

Chapter 11



The Count was in a little room off the tower room when he turned to find the Stranger standing behind him.

‘The angels are fighting,’ the Stranger said, smiling in enjoyment. ‘That should keep them out of our way for a while.’

He sat down in one of the chairs next to the fire and stretched out his feet to the flames. He looked round the tiny room. It was lined with books and bottles. The books were all beautifully bound in leather and had long titles such as *How to Change Shape or Become Invisible in Ten Easy Steps*. Many of the bottles contained beautifully coloured liquids, ranging across the whole spectrum from ruby red to an almost translucent blue. The Stranger smiled. The colours reminded him of the angels fighting. Some of the other bottles were not so pleasant. They contained dried up bats, the paws of innumerable animals, wings, toenails, skin, and other things that caused the Stranger to shudder in disgust.

‘I don’t know how you can bear to look at these things, Maleficio, never mind use them,’ he said.

The Count looked up from his table where he was scribbling on a sheet of paper. ‘You don’t complain when they work,’ he said impatiently. ‘How else do you think I can do half the things I do?’

The Stranger shrugged his shoulders. He was no longer smiling and his face looked strained in repose. If he didn't smile his cheeks looked too big for his face. Relaxed like this, his lips were small and petty. He watched the Count writing up his reports from the day. He knew that was what he was doing because he knew the Count was a creature of habit and that he was careful to write up all that had happened with his experiments each day.

Count Maleficio was indeed writing up an account of what Blanco had been doing with the flying machine but he was also watching the Stranger. Although he had known him for a number of years he did not fully trust him and was not entirely sure what he was doing here. He was one of a band of inventors whom the Count had met in southern Spain, in the city of Cordoba. Most had been students of alchemy seeking eternal life, immense wealth or, in most cases, both. But there were also many experimenters and Maleficio had been in communication with a few of them about the flying machine. He had gone to Cordoba to meet them and one of the people he had been introduced to was the Stranger. He was experimenting with Greek fire and other explosive ideas and he had taken the Count under his wing. The group he belonged to was full of grand plans and each of them brought something to it. The Stranger led them. Maleficio knew that he had a plan for all of their experiments but he hadn't told any of them what the plan was yet. The Count, though he barely liked to admit it to himself, was sometimes a little scared of the Stranger.

'How is the boy shaping up?' the Stranger asked abruptly.

‘Excellently,’ said the Count, instantly forgetting his thoughts about the Stranger, so delighted was he with the thought of seeing the fruition of his own plans. ‘He has finished the flying machine and will fly it tomorrow at dawn.’

‘Will it work?’

The Count looked insulted by this. ‘Of course,’ he said and then he modified his answer a little. ‘Well, it should.’ He shrugged. ‘If it doesn’t, at least it won’t be me who’s killed. I can always try again later. But it will work. Rameel has promised me.’

‘Lucky you met the boy in Venice,’ said the Stranger.

The Count snorted. ‘It was not luck. Rameel directed me to him. And it was a pleasure to thwart his great-uncle. If it hadn’t been for those plans of his that I stole we would never have tried to experiment with the fire-powder. That combined with the flying machines will bring us great rewards.’

The Stranger frowned. ‘Personal battles should never have been brought into it. And Rameel shouldn’t be used to further your personal vendettas.’ He paused. The Count said nothing but looked furious. ‘I would lay more trust in the fire-powder than the flying machines,’ he continued in a more placating tone. ‘If they do to a city’s walls in a large amount what they did to Griffin’s hair when we lit such a small amount then how can anyone refuse us anything? And look what happened to the church.’ He paused. ‘If the flying machine works tomorrow and the boy survives what will you do with him then?’

The Count was unsure exactly what answer the Stranger was expecting and so he hesitated before he replied. ‘Kill him?’ he said, a slight question in his

voice, as though checking it was the correct response. 'Him and that girl he brought with him.'

