ways.

-And in what way have you seen him? —.

Thomson looked away looking for a place to spend the night.

-Of the being, I love the most.

And how do you distinguish the scarlet-eyed man and the being you love the most? —.

-You just answered that, by his scarlet eyes. Go to those fields, we will rest there until dawn.

In the camps, there were communities of three households. It was usual for three generations of the same family to live together. They come in three colors and all in order from the lightest to the darkest. The lights faded with time, leaving Veronica to depend on the Moon. She dropped herself on the trail.

-Hey! Take it easy.

-Sorry. I’m too tired, I walked too much.

Veronica looked at the sky trying to remember at least what she had done that morning before ending up in Hickerland. Maybe I was doing the same thing now, remembering. Like those moments when Mom took her to school. She sighed, closed her eyes and went to sleep.

It’s been hours, minutes, It blinked and on the dark stage, a tiny spark appeared. A quiet, twinkling star.

-It looks like me.

The sun was rising, citizens were coming out of their homes to sweep. The whole family did the same task at the same time. It saves time; they said. Brooms varied in size and shape as well. Some very straight, others looked like the stick had just been cut from a tree branch.

\* \* \*

-Wake up, Veronica! —.

-Thomson? —.

The children in the class began to laugh. It’s not the first time Veronica’s fallen asleep in class.

-Go to the principal’s room, right now.

Veronica stood on her shoulder.

-GO! — The professor lost his patience.

Veronica walked calmly. At school, everything seemed quiet, and she liked it. The knocking of her shoes against the floor was felt even in the blood. Clank, clank. It seemed to have a rhythm. Clank, clank. It even makes you want to move your body.

-Veronica again? It’s the eighth time this week. The Principal stood in her way.

He stopped dry without moving his hand from her shoulder.

-What’s the matter? Does it hurt? —.

-I’ve got a branch on my arm.

-A branch.

-I shouldn’t have opened that box.

-What box? What are you talking about? —.

Veronica’s eyes became crystalline and tears began to come out.

-I don’t want to be a tree.

The principal was speechless.

-Veronica. just go to the office.

The girl walked rubbing her eyes and sobbing in silence.

\* \* \*

-I tell you, there’s something wrong with that girl, she talks about monsters and names I’ve never heard before.

-But we can’t do anything.

-Of course! We have to find out how she lives in her house. What if her mother is the one who puts those ideas into her? —.

-I don’t think so, she’s a good woman. Every time I’ve confronted her, you see she’s aware that her daughter has something. She tells me the girl goes to the doctor and undergoes treatment.

-We should at least recommend a better psychologist. That girl is crazy!

That’s funny. You have your mother’s eyes

Part I

Lost, or I thought I was. It was a beautiful winter night, there were children who despite the darkness played hide-and-seek. I wonder how they’re not afraid. I remember at their age I would tremble and scream at the thought of the night approaching and even though my sister slept next to me; it did not calm the strange feeling of dread that froze my blood.

I was still walking aimlessly; the locals looked at me strangely; they knew I was not from the village. Normally in small towns everyone knows each other, and I know because I also come from one.

The houses began to become smaller, some with large gardens that looked like cemeteries and others so rustic that they gave the impression that a simple wind could knock them down.

I took a letter out of my pocket, unfolded it and tried to read again the directions my grandfather had sent me. I had been ordered to visit a certain Guillermo Zimmers, in the letter it only mentioned that he was a distant relative although the surname did not sound at all familiar to me, I do not even remember that this name was in my genealogical tree, still, orders are orders.

I went on, the paved path became more difficult and I could feel the edge of the stones on the soles of my feet, I wish so much that this is over.

I admit I’m lost; I don’t know where it ends. The only thing that illuminates the street is a flickering lamp post and the fear of darkness has not disappeared after so many years. Now that I think about it, I shouldn’t stop, usually bad things happen in this kind of situations, thieves or even worse, some wandering spirit desirous of revenge. The light stopped blinking, and the darkness covered everything. I could distinguish the way and my hands when I brought them closer to my face, but I have concluded that luck was not on my side tonight, and how did I get here? I just heard a girl scream.

My blood froze, I was only thinking about running and getting out of here, but there was something that made me curious or maybe it was just this desire to help the lady in danger. I know this won’t end well. I pulled a knife out of my pocket and walked to the source of the sound. Her scream sounded more and more desperate and went out at times. HAVE MERCY! It sounded closer and closer. You could see a silhouette twisting on the floor. I ran up to her at the same time took a quick look around to see if there was anyone around.

-Hey! Are you okay? -I knelt, taking her by the shoulders.

-DON’T LET HIM HURT ME! -

-Calm down! What are you talking about? There’s no one here! -I was trying to reassure her.

I helped her stand up, by the sound I think the dust was shaken. Her voice came back to me.

-Please, help me. She was sobbing.

-What’s going on? Who was attacking you? -I was trying to get information.

She kept quiet, grabbed my arm and pulled me a little. I took her down an alley. There was a lamp hanging from a roof, at least it was enough to light the street. I took a good look at the girl, the yellow light bulb gave her hair orange colors and reached up to her shoulders, she was beautiful or her colored cheeks made me think that.

She sat in a gardener, still shaking and hugging herself.

-I’m scared.

I didn’t know what to say at the time.

-You didn’t answer me. Who was attacking you? —.

-If I tell you, he’ll kill me. She sobbed.

-But there’s no one here... -.

She rubbed her eyes and sighed.

-I’ll... I’ll tell you.

She got up and was about to talk when a terrible sound stunned my ears; the girl fell to the floor with a hole in her head. I wanted to run, to escape that horrible scene. I tried to locate the source of the shot and out of nowhere I felt an impact in my chest and fell to the floor and began to lose consciousness. My blood ran through the holes in the stones. I had a gun to my head.

-Hey! Eliot Wake up! —.