

Owlient



Her name was Tormenta

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Her name was *Tormenta*

Prologue

My General, have I failed this mission you entrusted to me?

I rode tirelessly southwards through these lands. I was not able to use your pass with the barbarian tribes I came across; they spoke an incomprehensible language and proved to be hostile. I occasionally had to use my sword to cut my way through, choosing to avoid human contact from them on. Then the mountains, valleys and plains gave way to a vast expanse of saltwater.

I had no option but to travel westwards along the coast, hoping to find a way to cross this sea and continue my path south. I found a harbour where a few merchant ships were docked. By means of gestures, and showing some of the gold coins you had entrusted to me, I was able to book passage with the captain of one of the ships for myself, but not for my horse. I regretfully gave him his freedom. I was just beginning to enjoy the rolling waves when, after many miles at sea, we were attacked by a galley.

The pirates were as ferocious as they were cunning. Bringing themselves alongside us, they began to board. I fought valiantly with the crew, but I soon realised that the assailants had the upper hand and so I decided to take a gamble. I sliced my thigh open, slid the object you had given me into the wound and bandaged my leg with a rag torn from the sail. The pirates killed anyone whose injuries were too severe, plundered our ship's cargo and sank it to the bottom of the ocean. The survivors were chained to the oars, slaves to a merciless whip; and so began my life as a galley slave.

This sea was the setting for a procession of battles between barbarians each more bloodthirsty than the last. I survived as a piece of human merchandise, brute force allowing me to take an oar without whining or begging. Escape was impossible. The wound in my thigh healed unusually quickly and nobody could have guessed what was hidden there.

Seasons, then years of slavery went by thus, where I was batted from sea to land and back to sea again, discovering the vastness and the diversity of this world that Alexander wanted to rule. I lived as a slave until a storm smashed my last master's ship to pieces. I was carried away with the debris of the vessel to an unknown shore. I rid myself of the chain that still shackled my ankles by smashing it against the rocks and, alone and free at last, I left the sea behind me, its waves filled with more sweat and blood than the battlefields I traversed with you, my General, in pursuit of glory for Alexander the Great. What became of you after the defeat at the Hydaspes? What became of our King, whom I saw fall and then carried away on a stretcher from the battlefield under your orders?

I remember this young, flamboyant king, intriguing and invincible, sitting astride his great stallion Bucephalus and for whom each of his men would have given their life without hesitation. Why did his inflexible desire to conquer the world have to lead him, lead us, to the injustice, the excess and the madness of these massacres? We entered the final battle against the Indians with fear and disgust in our bellies, but only because you

asked us to, Ptolemy. Your men believed in you alone. And yet we knew that for most of us, this battle would be our last...

Washed up on these shores at the edge of the world, surrounded by nothing but waves until the setting of the sun, I gave up on searching for a way south. I chose to retreat inland. One day, when the fatigue of loneliness and fever overcame my courage and strength, a barbarian woman, surrounded by a handful of frail children, took me in and gave me food. I learned the language, worked alongside her to help grow crops and spiced up her meals with game from my hunts. Until the day when I disturbed a mountain bear during a hunt. It inflicted terrible wounds upon me before I was able to defeat it.

I can feel my life fading as I walk, and then am finally reduced to crawling, back to my companion. I will not have time to see the face of my unborn child, which she is carrying. I will not have time to tell her the story of that which is hidden in my thigh. It will be buried along with my body in this foreign land that could have become my own one day. General Ptolemy, I carried the object that you entrusted to me as far as I could. Although I was unable to take it to the southern border, it has remained hidden all these years and will continue to do so.

General, I am going to die without knowing the answer to my question. Have I failed my mission?

Soldier Efcharisto, approximately 310BC

She was born prematurely one night during a *Tormenta*, a violent storm. While my grandfather Ramundo tried to save her mother from bleeding to death, I rubbed the filly with straw to remove the rest of the amniotic sac membrane covering her and to try to warm her up. She was so tiny and was barely moving. Without knowing why, I began to blow into her nostrils with all my strength, as though even at the tender age of five years old I could somehow infuse her with the will to breathe. Then I continued to rub her chest, encouraging her, breathing into her nostrils, despite my grandfather's pleas for me to stop tormenting the poor filly. This caused me to burst into tears. I held her tight, cradling her, begging her to wake up. Then I felt my grandfather's hand pulling on my shoulder, forcing me to let her go. At that moment there was a deafening clap of thunder. I felt an intense burning deep in my chest and the motionless filly jumped into my arms. I loosened my grip, unable to believe the miracle that was happening. The filly's legs, driven by an ancestral survival instinct, moved in a slow gallop. I could hear the chaotic beating of her heart as she tried to lift her head.

"Maldito!" cried grandfather incredulously. "Pablo, you saved her. Look, she's trying to stand up!"

My eyes blurred with tears, now of joy, I watched the wonderful sight of this newborn horse managing to get to her feet and walking a few paces before falling from exhaustion, then trying again, standing awkwardly on her legs, dazed but already searching for her mother's teat.

"Keep warming her up," cried grandfather. "I'll fetch some milk and a blanket."

She walked back to me and tried to suck my fingers, ears and nose while I continued massaging her vigorously. When my grandfather returned to the stable, with the rain dripping off him, she had fallen asleep against me. He slipped a bottle into my hand and wrapped a blanket around my shoulders like a cape, covering and protecting us both. It was the first time I ever had ever seen grandfather Ramundo show his softer side. The filly shuddered in her sleep, her lips sucking the air before finding the teat and drinking in large gulps. My grandfather shook his head before murmuring,

"Brave little thing. What do you want to call her?"

"Tormenta."

The night when *Tormenta* was born is still my strongest memory. We grew up together, getting to know each other and comforting one another. She soon grew in size and strength, and became a graceful filly with a light dun coat, a chocolate mane and high white stockings. During the summer we splashed together in my paddling pool, in the spring we played hide and seek in the tall grass and I even taught her to play football! If my grandmother had not been so adamant about it -- "Verdammt, wir sind keine Tiere" (we are not animals!) -- I would have slept in the stable next to my mare every night. The first drama happened when they told me I had to go to school; in Argentina school is

compulsory for children between 6 and 14 years old. In order to try and console me, they allowed me to ride to the school in the neighbouring village on horseback, like the children of the estancia workers, and we "parked" our horses in a field adjacent to the school. The next tragedy came when I was 14 years old and had to begin five years of secondary school before the Bachillerato, A-levels, in the city of Santa Rosa; I was no longer able to ride my horse to school and instead had to take the bus. The hardest thing was leaving for university in Buenos Aires.

Of course I was ecstatic to leave the nest, and enjoy some independence in the halls of residence in the capital, but I was also heartbroken at leaving my *Tormenta* behind. I would only see her during the school holidays between each university semester. Grandfather Ramundo spoke to me the day before my departure to Buenos Aires. I know that he was incredibly sad that I was moving away from the estancia, where the future of the proud gauchos of old is now no different to that of the paesanos, the poor peasants. But all he said was how proud he was of me and my studies. And he pointed at the piece of metal on my chest inherited from our ancestor Esteban, attached to a leather cord that I have worn since I was a child:

"It has always brought our family luck. Keep it with you always and be strong. And don't get lost in the capital. Adios!"

Now that I know where this damn piece of metal came from, I understand why it has never brought me any luck...

"Mexicans are descended from the Aztecs, Peruvians from the Incas and Argentinians from the ships." Octavio Paz, poet, essayist and Mexican diplomat (1914--1998)

In 1877, fate really had it in for my ancestor Esteban Ruiz Escobar Mendoza: his young wife died in childbirth, taking their first child with her; an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease decimated his herds; a forest fire ravaged his fields and farm. He had nothing left apart from this piece of metal engraved with indecipherable symbols that had been in the family since time immemorial and was miraculously found intact in the ashes of the farm. Alone and penniless, Esteban decided to leave his native Spain and set off towards the New World, determined to start a new life and make his fortune there. He arrived in Buenos Aires in Argentina in 1878.