'Good,' replied the Stranger coolly. 'I don't know why you didn't kill the girl as soon as she arrived.'

'She did have some angelic assistance,' replied the Count drily.

The Stranger waved his hand. 'Rameel will take care of that.'

There was a loud, resonant crash from outside the door.

'What was that?'

Eva was sitting on the windowsill in Blanco's room counting all the stars that she could see from his window. It was boring work but it was all she could think of to do to pass the time until he returned. It took her a while to realize that she was not alone in the room.

Griffin knew that he shouldn't be there. But he knew his master was in the tower room and he knew the demon angel was still fighting and he thought he would be safe for a while. This didn't stop his hands from shaking and his heart from thudding so hard within his skin that he thought it might burst out. But he liked the girl. She had been kind to him.

'Who's there?' demanded Eva.

A scuffling in the fireplace was followed by one ragged foot and then another one. Eva recognized them at once and ran over to help him out of the fireplace.

'Griffin!' she cried. 'What are you doing here?'

Griffin's mouth was so dry with terror at the thought of defying his master that he couldn't speak

at first. If he were caught . . . but he couldn't think any more about that or he would never be able to say anything.

'You must leave here,' he whispered in his hoarse voice, so low that Eva had to strain to hear him. 'You must go now.'

'We can't,' said Eva. 'Blanco won't leave now. He is going to fly the machine tomorrow. He'll never leave before he gets a chance to do that.'

'Even if *your* life is in danger?'

This silenced Eva for a moment. She didn't know how to reply to that. Would Blanco choose her over the chance to fly that machine? She suddenly realized that she wasn't sure. She knew how much he wanted to fly, how obsessed he was with the idea of flying, how it had filled his every waking—and probably sleeping—moment since he had been here but she had no idea how he felt about her.

'The Count is not working alone,' said Griffin. 'He has a dark angel.'

Eva's face brightened at the word 'angel'. 'I have two of them,' she said happily. 'I'm sure they could fight a dark one and win.'

Griffin looked surprised, so far as a man with no eyebrows or lashes could look any more surprised. 'Do you have to brew that horrid potion?' he asked.

'Potion?' laughed Eva. 'No. I just speak to them.'

Griffin looked even more miserable than usual. 'You are lucky,' he said mournfully. 'I have to brew a horrid potion to call the angel and then he stays for a few days before he disappears again. He's here now.'

Eva looked thoughtful. So that was what Micha and Azaz had been doing for the last few days.

‘There is something else,’ said Griffin, looking around the room, as though expecting Blanco to leap out from under the bed. ‘Where is your friend? I should tell you both together.’

‘He’s gone to the tower room,’ said Eva. She hesitated and then realized that Griffin was risking a lot coming to warn them and so she continued, ‘We found some plans, something to do with flames and buildings falling down. Blanco had been looking for something that he thought the Count had taken from his great-uncle but he found them instead. He’s gone to put them back.’

Griffin had pushed his hood back from his head as she spoke and was scratching at his missing eyelashes in terror.

‘Not the fire-powder,’ he said. ‘Not the plans with the fire-powder. If my master finds them gone, he will kill him. Now. This instant.’

‘But the Count likes him,’ said Eva. ‘He wants him to fly the machine. He won’t kill him.’

Griffin stared at her. His muddy brown eyes were straining in their eye sockets as he tried to speak through his terror. ‘The Count is not my master,’ he said.

Scared by what she saw in his eyes Eva ran out of the door.

Blanco couldn’t believe that he had knocked over the astrolabe. Of all the things to have knocked over that was certainly the heaviest and therefore the loudest. The crash resonated in his ears as he tried to decide in an instant whether he should hide or whether he should tell them that he had come back to work on

the flying machine. The chilling words about his and Eva's death certainly made him prefer the former option but would he have the time?