Esteban was a tireless worker and managed to earn enough to buy a few head of cattle and land. In the vast, dreary plains of the Pampas, the name of the Native American tribe that once lived in the area, he chose a plot between Rio Salado and Rio Colorado. He built his estancia on these rich lands where the grass was fertile and nourishing and where horses and cattle could be bred easily. He soon needed help to look after his cattle and so he hired some gauchos, horse wranglers. "Gaucha" means vagabond in the native South American language Quechua; they are essentially Spanish-Native American mestizos, rejected by society. Mounted on Criollos, a breed of courageous Argentinian horses, they proved to be as taciturn as they were hard-working. One day while travelling through his land, Esteban came across one of the gauchos washing at the river. He was shocked to discover that it was in fact a young woman, who'd been living hidden among these boorish, independent men. It was love at first sight; Esteban married this strong, mysterious, nameless mestizo. She bore him many children that she cherished in her own way, but they say she preferred riding alone in the Pampas. When I look at his faded picture above the fireplace, his legs encased in *guardamontes* which look like leather butterfly wings and protected him from scratches, and his face stern and distant, I tell myself that I would not have fancied facing him in a duel. My grandfather, Ramundo Ruiz Escobar Mendoza, said that I must have inherited his rotten temper. But the man they call "El Zorro", the fox, and who manages the estancia passed on by our ancestors with an iron hand, also shares some responsibility for my "rotten temper". I guess he has transferred the hope of seeing his own son following in his footsteps and running the estancia to me. And that's a lot of pressure...

Spellbound by her girlish fair hair and indigo blue eyes (which I inherited), my dear grandfather married Helga Siegfried, daughter of German immigrants. They had just one son, Cesar Ruiz Escobar Mendoza, my father, who quickly left the cowshed to become a professional tango dancer. Ah, the overwhelming melancholy of this dance of fevered bodies and souls... He married my mother, also an incredible dancer, named Mafalda. And they named me Pablo, after the painter Picasso whom my mother adored. But they were carried away by tango fever and took their show around the world, so they entrusted

my education to grandfather Ramundo and grandmother Helga.

In short, if I am indeed a mysterious loner with a rotten temper, it's mainly my family's fault. But when I'm on *Tormenta's* back and we are galloping at full speed across the vast Pampas, I am completely different. My smile is so wide with happiness and fulfilment that flies could get stuck in my teeth.

I need to stop thinking about when I will see my mare again and hurry to the conference room. Today we have a guest scientist all the way from Mongolia, on the other side of the world: Professor Temudjin who, together with his students at the University of Ulan Bator, has developed a robot that searches for missing people in extreme weather conditions. It seems that this project was inspired by a true story, something that happened to one of his students in the icy mountains of Mount Altai...

For my 10th birthday I received a present by mail from Shanghai. It was from my parents, those eternal absentees, who were on tour in China at the time. They had sent me a remote-controlled propeller plane that was linked by a long cable to some sort of ancient Game Boy. Overjoyed, I pranced around the house making my plane fly and making loud engine noises until my grandmother chased me outside with an imperious "Raus!" This toy invited me to go on an extraordinary journey. I imagined myself proud and free on board my plane, ready to join my parents on the other side of the world whenever I wanted then leaving Argentina to explore unknown lands. I was a hero, an adventurer to the rescue, whether it be making food drops for poor countries or bombing super villains, depending whatever I dreamt up. I became Antoine de Saint Exupéry, delivering mail around the world for Aéropostale through thick and thin, or Charles Lindbergh, the first person to cross the Atlantic solo. A tireless and invincible pilot, I ended up landing... in the branches of the hundred-year-old jacaranda planted by my ancestors at the estancia's entrance. The flamboyant blue flowers seemed to form a dazzling sky above me and I wondered how I would be able to fly into the sky high enough to get my plane back. I obviously tried pulling on the cable like a madman, but I only succeeded in ripping it out. Plan B was to climb up, but I would have needed a ladder just to reach the first climbable branches. So I opted for a different approach.

I whistled a long trill and my loyal *Tormenta*, who had been grazing nonchalantly a few hundred yards from me, pricked up her ears upon hearing my call. She whinnied happily and cantered towards me. She pushed the tip of her nose into my neck, nibbled my hair and pranced around me, ready to play. It was difficult to make her understand that I just wanted to use her as a stool, but I eventually managed to calm her down and make her stand still beneath the branches of the jacaranda. I stood on her back and, arms at full stretch, grabbed a branch and hoisted myself up like a monkey. I had to climb a bit further to reach the plane, but after a few manoeuvres that caused the jacaranda to shed quite a few flowers, I made it and managed to free the plane. I let out a cry of victory, but at that moment my foot slipped. I tumbled down, bouncing like an overripe fruit and crashing onto the ground in a cloud of blue petals. The fruits of my labour earned me one plane and two broken tibias. Fortunately for me, as I was much too stunned to call for help, *Tormenta* caused such a thunderous racket that she alerted the estancia's workers.

Those weeks of recovery determined my future. I was of course unable to ride my horse or go to school, but I tried everything I could to repair my poor aeroplane. Using bits from other electronic toys brought by my sympathetic classmates, tools borrowed from the worker who'd picked me up from under the jacaranda and advice gleaned from model plane enthusiasts and RC fanatics, I was able to completely remake my remote-controlled aeroplane, and this time without even needing the linking cable. In the years that followed before the Bachillerato, when the weather was too dreadful to frolic in the Pampas with my *Tormenta*, I amused myself by making improvements to my plane: using lighter, stronger materials, increasing the flight time and the range of the remote control... and

even installing a hand-held camera and finding a way to control the aeroplane using my laptop. During my final year at secondary school, my science teacher convinced my grandfather to enroll me at the University of Buenos Aires. He told me that a mind as curious and as sharp as mine could only flourish in the discovery of new technology... and that I would also be able to miniaturise my flying tank!

So that's why I'm now studying nanotechnology and have such a keen interest in drones, whether they're flying, crawling or rolling. I can't wait to find out everything I can about this robot created by the uni students in distant Mongolia...

I think that the "Drobot", the drone robot created by Professor Temudjin's students, is a work of genius! The way it's shaped, like something between a mutated caterpillar and a flying cockroach, however ugly it looks at first glance, allows it to function in all geographical and climatic conditions. This thing could win the gold medal in the decathlon; it can fly, jump, crawl, run, swim, ski, launch grappling hooks, climb smooth walls and get out of any situation. It's also "intelligent", adapting to whatever conditions it encounters, and is able to perform on-site operations autonomously or in response to commands from a remote operator.

"It's like Luke Skywalker's robot in Star Wars, only uglier!" laughs my friend Tiago in his thunderous voice, slapping me on the back.

He just can't help embarrassing me with his idiotic interruptions. But Professor Temudjin doesn't get flustered, waiting for the laughter to fade before responding.

"Which one, R2-D2 or C-3PO? In any event, however ugly it might look, I hope that our "Drobot" will be as useful to humankind as Luke Skywalker's robots were to him!"

And the professor continues his speech. "The Drobot is equipped with multiple sensors, GPS, sonar, gyroscopes and much more. A computer unit processes all the information gathered, allowing it to adapt accordingly. For example, it can react to a gust of wind or an ocean current and adjust its trajectory. It can also take samples of material, film them, scan them, light them up and record them. In short, this robot makes it possible to remotely carry out tasks that a team of experienced, well-equipped scientists would normally have to do on-site. And you can do all this without having to use a laptop, just an ordinary smartphone will do the job! Professor Temudjin then shows us a short film on the lecture theatre's big screen that demonstrates how the robot can be used in areas that are hazardous to humans, for example in assessing the toxicity of polluted groundwater or by inspecting a damaged nuclear power plant just like Fukushima. It can also relay invaluable information to rescue teams in the event of forest fires or serious natural disasters such as cyclones and hurricanes. The civilian applications are endless. But we were all particularly impressed by the part in the film where the robot was able to detect the location of people buried under an avalanche, speeding up the rescue time and improving their chance of survival significantly.

"See how this Drobot differs from military drones intended for surgical warfare where the targets are hit from a distance without risking the life of a single attacker."

Tiago, a pacifist who's staunchly anti-military, stands up and begins one of his favourite speeches.

"It's disgraceful! These so-called "surgical strikes" cause unacceptable collateral damage. Innocent civilians die or are injured and---"

"Absolutely, young man," interrupts the professor, making the Drobot fly through the

lecture theatre to hover in front of Tiago, transmitting the image of his face to the big screen. "That's why I recommended my students to file a patent to prevent this invention from being used for violent means. But now let me move on to the main point of this talk," he continues, returning the Drobot to his desk by simply flicking on his phone with his finger. "As it is the focus of your university education, I would like to explain the invaluable contribution nanotechnology has to offer and how we can use this to make the robot even more effective..."

Tiago, mesmerised by the quiet confidence of this amazing little man, sits down without a word of protest.

At the end of this fascinating speech, the students give him a round of applause before slowly leaving the lecture theatre, exchanging comments of heated approval. I, however, decide to go up to the professor to express my admiration and ask him whether he would like to take a look at my creation, my "Draeroplane". Professor Temudjin, busy packing his things, looks up and smiles. Then, as though a dam had burst, I passionately blurt out the story of my aeroplane. But, after a moment, I can tell that he is not listening to me anymore. His eyes are fixed on my chest and then return to my face. He looks dumbfounded. Other students are trying to speak to him, but Professor Temudjin ignores them, frantically searching the inside pocket of his suit and taking out a pen and a small battered notebook which he hands to me.

"Write down your name and your telephone number and send your plans and photos to the University of Ulan Bator's email address."

Then he pulls his smartphone from another pocket and asks,

"Could I take a photo so that I can remember you? I meet so many people, it's hard to remember everybody's face..."

I nod, speechless. The professor beckons me over, straightens my collar and takes a few photos. I feel horribly embarrassed, particularly as Tiago and some of the other students begin to heckle me.

"Woooo! Is señor Pablo having an audition?"

At this moment, the Director of Studies arrives to disperse the crowd and to remind Professor Temudjin that he needs to hurry if he doesn't want to miss his plane. The professor nods, puts his phone, notepad and pen back in his pocket, grabs his briefcase and, just before leaving, whispers in my ear,

"I... someone will call you on my behalf very soon. I'm sorry, I would have liked to talk with you further. You can trust this person completely..."

"Hurry!" cries the Director of Studies impatiently. "You know what the traffic's like in Buenos Aires..."

Tiago grabs me by the arm and drags me through the crowd, waddling like a chicken and cackling in a high-pitched voice,

"You're going to be a staaar, querrrido! You'll be in Game of Drones, Pablo's Anatomy or maybe even Gossip Boys! Can I have your autograaaph?"

I choose to simply laugh at Tiago's teasing, but I can't get the strange words whispered by the professor out of my head: "Someone will call you. Trust him"...

My brain is running on overdrive while I think of new ways to boost my "Draeroplane" with new applications. I've just walked into the university cafeteria teeming with noisy students and have filled my calabash from the hot water dispenser. Here, like almost everywhere in Argentina, you can drink mate (the invigorating herb we drink here instead of tea and coffee) whenever you want. I suck up some of the hot, slightly bitter infusion through my aluminium "straw" and try to get my thoughts in order. Suddenly, my phone starts to vibrate insistently...

Unknown international number. Could this be the trustworthy person that Professor Temudjin was talking about? I apprehensively accept the call.

"This is John Fitzgerald Hannibal, from Hannibal Corp.

I drop my calabash. Is there anyone in the world who doesn't know Mr Hannibal, the genius billionaire whose companies are at the forefront of the most advanced innovations in technology and who also sponsors scientific researchers across the world? Who wouldn't dream of maybe getting a scholarship offered only to the most promising students? But I don't understand why Hannibal himself is calling me; I'm only just beginning my university studies and am yet to prove myself. Unless I was recommended specifically by one of my teachers... or Professor Temudjin perhaps? I don't understand. I haven't sent him the plans of my "Draeroplane" yet.

"Young man," continues Hannibal in perfect Spanish with just the slightest hint of an American accent, "you wear a pendant that is of great interest me due to its historical importance. I would like you to have it examined by one of the experts from the Hannibal Human History foundation, currently working in Buenos Aires. A taxi is waiting for you at the main entrance of the university and will take you to the meeting point. My expert, Horacio Cortès, will compensate you for the inconvenience. It goes without saying that you should come alone."

I couldn't even get a word in edgeways as he has already hung up. I have this horrible feeling I've been given an order I can't disobey, worse than when grandfather Ramundo used to tell me to do something with no explanation. I hate it; all I want to do is call Hannibal back and tell him to get lost. I pick up my empty calabash and stuff it angrily into my bag. Through the hubbub of the cafeteria, I hear some shrill laughter and automatically turn towards the source. Ah, Tiago is busy showing off in front of a harem of swooning admirers. It's easy when you have a body like Cristiano Ronaldo... Once he's started his performance nothing can stop him, and even when I begin gesturing like crazy I'm not able to get his attention. I wanted to tell him about the phone call, but it's clearly not a good time. I swallow down my frustration and head to the university entrance, cursing under my breath. I barely make it through the door when I notice the driver of a stationary black and yellow taxi checking the screen of his mobile phone before beckoning me over. I tell myself that, if only to make grandfather happy, I could perhaps learn something interesting about this damn scrap of metal, brought over from Spain by our

ancestor Esteban...

The taxi driver has put the radio on full blast, preventing me from asking any questions. He drives like Fangio, the Argentinian five-time Formula 1 world champion. Buenos Aires stretches over almost eighty square miles and is arranged in a perfect chequerboard pattern that seems to go on forever. When I arrived in the capital, I flew my "Draeroplane" over the city to get a picture and was impressed by the sprawling, methodical geometry. Thanks to the driver racing like a madman through the "French-style" avenues of Haussmannian buildings lined with trees and screeching around corners, following a route that only he seems to know, I end up not being able to work out where I am and have to fight against the nausea building up inside me. I open the windows and hang onto the door handle until the driver is forced to move more slowly through the cobbled streets. Judging by the brightly painted facades of the houses on stilts, based on an idea from the painter Benito Quinquela Martin in the 1920s, I'm in the popular neighbourhood of La Boca. I can hear passers-by calling to each other in Italian through the open windows. Over the scent of the nearby river, I can make out the delicious smells of bubbling tomato, fried food, garlic and crispy mozzarella from the noisy restaurant terraces. The taxi honks its horn angrily at the dawdling passers-by and slips through the alleyways, ending up in a small square at the end of a cul-de-sac. He sends a text message and within a few seconds, a door overgrown with beautiful bougainvillea opens to reveal a large man in a light linen suit. The man hands the driver a wad of cash before asking me to get out of the taxi. He nods briefly by way of greeting before introducing himself.

"I am Horacio Cortès, an antiques dealer and an expert working with the Hannibal Human History Foundation. If you would like to follow me..."

I gulp and then do as he asks. What kind of mess have I got myself into?

I follow Señor Horacio Cortès through a maze of dark corridors into a large room that is bathed in the sunlight that is coming through the large bay window. I can see an incredible courtyard gleaming from behind the window, my gaze torn between the understated orchids, the roses with their silky petals, and the vibrant groves of multicoloured flowers. I turn back towards the inside of the room and, as my eyes adjust to the light, I breathe in the scent of beeswax. An impeccably waxed golden parquet floor reflects the light onto the furniture: a large carved desk, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and surrounded by soft leather club chairs. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases line the walls, filled with old books and a collection of all kinds of antiques. A sensation of luxury and refinement emanates from this sheltered space, tucked away unexpectedly in this poor neighbourhood...

"Please, have a seat," says Cortès, gesturing to a chair across from his.

He slides a crystal glass filled with lemonade towards me, the ice cubes clinking inside it, then takes a long sip from his own glass while scrutinising me intently. Once I've set my glass back down on the ornate tray, Cortès takes a transparent Plexiglas box from a drawer. It contains equipment worthy of a dental surgeon. Then his well-manicured hand waves at the leather blotter between us.

"Show me the object."

Reluctantly, I take the pendant from around my neck and place it on the blotter. Cortès holds a kind of magnifying glass up to one of his eyes and rotates the pendant using fine tweezers, similar to those used by a stamp collector. His face betrays no hint of emotion, no special interest. But I guess that's all part of his job as an antiques expert... Then he puts it down and remarks casually,

"This piece of scrap metal has no market value. I guess you already knew that."

I shrug my shoulders.

"It's not gold, just an old metal alloy. Anyway, it's not for sale. It's a family heirloom."

"Well then, tell me what your family knows about this pendant," continues Señor Cortès, removing his eyeglass and settling in his chair, his arms on the armrests.

I tell him briefly about my ancestor Esteban's expedition from Spain to Argentina, but, rather annoyed at the man's haughty attitude, I neglect to mention the fact that this piece of metal also withstood a fire...

"So, this object was brought into Argentina in 1878."

"That's right. Now it's your turn to tell me something. What did your examination tell you? And why is Mr Hannibal so interested in my pendant?"

His lips curl into a thin, cold smile.

"The Hannibal Foundation is very interested in the Hellenistic period. I take it that you never learnt Greek, young man, otherwise you would have recognised some of the ancient Greek letters engraved on this pendant."