It would appear not. The dark wall hanging on the far side of the room was thrust aside and the Count came storming through, his silver cloak billowing out behind him like an angry cloud. Just behind him came the small round man from dinner with a delighted smile on his face. Looking at him and his twinkling eyes, Blanco began to wonder if he hadn't dreamt the whole conversation that he had just listened to. This man reminded him of the old men who sat in the piazzas at home and talked of how much better things had been in their young days.

'What are you doing here?' demanded the Count.

'I . . . I . . . ' Blanco was too well aware of the fire-powder plans in his tunic to lie confidently. Eventually he managed to control his tongue which had tried to twist away from him. 'I just came to check on the flying machine. I was too excited, could not sleep.'

The Count frowned, unconvinced. Blanco was looking awkward. But then, he was obsessed with that machine and maybe what he said was true. And he wanted to see the machine fly. If they killed him now he might never know if it worked. He turned to the Stranger.

'Rameel will know if he speaks the truth,' he said. 'Where is he? I would have thought that he would be back here by now.'

Blanco looked from the Count to the small man. The Count sounded almost deferential. And who was Rameel?

'Tell him that Rameel won't be back for a while,'

said a voice in Blanco's ear. He recognized it as belonging to Azaz. *'Tell him . . .'*

But before Blanco had a chance to, the door to the tower room was thrown open and a heavily puffed Eva stood there. When she saw Blanco she ran over to him and threw her arms around him. She was still unable to speak, breathing too heavily. Azaz continued speaking into Blanco's ear.



'What are you saying?' asked a voice.

'Isn't it a shame,' asked Azaz, turning cold eyes on Rameel, 'that your friends have to burn some concoctions to be able to hear you and Blanco and Eva can hear us without even trying.'



'Get off me!' cried Blanco, taking Eva's arm from around his neck. He looked embarrassed. 'What are you doing?'

Eva glared at the Count and then smiled at the man standing beside him, the man who had been so kind to her at dinner. 'Señor . . .' She hesitated, suddenly realizing that she still didn't know his name. 'Señor, you must help us. The Count . . .'

'I told you not to trust him,' said the man, smiling at her, this time in a pitying manner.

'I know,' said Eva while Count Maleficio threw him a murderous glare.

'Then you should have listened,' said the man, his smile beginning to fade. 'I told you to leave the castle.'

‘I know,’ said Eva, glancing at Blanco. ‘But I couldn’t leave—’

‘Oh, not this again. Not more declarations about how you couldn’t leave your little friend,’ interrupted the Stranger, smiling at Eva. ‘It’s all too tedious for words. He would have left you fast enough if it had been the choice between you and flying, you know.’

‘No, he wouldn’t!’ cried Eva and then she looked at Blanco. He was staring not at her but at the flying machine. He tore his gaze away as she spoke.

‘I . . . I—’ he said.

‘I’ve had enough,’ interrupted the Stranger and then he turned away. ‘Kill them.’

All three of them looked at him with horror.

‘No!’ cried the Count. ‘He’s got to fly first.’

‘No!’ cried Blanco, who quite agreed with the Count. If he was going to die, he was going to do it while trying to fly.

‘No!’ cried Eva looking in shock at the man she had thought her friend.

He smiled at her again. ‘You shouldn’t have trusted me either, my dear,’ he said. ‘You really are just too trusting. It looks as if we’ve all let you down.’ He motioned to himself, Count Maleficio, and Blanco.

‘*Not all of us!*’ cried Azaz, heading towards the Stranger. Just as he was about to reach him, a hand grasped his wing, twisting it viciously. Crying out in pain he turned to see Rameel.

The Stranger turned cold eyes on the angels and Eva realized that he could see them. But that he could do so he was keeping secret from the Count and also, she thought, from the angels.