"This piece of metal comes from Greece? Then what on earth was it doing in Spain? How old is it? And do you know what is written on it?"

"Hold your horses," says Cortès, his smile unwavering. "For starters, I don't know what is written on it. Some of these engraved symbols are indeed Greek letters, but they don't make any sense by themselves. This pendant is only one incomplete fragment of another, the whereabouts of which is unfortunately unknown to the Foundation. And just like you, I have no idea where this pendant comes from nor why it was in Spain at the end of the 19th century. If you want to know when it was made and find out more about where it came from, you will have to let us examine it in one of our specialist laboratories."

A sudden flash of greed in Cortès' eyes sets off alarm bells in my head. I reach out towards the blotter to pick up my pendant, but Cortès grabs it just before I get there, holding it by the leather cord and dangling it in front of me like a hypnotist. He whispers unctuously,

"You will get it back after the examination, of course, with a detailed report of the analyses. The Foundation is most generous to those who help advance historical research."

"That's enough. Give it back," I say, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible and holding out my hand.

"But wouldn't you like to drive a beautiful sports car? Wouldn't your grandparents love a well-earned retirement rather than having to keep dragging themselves to Buenos Aires to sell livestock at the Ignas Market? The price of meat is not the best these days..."

I am overwhelmed by a terrible uneasiness. How does Cortès know all this about my family? And why is he so desperate to get his hands on this "worthless piece of scrap metal"?

Cortès slowly places the pendant in my palm, the smile gone from his face and replaced with a look of sorrow,

"What a loss for history... Nevertheless, the Foundation would like to keep a... well, a photocopy of sorts of the original. Have you ever heard of 3D printing? Ah yes, since the financial crisis in Argentina, subsidies to universities have dwindled somewhat. But my sources tell me that your education authority is hoping to acquire one of these machines. Perhaps the Foundation could make a small gesture? And perhaps you would like to see for yourself how one of these machines, such as the one in the room next to this very office, creates an exact copy of any object you put in it?"

Whaaa... My thoughts are bouncing around in my head like billiard balls. My curiosity is pushed to its limits and, despite my distrust of this rather too well informed individual, I think he might have sold me on this... But it's for a good cause after all! A 3D printer at the university? That would be great! And I would be able to keep my promise to my

grandfather about never letting this pendant out of my sight, since I'll be there when it's copied. Maldito, alright then!

I would never have imagined that behind this office, decorated in such an upmarket antique style, I would find another room, ultramodern, sterile, windowless, purring away like a high-tech monster. The machine is connected to numerous computers and devices, and I find myself mesmerised by the way it works. Cortès shows me the stages of three-dimensional printing.

"The antiques displayed in the office are perfect copies, made from plaster of Paris using the additive manufacturing method developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which is of course sponsored by the Foundation. But here I will use FDM, Fused Deposition Modelling, where a metal object is 'printed', the 'ink' being replaced by wax, ceramics, plastic or other materials."

My pendant, minus its leather cord, has been placed on a glass shelf in the middle of some kind of translucent sphere.

"First, I model the object I want to 3D print using this computer-aided design software. Then I adjust the print settings, such as speed, layer thickness and accuracy, and then I set the layout of the print nozzles by generating the G-code. Do you want to start the printing process?"

I press the "Enter" button and can instantly see the printer nozzle moving behind the thermal protection screen to the end of its arm where it starts to deposit tiny filaments of liquid metallic material, beginning with the outline and then filling in the middle, layer by layer, until the object is completely finished. Volume is created by the layers stacking on top of each other. It's fascinating.

I don't know how long I spend watching the nozzle dance, but the rumbling of my stomach urges me to think about getting some food. As if reading my mind, or maybe he just has great hearing, Cortès casually hands me a wad of pesos.

"Where are my manners? Go get yourself a snack. I hope you like Italian food. I'm not leaving. I have to watch every second of the process. There's still an hour and four minutes left.

I am reluctant to leave my pendant behind; what if Cortès disappears and takes it with him? Sensing my hesitation, Cortès waves the cash in front of me and fixes his eyes on mine.

"Look, young man. I have been commissioned and paid handsomely to make this copy. I am going to finish it. I guarantee you that I will not leave this room."

His assurance makes me give in. After all, I tell myself, stretching my legs a bit won't do me any harm. I take the pesos and put them into my pocket, stretch, cracking my back, and start to walk back the way I came in. No way, it's almost night time! The delicious smell of food teases my nose, causing my stomach to rumble violently. No, wait, it's my phone vibrating. It must be Tiago calling me to grab something to eat. But before

answering, I realise I have several missed calls. Why didn't it ring or vibrate when I was in Cortès' office?

"Tiago, eat without me, I'm a bit busy here..."

"Pablo?" says a man's voice, young but determined and with a strange foreign accent. "Please," he continues in English that I struggle slightly to follow, "listen to me carefully. I'm calling you on behalf of Professor Temudjin. I'm one of his students, Battushig, the one who was in an accident in the mountains in Mongolia and whom the professor mentioned when talking about the Drobot. I fell into an icy crevasse and discovered a horse frozen in the ice. After I was rescued, researchers from the Mongolian Academy of Sciences found the horse's rider and certain objects allowing us to place their death at the end of the fourth century BC. But then Hannibal Corp took control of operations. They transported all of the 'discoveries' in refrigerated aeroplanes to their cryogenic centre in Massachusetts in the United States. A former student from the university who works there told me that the mounted warrior was carrying a bill of exchange and a military pass signed by Ptolemy, Alexander the Great's general in 326BC. The rider was also carrying a metal object with engravings on it, very similar to the one you wear around your neck."

"I don't understand!"

"Listen. Using the photos of you that Professor Temudjin sent to me, I was able to identify the pendant you're wearing as part of a five-pointed star. It's identical to the piece found on the frozen rider in Mongolia and the one that was stolen in Egypt. The three fragments fit the template perfectly. This star was worn by Alexander the Great, one of the greatest conquerors in the history of the world. I hope that you haven't given your pendant away or sold it?"

"No, I refused. But Señor Cortès is in the middle of making a 3D copy of it. It's for research for the Hannibal Human History Foundation and---"

I am interrupted by a furious rumbling sound. Battushig carries on immediately.

"Sorry. The Foundation is just a pretext. It's John Fitzgerald Hannibal himself who wants to get his hands on the pendant. It's imperative that he doesn't! I met this man. He's really dangerous, believe me."

"But... I...?"

"This five-pointed star is the seal of power that made Alexander invincible. But it also drove him mad. That's why Ptolemy broke the star and gave the pieces to several elite riders, asking them to take it as far away from Alexander as possible. Hannibal now has at least two pieces. If he uses the power of his intelligence network, his financial backing and his mastery of the most sophisticated technology to find them then he will be able to piece them all together and reforge the star. He will become as powerful and indestructible as one of the greatest conquerors -- and dictators -- in the world!" Along with all of the members from our 'Network', we are working to stop him from achieving his goal, but he's always a step ahead of us! This Cortès is a middleman. He's there to take your fragment.

You mustn't let him!"

I am reeling from these revelations. I mumble,

"But... my pendant... the 3D copy... Señor Cortès...?"

"Hannibal must not get his hands on it! Find a way to get the pendant back as soon as possible and get out of there. Hide it, hide yourself, but first get rid of your phone so that he can't trace you any more. Don't use your computer either. He has spies everywhere and... the 'Network' is being... Krrr... Krr... Jamm... Krr...ed... G... Luck...

The line suddenly goes dead. My heart is thumping in my chest and I start to get really scared... How am I going to be able to get my pendant back and escape without getting caught?

"Any second now!" announces Cortès, closing the door behind me. "Let's hurry."

I can barely keep up with him, bloated as I am from having stuffed my face in the neighbourhood's plethora of *pulperias*, the café-grocery stores that sell everything you can imagine, especially food, just as though I was eating to drive away the anxiety caused what Battushig told me. I'm still carrying a greasy paper bag which causes Cortès to point to his office, screwing up his nose in disgust.

"Leave all that here."

I obey him and hurry to watch the machine finish the 3D copy of my pendant.

It's astonishing. After laying one final piece of material on the top layer, the print nozzle stops its hypnotic dance and slowly moves back along the mechanical arm which then folds away. A cooling plate is then applied to the burning hot object, bringing its temperature down so that it becomes safe to handle. Once the plate's work is complete, it too withdraws and the protective screen slides away, revealing the finished piece. The ultra-sophisticated machine has managed to create an exact copy of my pendant; the engravings are incredibly precise, the bronze material even showing the same signs of wear!