Eva gasped in horror. This must be the dark angel

that Griffin had mentioned. Rameel's wings were torn and his left one was hanging heavily from his shoulder blade. The blood, where it ran out, was of a metallic silvery colour and where it dripped on to the floor it sizzled and dissolved instantly. He was limping and he cradled his left arm carefully against his side as though it hurt dreadfully. But he had hold of Azaz with his one good hand and he was pulling at Azaz's wing. Azaz turned round in a rage and pulled at Rameel's hand. Their eyes were blazing in anger and their faces twisted in hatred. Azaz grabbed Rameel's left hand, causing him to howl in anguish but he refused to let go.

Their moves were almost too quick for Eva to see but whatever they were doing it looked painful. Before her horrified eyes, they fought their way over to the windowsill. Azaz jumped on to the sill to give himself greater leverage to fight off Rameel but Rameel with one last burst of energy lunged forward and pushed Azaz backwards. Azaz, recovering from a previous attack, was off balance and stumbled. A smile of triumph flickered momentarily over Rameel's face before Azaz reached out a hand and grasped the trailing edge of Rameel's wing. When Azaz disappeared over the ledge Rameel followed him howling curses as he fell.

As they had been fighting the rest had stood still, as though turned to statues. The angels had fought in a terrifying silence echoed by the humans in the room. As soon as they disappeared over the edge, however, everybody came back as though waking from a dream.

'There's one thing I want to know before you kill us,' said Eva turning to the Count, calmly as though

discussing what she would like to have for dinner. 'Why did you need Blanco in the first place? Why didn't you just try to fly yourself?'

'My dear girl,' said the Count in tones of outrage. 'I might have hurt myself. *You* must understand what I mean, Blanco,' he continued coldly, turning away from Eva. 'Great experiments demand sacrifices. Someone has to make them. It is an honour for you to take part in my experiments.'

'You are supposed to make sacrifices *yourself*,' Blanco said. 'Not turn other people into them. I don't understand you. I want to make a flying machine. But *I* want to fly. I want to feel what it is like. Don't you understand that? Don't you want to try that yourself?'

Count Maleficio stared at Blanco as though he were lacking in his wits and then he grabbed his arm and pulled him over to the ledge where the flying machine lay. Looking past it Blanco could see little for it was still dark, although far off in the distance dawn was struggling to break through. It was a windy night and the clouds were forcing it to fight hard to be seen.

'Do you have any idea,' he hissed in Blanco's ear, 'just how high up we are here?'

Blanco nodded. 'Of course I do,' he said. 'It's wonderful!'

He had looked out often in the past few days while working on the machine and had thought it was wonderful how high the castle was. The chance of a successful flight was so much greater leaping from here. The Count ignored his nod, however.

'The tower is the height of the cliff that the castle rests upon. I did my calculations to find the highest

tower possible on top of the highest cliff that I could find inland to give my machines the greatest chance of success. To give *me* the greatest chance of success.' His fingers were gripping Blanco's arm so tightly now that it was painful. '*I* did the calculations, *I* created the designs, but I needed someone to test them for me for I could not bear to even look out.' He paused and then turned Blanco to him, gazing into his eyes as though defying him to laugh. 'I cannot bear to look out,' he said. 'I find I do not like the height.'

Eva bit back a nervous giggle. It did seem strange, a man so obsessed with flying who was afraid of heights. That must have been why he recreated the stars inside—so that he did not have to look out to see them.

'That is why I now have need of you,' he said, still gripping on to Blanco's arm. 'I need someone who knows what he is doing to see if the machine will truly work. I need to know if my machine can really fly.' His strange glittering eyes were looking straight into Blanco's. 'Then I can build more. Hundreds! Thousands!'

Blanco suddenly realized what the compartment was for. It was for the fire-powder. If they could light the fire-powder and release it from above a walled town then they would indeed be invincible. Nobody could fight back against an attack from the skies. They must never find out that Blanco had the plans for the fire-powder. He had to leave the castle with them and hope that they had not copied them.