Cortès, whom I had almost forgotten existed as I was so fascinated watching the end of the process, then holds out to me my pendant's leather cord at the end of a pair of tweezers. With the other hand, he puts the copy into a sort of vanity case, opening the lid to reveal a bunch of neatly stacked pesos.

"The copy is perfect. No one will ever know the difference. You can still walk away with the copy... and the money. The university will still receive a 3D copier in the next few days in any case."

My head is spinning. Cortès' offer is devilishly tempting; I can't imagine what I would do with all that money; it must be a fortune... And yet Battushig's warning is ringing in my ears, like the voice of my conscience but from the other side of the world. I take a deep breath and look into Cortès' eyes.

"First I want to check the quality of the copy compared to the original."

Cortès sighs in annoyance before going to fetch the sphere containing my pendant. He opens it and places the original next to the copy using the tweezers as well as a magnifying glass. I decide to lay it on thick:

"If grandfather finds out that I've traded the family heirloom, I'll be in for a whole heap of trouble. It's okay, you can put your magnifying glass away, it looks similar enough. But I just have to check something," I continue, grabbing the two objects.

I weigh them in my palms, pacing around the room like a macho man, trying to channel Rambo. Then I turn to face Cortès.

"Okay, it works for me. I'll play your game."

I walk back to the table and, my back to Cortès, put down the copy and at the same time slip the original into the pocket of my jeans I grab the vanity case and am about to leave the room when I find myself face-to-face with an automatic pistol equipped with a silencer, ready to shoot.

"That was hardly subtle. Nobody outsmarts Mr Hannibal. Back up slowly and put the original back... I would hate to have to paint the walls with your stupid brains. What a mess."

I can feel drops of sweat beading at the roots of my hair. My eyes dart around in panic like a mouse in a trap, desperately looking for a way out. That's when I notice the gleam of the cameras carefully concealed in the walls. There was no way my manoeuvre could have gone unnoticed. Then my stupid brain makes me do something insane: I jerk to my left and smash the vanity case into Cortès's face. The gun goes off with a barely audible "thoop" and the force of the impact causes me to let go of the vanity case which goes flying across the room. Cortès staggers and tries to aim his revolver at me. I mustn't give him the chance. Pumped full of adrenaline, I throw myself on top of him and snatch the weapon from his hands. I jump back instinctively and aim the pistol at him.

"You're making a terrible mistake," says Cortès grimly.

I walk backwards towards the door, go through it and slam it behind me. No lock! I grab one of the office chairs and use it to block the handle. I realise that my hands are shaking like crazy, my vision is completely blurred and the blood is thundering in my temples. I've gone completely mad, totally irrational! Without stopping to think, I run for my life, driven by an ancient instinct to survive.... I bump into a group of onlookers in the street who hurl insults at me. A woman's shrill voice pierces my eardrums:

"He's got a gun! Call the police!"

I run. I'm amazed that I'm able to stay so calm in the situation I'm in. I throw the weapon and my telephone into the first rubbish bin I come across. I need to run, hide, disappear from the face of the earth. I'm a fugitive now...

When she first saw the estancia, Grandmother Helga had cried out, "Ach, mein Ramundo, the horses in your Pampas are like the colourful flowers in a garden..."

I don't know why this family legend suddenly popped into my head. I've travelled miles overnight, by bus, by hitchhiking, by truck and then on foot, so I can get back to the estancia. And pick the best flowers there. Any sane person would say it was pure madness; it's the first place they would come looking for me. The lights are still on in the house. I can only imagine how concerned my grandparents would be if the police, or rather Hannibal's henchmen, had come to tell them of my disappearance or even to threaten them personally. But if I have to run away, I can't imagine doing it alone. I creep silently into the tack room, barely lit by the light of the moon. I grab a full harness, rather surprised by the unusual weight of the saddle, then slip out into the night and make my way to the paddock. I don't need to whistle to call Tormenta to me. She has sensed my presence and is whinnying expectantly, full of joy and impatience.

"Hush, Tormenta," I say, stroking her tenderly as she prances about in happiness. "We're not playing. We've got a long, long ride ahead of us..."

As I saddle her, I find that the saddle flaps are bulging with a few unexpected additions. Clouds veil the moon, so working by touch alone I make out that they include a soft leather waterskin and food supplies. Grandfather must have guessed that I would come back... I shove it all in my bag before closing the paddock. I slide one foot in the stirrup and hoist myself up to sit in the saddle, covered by a thick sheepskin. I'm delighted I kept grandfather's old gaucho saddle; it's a real armchair. Just imagine how it must have been for the gauchos, spending at least 6 to 8 hours a day on their horses, perhaps having to sleep under the stars when they moved the herds, especially when setting out for the summer pastures. They would remove the saddle, lay it flat on the ground and unfold the woolly sheepskin to transform it into an incredibly comfortable bed. I take one last look at the estancia and, in spite of myself, my eyes begin to prickle with tears at the thought of never seeing my grandparents again. I pull myself together, imagine I'm a hardy gaucho and, rather embarrassed by how sentimental I'm being, urge Tormenta into a canter. We head south together, into the wilderness where none of Hannibal's henchmen will be able to find me. I offer up a sort of prayer to the stars, asking them to watch over my grandparents. And also over Battushig, Professor Temudjin and everyone opposed to Hannibal's evil plans...

Dawn, and the sun chases the indigo ink from the sky, staining the tall grass a glimmering white, then a dusty amber before the blades finally turn a reserved green. How long have Tormenta and I been navigating this never-ending sea of grass? I can hear the roar of a tractor engine in the distance, soon swelled by others. It is not the rooster that announces the rising of the sun here, but these titanic machines getting ready to cultivate the vast farmlands. These prairies where a thousand head of cattle are grazing gradually give way to intensive farming, mainly of GM soy, 'green gold', the country's main source of export

revenue. Genetically modified wheat, maize and sunflower fields are resistant to all known insecticides, resulting in maximum crop productivity. But the seeds are sterile and can't be replanted from one year to the next; they have to be repurchased from unscrupulous multinationals. Ultra-performance, sure, but won't the earth make us pay one day for all this intensive, short-term farming? This thought reminds me of Tiago who, in addition to being antimilitary, also campaigns for all kinds of environmental causes and anti-globalisation -- when he's not busy flirting, that is! I smile despite myself, despite the despondency and loneliness clinging to me, despite the fact that my journey into the unknown is a one-way ticket which will prevent me returning to everything that is dear to me. As though in protest, Tormenta shakes her head from side to side and then kicks out slightly, seemingly asking "What about me? Am I not dear to you?" I urge her to move again, stroking her neck.

"We're nearly at a stream where you can have a drink and rest a bit. I could do with a pit stop and a snack. What do you think?"

This time Tormenta nods her head and I give her the reins, confident in her. I take the opportunity to stretch and massage my sore neck, trying to shake off the fear of my uncertain future.

Tormenta has led us to a babbling brook, near to which are growing carob and *ombùs*, the huge herbaceous trees that survive in these steppe regions and provide welcome shade during the hot weather. I unsaddle my mare and remove her bridle. She snorts and shakes like a young puppy before going to drink from the creek. I take the sheepskin off the saddle and unroll it on the ground, between two groves of mesquite -- incredibly sugary plants that livestock graze on; Tormenta will be delighted. Then I empty the contents of my bag and my pockets onto it so I can take stock of everything I have in my possession, to help me assess my chances of survival in the days to come.

When I unwrap one of the packets my grandfather left me, the delicious scent of *chimichurri* wafts under my nose. I gratefully tear into the enormous grilled *bife*, beef marinated in a spicy sauce made from garlic, parsley, tomatoes, olive oil and thyme. I wolf it down, just like a Cro-Magnon. Then I lick the packaging and my fingers with relish, far from the disapproving looks that I know my grandmother Helga would not have been able to help herself throw my way... Feeling pleasantly full, I return to the stream to wash my hands and face and fill my waterskin.

I take a quick inventory of everything I have. A lasso. A nice big loaf of bread. A packet of *yerba mate* and matches. Making a fire to boil some water just so I can sip some mate is out of the question; I'm still too close to home and this is not the time for getting spotted. That's a *facón*, the large knife that gauchos keep in a wide belt strapped to their backs. I slide it back in its sheath, hoping I won't have to use it. And then there's my Draeroplane and my laptop. What a crazy contrast between gaucho tradition and the world of new technology that seems so far away right now. I have a terrible urge to turn on the computer, chat with Tiago or fly the Draeroplane like a kite, without a care in the world. I glare resentfully at the piece of metal glistening on the sheepskin, the source of the misfortune that is preventing me from returning to my normal life. I want to destroy it, throw it into the long grass, make it disappear forever. I sigh deeply. I know it's immature, but I have to admit that this object feels like a huge burden. I can feel a warm breath on my back. With the constant prevailing winds rustling the grass and the branches around me, I didn't hear Tormenta approaching. I try to cuddle up to her, but she pushes me away with her head, knocking me onto the sheepskin and making me laugh out loud.

"You're right. I need to get some sleep. I'll definitely be thinking more clearly after that."

Satisfied, Tormenta turns her back to me and nibbles at the long grass. I feel my muscles gradually relaxing and I drift off into sleep.

I'm tormented by strange dreams: the meadow's caught on fire and has turned into an inferno, fed by gusts of violent wind. An evil, grinning face is bent over me, wearing a mask ringed with dark feathers, symbolic of death. My blood runs cold and I wake with a start, screaming and thrashing around. My fingers tear at something strangely soft, and shrill cries almost burst my eardrums. Dazed, my heart pounding, I realise that I have just terrorised a rhea, the ostrich's black cousin, who are as tall as people and whose Indian

name *guaraní* means "large spider". The panicked bird flaps its black wings open and closed, and zigzags about, snapping its beak, before sprinting off with giant strides. I let go of the black feathers I accidentally caught in my fingers, and they whirl in the wind before disappearing into the distance. I rub my face to wake myself up properly. The sun is at its zenith and it is time to hit the road. I repack my meagre possessions, scattered everywhere by the curious rhea, and curse upon discovering that only breadcrumbs remain of the loaf of bread. The waterskin has been torn to shreds and is therefore unusable. Fortunately, the laptop and the Draeroplane escaped the bird's claws and beak. But as I fold the sheepskin, I realise with horror that the pendant has disappeared!

I'm such an idiot! The leather cord I used as a necklace is still at the corrupt antique dealer's office in Buenos Aires. I should have found a way to tie it around my neck instead of leaving it lying around in my pocket or in the sheepskin in the middle of the Pampas where anybody could get their hands on it! I frantically search the ground around me on all fours, looking everywhere that has been trampled by the rhea. I tear the skin on my hands and arms on the leafy stalks of clumps of pampas grass, which have magnificent pink and white plumes but whose leaves are razor-sharp. Still nothing. Furiously I grab the *facón* and hack away at all of the vegetation around me in an attempt to find the cursed pendant, but in vain. Where could it have disappeared to???

This damned pendant is going to be the death of me. My mission is to keep it safe and stay low while Battushig's "Network" looks for a way to retrieve it -- and me at the same time, I hope. Not only has my whole world fallen apart because of this damned piece of metal, but now it's gone and vanished into the endless Pampas. If Professor Temudjin were here with his Drobot, he could search the ground using the built-in metal detector! I could fly my Draeroplane over the area, but it wouldn't be able to cope with the force of the wind for long. And if I turn on my laptop to control it, Hannibal's spies will find me instantly. There's only one thing I can do: set fire to the prairie and then comb the ashes to try and find it. If it survived the fire on my ancestor Esteban's farm in Spain, then the pendant can surely survive another a century later! I take the box of matches and am just about to strike one but the values passed down by my grandparents stop me in my tracks, as though an invisible arm had grabbed my shoulder. With all this wind whirling about, it is very unlikely that I would be able to control the flames, and if it were to spread to the farmland then it would ravage that too. And I would risk being hacked to pieces by the farmers who toil so hard to make a living. I scream in anger and throw the matchbox at the bag. I have had that bag, made out of the leather from cows raised on my grandfather's estancia, since primary school and it's pretty much indestructible. A distant memory from school suddenly comes to me...

In a desperate attempt to avoid paying up after being beaten in a game of marbles, Antonio Suarez, one of the boys in my class, decided it was better to swallow all his marbles instead and almost choked to death. The headmaster intervened and helped him to spit out most of the glass balls, but I never found out how he managed to get the rest of the ones stuck in his guts out... This unexpected memory set me on the right track, as it suddenly dawns on me what must have happened. The rhea probably gobbled down the pendant as greedily as Antonio swallowed his marbles, as greedily as the same bird ate the bread. And if I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking through his faeces in the vast Pampas, I have to catch him at all costs!

Seeing as the rhea runs at around 40 mph and can reach speeds of 50 mph, it's clear that there is no way I'll be able to catch him on foot. I whistle to Tormenta, busy grazing somewhere, and see her head over the top of the tall grass. She pricks up her ears, whinnies and gallops towards me. I throw my bag over my shoulder, grab the bridle and the saddle and then I'm ready to mercilessly hunt down that rhea. I hope that there aren't too many of them; I'm hardly a rhea expert and didn't have time to memorise any distinctive features that would allow me to tell him apart from the others in his flock! I shake off this defeatist attitude and climb into the saddle. The extra height should give me a better chance of spotting the thieving rhea -- or rheas.

In his flight, the rhea left a trail through the vegetation, trampling the grass and breaking several branches as it kept its wings outspread to help it balance. I realise that he was running in a zigzag, changing directions suddenly and haphazardly, so I make Tormenta

slow down, otherwise we'll end up getting lost in this maze created by the panicked running bird. I stand up on the stirrups, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand and scanning the horizon. There! Something dark is moving next to that *ombús* grove. I squeeze Tormenta lightly with my thighs and she takes off at a gallop, charging straight ahead towards this indistinct shadow. I wish I had some *guardamontes* now; the leathery wings would have prevented me from being scratched and stung by everything that grows here. My mare races ahead courageously. We will soon catch up with the rhea, thrashing about like a caged animal under the *ombús* branches. Why is he writhing around like this? In all honesty, I hope he's trying to spit out the pendant, as this would prevent me from having to 'take him out', so to speak, to get my possession back. But when I see what is causing all his agitation, I'm ashamed of thinking so selfishly...

Tormenta stops running. The bloody body of another rhea, probably his mate, has been torn to shreds and is lying on the ground next to a nest. Nothing remains but fragments of pale yellow egg shells. The rhea, dancing in a grief-stricken trance, doesn't even notice us. I gently untie the lasso hanging from the pommel of the saddle, grab the coil of rope and with my other hand begin to whirl the end with the noose. I gulp and then -- Hup! -- throw the rope. Either by luck or thanks to the hours of practice with my grandfather, I hit the target and pull hard to capture the bird. But at this exact moment, Tormenta suddenly rears up, whinnying and bucking in terror, sending me flying onto the ground as she gallops off. Dazed, I watch the rhea run all over the place at the end of my rope, beating its wings as fast as it can and screeching as though it were possessed. I tighten my grip and wrap the rope around my wrist. As I try to get to my feet, something suddenly drops on top of me from the branches of the tree, its weight forcing my face into the ground. Something that feels like daggers sink into my back and a powerful musky odour floods my nostrils... Maldito, it's a puma!

Time to panic. I'm sprawled face down in the Pampas with a puma on my back, ready to break my neck with its deadly jaws before enjoying my choicest cuts. My mare has disappeared and I have a rhea pulling like crazy against the noose whose other end is wrapped tight around my wrist, almost dislocating it. Using all my strength, I try to buck my assailant off me and swat his paws off my back, but I only succeed in making him sink his claws deeper into my flesh. What an earth is a puma doing so far north in the Pampas? They normally feed on sheep from the Patagonian estancias, but maybe the pumas are also in the middle of a crisis and have had to leave their territory to try their luck further north? Before answering this hypothetical question, I first have to find a way to get this beast off me before I turn into minced *bife*, just like the rhea's mate!

I can feel his hot breath getting closer to the nape of my neck; if I don't do something quickly, I'm done for. I arch my back and push with my knees and forearms to try to destabilise my assailant. He lets out a furious roar and sinks his claws into my trapezius muscles. RBI, Really Bad Idea. The pain is excruciating. My anguished cries are smothered by the tufts of grass my face is flattened against. All he needs to do is push down slightly and he will break my neck. I suddenly hear a supremely defiant whinny and I feel the claws of the beast, who is distracted by the approaching horse, retract slightly, his weight shifting onto my back. I picture the beast's head turning towards the belligerent ruckus made by my Tormenta, coming to my rescue despite her instinctive fear of feline predators. The puma lets out a terrifying roar and leaves my prone figure temporarily to pounce on his new assailant.