The Count released Blanco's arm and pushed him back towards the far wall. He turned and looked out at the slowly lightening sky and then turned back to

face them all, his cloak whirling around him. He was laughing. He raised his arms as though calling to the heavens.

‘I have a vision!’ he cried. ‘Imagine the sky filled with men in flying machines.’

Blanco at least could share that vision. It could be a beautiful thing. It was what he longed for. But what Count Maleficio said next shattered those illusions.

‘Like great black bats they will fill the skies, casting their shadow upon the earth. And they will be filled with poison or fire or missiles. Venom will pour from them on to the people below. They will destroy whole villages in moments. Towns in half a day. Castles will fall! Nobody will be able to stop them. Nobody will know how to prevent them or to fight against them! Except me!’ His voice rose. ‘Me! I will have their power in my hands. They will do what I say. *Everyone* will do as I say!’

He paused and his strange grey eyes focused for a moment on Blanco and he spoke to him as though sharing a great secret. ‘At first I thought of how much kings would pay me to build such things. They would be helpless against them. How do you protect your castle from a threat from above? You cannot. Do you have any idea how many kings would pay to own such a weapon?’

Blanco and Eva shook their heads in dumbfounded horror at what he was saying. He continued as though one of them had actually answered him.

‘And then I thought, wait! Why should they pay me for my machines? I can have my own power. I can threaten everyone. There is no one who can stop me. So why can I not be a king? Why can I not rule

the earth? With these machines at my bidding, nothing and no one can stop me! I *can* rule the world!

He stood there, his eyes glittering in triumph as he contemplated his dreams of mass destruction, his arms still raised to some unknown demon of flight that held his soul in thrall.

‘Really, Maleficio,’ said the Stranger. All three turned to him in surprise having forgotten that he was still there. ‘You do like to dramatize things, don’t you?’

His smile had never wavered but his eyes had grown hard. He did not like what he had just heard.

Blanco was horrified and barely heard what the Stranger said. To him, flight had always been like a gift from heaven. He had always thought of it as being a beautiful, graceful thing. He had always thought of birds when he thought of flying. Not this, not death and destruction and visions of terror. The Count had ruined all his dreams, all his hopes. Now he would never be able to look at another flying machine without thinking of the terrible things they could be used for.

‘No!’ he shouted, trying to stop the Count from speaking further. ‘I won’t let you! I will smash the machine first!’

‘Will you, Blanco?’ said the Count, quieter now, staring into his eyes, his own bright with a lust for power. He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Would you not like to build them with me? I could let you have a town or two. I was always planning on doing so anyway.’

Blanco picked up a metal hammer.

‘Don’t touch that machine, Blanco,’ said the Count and then he shrugged. ‘I will only build another if you smash it,’ he added.

‘But who will you get to fly it?’ Blanco asked. ‘If you are too scared of heights and I refuse to get in?’

Blanco turned to the machine. He was reluctant to smash it. It was a beautiful thing, despite what the Count wanted to use it for, and he was sure that it would work.

‘I think I can say something here.’

The Count and Blanco both turned. The Stranger held Eva in his encircling arm. She was pale and her eyes were even larger than usual in her terror. At least Blanco thought it was terror. Looking again, he saw that it was anger.

‘I think you *will* fly it,’ said the man in his soft voice, his teeth shining through the murky half-light in the room. The sight sent shivers up and down Blanco’s spine. ‘Unless you want your friend to die.’

Blanco stared at him in shock and saw that he held a knife in his hand. He was such an ordinary looking man but his voice was pure evil. The blue eyes, looking into his, showed no emotion. Blanco felt that the Stranger truly did not care whether Eva lived or not.

He smiled cruelly at him. ‘Get in, Blanco.’

‘Smash it, Blanco,’ cried Eva. ‘I don’t care what he does to me.’

Blanco looked from her to the Count to the man who held her. He realized that *he* cared what the Stranger did. He would have cared even if the Stranger had held Griffin in his arms but the fact that it was Eva made him care more than he could ever have imagined. There was no doubt in his mind that the man would kill her if he did not do as he said.