Free from his weight and his claws, I roll to the side and straighten up as much as possible, getting onto my knees, panting. The beast has thrown itself at Tormenta's neck, its claws sunk deep into the flesh of her chest and neck. My mare, eyes bulging and off balance from the weight of her assailant, spins around, trying to throw herself at the tree trunks to remove the puma. But the puma does not let go and despite my mare's dizzying dance, he is ready to sink his fangs into her neck. Galvanised by this horrific sight, I get up and charge forwards, ripping open my bag and pulling out the *facón*, the large gaucho knife. I bellow a war cry and rush towards the beast, striking wildly at its body over and over until I finally manage to free Tormenta from its claws. The puma falls to the floor in a heap. I kneel and drive the knife into its flesh again and again until I feel Tormenta pulling the collar of my shirt, whimpering. As if I were coming out of a bad dream, I finally drop the knife, bury my face in Tormenta's mane and hug her neck tightly before bursting into tears. I suddenly become incredibly dizzy, my vision blurs and I feel myself slipping into unconsciousness. It doesn't matter what happens now, just as long as my Tormenta is safe...

* * *

"Olà, Señor. Que tal?"

Huh? Who's asking me if I'm okay? My eyelids flutter and I try to sit up, but a terrible

pain floors me, causing me to fall back onto what I assume to be a bed or a mattress.

"Tor... menta, mi caballo? My mare?"

A huge grin lights up the face of the small girl standing above me.

"She's fine. Your mare is incredible. She came to the estancia to get help. My dad found you unconscious next to the puma. He brought you here. I'm so happy you're awake. I'm Isabel. What's your name?"

"Me llamo Pablo. But, the... the rhea. Did it escape?"

My question is met with cheerful laughter. The girl hands me a tray of bloodied tissues, clean dressings and bandages and a bowl full of a whitish substance.

"Rhea fat. Great for healing, hahaha!"

Her laughter is contagious, but I'm filled with a terrible dread as she puts down the tray and hands me a plate full of grilled chunks of meat.

"Rhea meat. Great for *asado* !"

I nod but have no appetite for an ostrich barbecue.

"Did you find a piece of metal... inside?"

"Inside what?" she says, frowning slightly.

"Inside the rhea!" I almost shout.

The girl's face darkens and she takes a step back. She reluctantly slips her hand into her pocket and pulls out the pendant. She sighs and hands it to me with a sad smile.

"Can I keep it?"

I take the pendant and look at it closely, checking it is indeed mine. It's definitely the same cursed pendant. This time it's my turn to sigh. I slip the pendant into my pocket and say to the girl,

"I can't give it to you, I'm sorry. But I would like to give you something else. Have a look through my things and see if there's anything you like."

I think that the girl must already be very familiar with the contents of my bag, because she streaks out of the room before returning with a huge smile.

"This. Can I have it?"

I smile back at her and nod. Then I watch her twirl around the room, holding my Draeroplane above her head and making loud engine noises before racing back out of the room.

One day I hope to make a new one, more efficient and probably a bit more like Professor Temudjin's Drobot. But until then, at least my Draeroplane will help a little girl from the Pampas play and dream...

A bizarre video conference is taking place between the US and Mongolia:
Massachusetts, USA.

Battushig:

"Professor Temudjin, Salonqa, thanks to the photo of the third star fragment, Pablo's pendant, I think that I have managed to decode some of the geometric symbols engraved on the metal. I've managed to isolate one particular word: ΑΘΑΝΑΣΙΑ. Salonqa, you're the ancient Greek expert. Do you know what it means?"

University of Ulan Bator, Mongolia.

Salonqa's face darkens as she reads aloud,

"Α-THA-NA-SIA. It's worse than we thought. It means: IMMORTALITY..."

"So," says Professor Temudjin, "if Hannibal gets his hands on all of the pieces of Alexander the Great's star and reforges the seal, he'll be immortal."

"Only if he's riding Bucephalus!" retorts Salonqa. "And as far as I know..."

Salonqa is suddenly interrupted by an urgent contact request:

Cairo, Egypt.

"Hi everyone. I've got some good news and some bad news."

Leyla's face appears on the screen. She seems excited and super talkative.

"What???"

"First, the good news: Pablo is alive."

Leyla sends an extract from an article from the "In other news" section of a Spanish newspaper. There is a black and white photo showing a dead puma surrounded by a crowd of Argentine farmers all looking proud and happy. Then there's a photo of a young man lying on his stomach, his entire chest wrapped with bandages covered with dark stains.

"The article basically talks about a young man who was saved from a puma attack thanks to his brave mare which then went to get help from this family's estancia. They found the young man and treated him and all of the farmers in this area of the Pampas came to see the puma. They are very concerned that pumas from Patagonia have made their way to the Pampas. And my John, who's on holiday with his family in Seattle in the States, it rains all the time over there and..."

"Thanks, Leyla," interrupts Battushig, "we take it that a local newspaper has broadcast this information. But the bad news is that if you managed to find Pablo, then Hannibal also knows where Pablo is."

"He has to get out of there quickly and find another hiding place!" says Leyla, panicking. "How's he going to manage if he's so badly injured? Hannibal must have already sent some of his men to grab him. Is there any chance we can get to him before Hannibal and get him out of there?"

A long silence follows Salonqa's anxious words. Professor Temudjin coughs discreetly.

"It looks like we're not off to a good start... I'll see if my contacts in Argentina can lend us a hand. I'll make some calls and get back to you."

"Isabel, dejele dormir!"

Ironically it's the voice of Clara, Isabel's older sister, that rouses me from my slumber. Clara, with her big eyes, black and shining like her hair. Clara, with her radiant smile. Clara with a dimple in her left cheek. Clara, who moves so gracefully. Clara, who braided some silk thread and fashioned me a bracelet to bring me luck... Her lilting voice causes my heart to beat at 100 miles per hour. I dare not open my eyes for fear of meeting her gaze and blushing as red as a chilli pepper. I'll sleep for a bit longer! But Isabel 'strokes' my cheek vigorously to get me to open my eyes.

"Your face is all scratchy, Pablito! Look out of the window, it's a surprise!"

I was feeling so good in this cosy bed. I was dreaming that everything was going to be fine, that I would continue to be looked after by Clara... uh, I mean by the wonderful Ortega family, for as long as it would take for me to finally forget all about Hannibal... I struggle to lift myself up onto one elbow and turn my head towards the window. What I see gives me a good reason to get up.

My sweet Tormenta is licking the windows like a car wash. I smile at Isabel and Clara who help me to get up. I move with the grace of a four-ton elephant seal on the ice of Tierra del Fuego, stifling a moan of pain as I turn around and sit on the bed. I wait for my head to stop spinning before standing up and taking a few steps towards the open window. And now it's my turn for a car wash from Tormenta, stamping her feet and trying to climb through the window.

"Easy now, my sweet," I say, stroking her head. "I'm coming. I'll come out now, but through the door I think."

My heart aches when I leave the Ortegas' house and am reunited with my mare. The cuts to her neck and chest from the puma are covered in bandages; neither of us are looking great right now.

"What on earth are you two doing outside?" protests Senora Ortega, wiping her flour-covered hands on her apron. "Isabel!" she continues, frowning. "Did you let the mare out of her box?"

"No, Mum!"

"Please don't scold her, ma'am. Tormenta hates being locked up so she learnt how to open doors."

The phone suddenly begins to ring and Senora Ortega rolls her eyes.

"Ever since you ran into that puma, the phone hasn't stopped ringing! How on earth am I going to finish my *empanadas* ! The men want to go on a hunt with rifles. Imagine if there are other pumas roaming out there, with all the kids running around in the Pampas!"

As Mrs Ortega walks back into the house, cursing under her breath and dragging Isabel

with her, my stomach rumbles at the thought of the meat pastries being made by my hostess. But I am suddenly struck by a terrible thought, driving all thoughts of food out of my mind. Quite a few people have already heard about my misadventure, and I fear that the story may reach the ears of Hannibal's henchmen. And he's an even more dangerous predator than a puma. I need to get out of here as soon as possible! But there's no way I'm going to be able to saddle Tormenta, what with all of her injuries. I look around to see if there is a car or van that I could borrow, but the courtyard and barn are empty. I can't even see a tractor. So I turn to Clara, brokenhearted.

"I have to leave, but I promise I'll come back to see you, uh... you all. Could you please lend me a horse?"

With Tormenta looking on indignantly, I saddle the old pinto-chestnut gelding that Clara pointed out to me in the paddock.

"Alberto, he's the nicest."

I try to hide from Clara how much my injuries are hurting with every movement, carrying the saddle, lifting it up, fastening the girth and then climbing onto Alberto's back. I thank Clara awkwardly before spurring my steed forwards and heading off into the distance. Of course Tormenta follows me, infuriated. Nothing could have made her stay behind. I take one last look behind me. Clara is standing in the tall grass, head crowned by the halo of her long, wind-tossed hair, and she is blowing me a kiss. My heart skips a beat. For the first time in my life I think I've fallen in love, for real, and now I have to leave the one I love behind! I only hope that Hannibal and his men do no harm to Clara or her family...

This Alberto is such a good boy. Tormenta took me from the Pampas, past the Rio Colorado on my way to Patagonia until my encounter with the puma. Alberto has taken us past the Rio Negro, even farther south. We've been riding for hours and still Alberto shows no sign of fatigue or irritation. Tormenta, however, seems exhausted. She has long since stopped trying to bite her rival and I am now rather concerned at the sight of the blood beginning to seep through her bandages. I decide to stop at the next watering hole and start to keep an eye out for thicker vegetation. Squinting, I can just make out the foothills of the Andes to the west, the natural border between Argentina and Chile. I cannot yet see where the jagged coastline meets the Atlantic Ocean to the east. I feel lost in this central desert in the wilderness to the north of Patagonia, battered by the constant dizzying western wind. This country is so vast. If I continue further to the south, straight ahead, maybe I will be able to cross the Strait of Magellan and arrive in Tierra del Fuego within a few days. Then from Ushuaia I will cross the icy archipelagos before finally reaching Cape Horn, where I will have to smuggle myself on board a ship to an unknown destination...

I shake my head violently. I think the wind is making me crazy, unless it is the infinite loneliness of these deserted lands that lies behind my desperate dreams. Tierra del Fuego is still miles away; I have to get my head straight and focus on the present. The land has changed: there are no more cultivated fields, no more signs of habitation, no longer even abandoned ruins of houses, but there are rocky, thorny ridges everywhere. Alberto is taking us through the bushy grasslands towards a small hollow with a meandering stream. In my rush to leave, I did not take the time to pack my bag nor to borrow a clean shirt from Senor Ortega. The sun is burning every square inch of exposed skin, so I dismount gratefully to cool off in the creek and drink my fill together with the horses. Then I stuff myself with violet-blue Calafate berries. Legend has it that anyone who eats the fruit will return safely to Patagonia. I even find some *Pan del indio*, Indian bread, a kind of mushroom that grows on certain trees and looks like little yellow balls. They don't taste great but I feel rejuvenated!

Suddenly, Alberto begins to utter a series of low, short whinnies. His ears are flat, and he's stomping on the spot, as tense as a bowstring, before suddenly taking flight. Tormenta gives a snort of curiosity mixed with anxiety, but unlike Alberto, she does not panic. She must already know the danger that caused Alberto to lose his head. I don't understand where the threat is coming from.

Then I spot a shadow on the ground before recognising the buzzing sound. A good thirty feet above our heads, struggling against the wind, a triangular drone is scanning the terrain, sending images back to its pilot. I notice other dots in the sky; they must be drones too. I am just about to give into the same panic as Alberto by running straight off when the drone comes to a bumpy landing a few metres in front of me. Tormenta, who's used to my Draeroplan, moves closer to sniff it. As a drone of this size would not be able

to carry any explosives, however small, I decide to follow Tormenta's example and take a look at the object. It reminds me strongly of the model they're working on at the university, so much so that I am almost not surprised at all to hear Tiago's voice crackling through the speaker.

"Olà, Amigo! We're almost out of battery so listen carefully. Go east until you find a paved road along the coast, along the San Matías Gulf. There are some Duarte soybean transport trucks -- my father's company -- driving back and forth between San Antonio Oeste and the Valdes Peninsula looking for you. They can't drive over the rocks. You can thank Professor Temudjin; he's got the university's entire New Technologies department searching for you! Get a move on... Bzzz... Crrr.."

The speaker stops transmitting. A gust of wind shakes the drone, flipping it onto its back like a turtle. Tormenta begins to stamp next to me, as though encouraging me to ride bareback. But given the state of her bandages, I choose to proceed on foot. I stroke her forehead, pulling her cheek towards me to kiss her.

"When you're better, my sweet. I'll run for now. You can follow me."

And drawing on what little strength I have left, I take a deep breath and head east, trying not to twist my ankles in this hilly steppe. If the truck is big enough, maybe Tormenta will be able to ride in it too. Then we'll both be out of this hell the pendant has thrown us into!

I tumble down a slope strewn with rocks and choked with brambles, breathing heavily. It is as if I were riding over waves of rock, a giant prehistoric shell going up and down then up again, but which is now sloping indisputably downwards. On the horizon I can see the waves and foam of the Atlantic Ocean crashing away at the coastline. If I maintain my pace, I will soon reach the tarmac road. I glance behind me; Tormenta is trudging along, head down, her feet, normally so sure, hesitating at times on the treacherous gravel. I can't wait to get her out of here so that I can heal her wounds...

The jumbled terrain is now giving way to a kind of plateau, as though one of the ridges of the shell had been cut with a scalpel. I force myself to climb the slope leading up to it, hoping that I will have a clear view of the coast from there. I hoist myself onto the plateau. But instead of a pleasant view, I find myself standing in front of a small plane. No, it's not the propeller plane belonging to Saint-Exupéry, who opened new routes for Aeroposta Argentina in Patagonia in the early 30s. It's a private jet. A man in a plain linen suit and wearing a Panama hat is waiting for me beneath it.

"You made me wait, young man."

I recognise the voice of the man who contacted me in Buenos Aires after Professor Temudjin's lecture. Hannibal! My heart stops and my eyes dart around to assess my chances of escape. I spot the deserted road far below me. I think I can make out the shape of a truck arriving from the north. If I jump from this plateau and run like a *guanaco*, the Argentinian llama, maybe I'd be able to...

"Don't even think about it," interrupts Hannibal, his tone icy. "My co-pilot is also an expert sniper, and I'm not a bad shot either," he says, shifting the hem of his jacket slightly. "Put your pendant on the ground and back away slowly."

Through the window of the jet I notice the long, thin barrel of a gun pointing right at me. After all this journey, having to hand over my pendant to this monster fills me with helpless rage.

"I'm waiting," rumbles Hannibal.

Defeated, I slide my hand into my pocket to take out the piece of metal. Suddenly, Tormenta emerges over the plateau. Hannibal jumps back in surprise and takes a step back. I didn't hear the sound of hooves muffled in the wind either. He composes himself quickly and draws his weapon.

"Put the pendant on the ground immediately or I'll kill the horse!"

Tormenta, ears flat, baring her teeth, muscles taut, is ready to launch herself at Hannibal. I hastily throw the pendant onto the ground near Hannibal, before rushing towards Tormenta, my arms outstretched and whispering "whoa, girl", trying to calm her down. By the time I have managed to grab onto her mane and wrap my arms round her neck to hold her back, Hannibal has picked up the pendant and taken his seat in the jet. The door shuts

and the jet begins to take off. Over the noise of the engines, I can hear the sound of frenzied honking echoing from below. I walk to the opposite side of the plateau. There is a transport truck parked at the side of the road. I raise an angry fist in the direction of the jet and scream with rage; if only it had been here a few minutes earlier, I could have disappeared again and taken the pendant out of Hannibal's reach! At this moment, I hear a high-pitched whistle and notice the sun reflecting off something metallic in one of the jet's window frames. Like a robot, I turn around in time to see Tormenta's legs buckle under her as she collapses to the ground in a pool of blood that is growing larger by the second... Noooooo!!!

* * *

The same despair overwhelms the Network's members, scattered throughout the world.

"Professor Temudjin, Hannibal already had the pendant. He didn't need to shoot Pablo's horse too!"

"To indulge in such needless cruelty... This man has a terribly dark and twisted soul. If he becomes all-powerful and immortal, he will be unstoppable. Who knows what evil plans he might be dreaming up?"

"And now he has at least three of the five star fragments!"

"It's a race against time. We have to find the last two pieces before he does.

"Do we have a chance?"

"We can try..."