‘Who are you?’ Blanco asked the Stranger.

‘Does it matter?’ he replied. ‘You probably won’t live long enough to care. You know, I’m not sure that we do need you to fly that machine. I doubt it will work and I doubt that, if by some miracle it does, you will be able to control it.’

‘I can fly that machine,’ Blanco returned.

The Stranger shrugged. ‘I find I don’t really care,’ he said. ‘This was Maleficio’s plan. I’m just here as a courtesy. But I have plenty others. As for you, Maleficio.’ He turned to the Count. ‘Going to rule the world by yourself, were you? What about the rest of us?’

The Count looked furious and terrified at the same time. He gazed at the Stranger pleadingly. ‘You all laughed at me,’ he said sounding like a petulant child.

The Stranger silenced him with a quick snap of his fingers.

Blanco knew he had to make the Stranger care that he could fly the machine.

‘It will do as he says,’ he said, motioning towards the Count. ‘If it works, you will be able to control whole towns. The Count is right. They’ll be terrified.’

That sparked a small light of interest in his eyes. ‘I have other plans that will work just as well,’ he said again, ‘but this would definitely speed things up. Go on then. Prove it.’

‘I will do it,’ Blanco said quietly. ‘On one condition. I will fly if Eva is in the machine with me.’

The Stranger glanced at the Count, who seemed a little put out at being ignored in the negotiations. The Count nodded.

Eva appeared more terrified at this prospect than

at the thought that the Count or his friend might kill her.

‘Do you think that’s a good idea, Blanco?’ she asked hesitantly, glancing at the fragile machine which looked as though it would barely hold one person’s weight, never mind two.

Blanco ignored her. ‘Put her in,’ he said to the Stranger.

The Stranger looked at Blanco and then at Eva and then at the machine. Blanco realized that he now wanted to see it fly more than he wanted to kill Eva.

Ignoring Eva’s protests, he dragged her over and strapped her into the back of it with ropes under instruction from the Count, whose eyes were sparkling at the thought that he might finally see his great invention take flight.

‘Now you,’ the Stranger said.

‘You are mad,’ Blanco said facing the Count. ‘How can you dream of destruction with such a beautiful thing.’

‘Power,’ whispered the Count. ‘I need power.’

Blanco went over to the machine, not looking once at Eva. He knew that if he saw her terror he would never be able to do what he was going to do.

‘Now get in,’ said the Count. The Stranger stepped back and crossed his arms.

‘You’ll have to help me prepare it first,’ Blanco said.

The machine was still at the back of the ledge. It needed to be pushed forward ready for that one final push that would take it over the edge. Together they propelled it forward. Eva screamed as she saw the drop that was outside the ledge.

‘Blanco!’ she screamed. ‘Don’t leave me in here. Get me out!’

The machine was balanced precariously. One small push and it would be over. Smiling, the Count pretended to push it and Eva screamed once more.

He was now staring at Blanco, waiting for him to climb in. Blanco had walked over to the fire and when he turned the Count saw that he held something in his hand.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded angrily, coming towards him. The Stranger looked on with indifference. He was curious now to see whether the machine would work.

‘This,’ Blanco said, turning and throwing the sticks he had in his hand into the fire.

While the Count stared open-mouthed Blanco dodged past him. The Count had rushed to the fire and was trying to remove the sticks but he was too late. Blanco could not see what the Stranger was doing.

A moment later the whole room shattered with colour.

The sticks had exploded and one caught the Count on the side of the face causing him to howl in pain. For a moment Blanco just stood and stared as the brightly coloured rockets streamed around the room, red and green and gold and silver, all shooting out from the fire. And then the rockets seemed to head straight for the window and he leapt into the flying machine, pushing it forward as he did so. The Count’s shout of anger was the last thing he heard as the machine fell forward into the night sky.