

A New World

When the tutor finished his speech, everyone stood up to applaud, which caught Juanjo by surprise, as he had not been paying attention. He got up a few seconds late, feigning indifference to hide his confusion (although he had liked what little he had heard of the talk), and applauded in turn.

“You never pay attention to anything,” Thais said to him, smiling, at his side.

Despite their almost opposite characters, they had gotten along well practically from the first semester, united by the twists and turns of a destiny that took the form of group classwork, and they had hardly separated since then. Her sociable sweetness mixed with fine humor complemented his quiet stoicism and acidic sarcasm.

“I don’t want them to think I’m human,” he replied, always reluctant to stop having the last word or show any defect.

The applause ended, and after gathering their things, they began to leave the classroom amid the generalized murmur. The speech had marked the end of the exam period that had followed the last academic one, and with it the conclusion of a stage of four intense years that many would remember forever as the one in which they became adults, in which they crossed the threshold to a new world to discover. The best time of their lives. Juanjo felt it had been very short.

“Well, what? Are you going to be the first, Mr. Perfect?”

She pronounced it in an attempt at a mocking tone, but he knew her well enough to think she was serious. Her eyes gave her away. In her arms, she held, seemingly perpetually, her folder full of drawings and signatures from classmates as if it were a baby. He would always have that image of her engraved in his head.

“Ha! This buffoon would like that... wouldn't he?”

In such a way Pablo made his appearance, emerging unexpectedly from behind them. He was laughing heartily, very animated. His open personality rivaled Thais', reaching histrionics. As with her, they were bound by strong ties of friendship that had begun to be woven in the first year of their major. He was going to miss them, although he would never admit it out loud. They walked past the bulletin boards that held good news for some, and bad news for others.

“Well, I think Miguel's going to be the one,” said his friend, “he's earned it. And Guillermo also has quite a few options. Sara also has a very good average...” she continued, looking at an indefinite point while gesturing her calculations.

“The only thing I can say is: may the best one win,” replied Juanjo, also smiling and putting his arms over their shoulders, disdainful. He wanted to appear indifferent, but the reality is that he had studied the situation carefully, he kept an exhaustive control of the grades of almost the entire class in a spreadsheet, and the prospects were not promising. If nothing changed, he was going to be second. Something meritorious for anyone else, but dishonorable for his personal value code and the high concept he had of himself.

And the worst thing is that it was not his fault. But he would take care of fixing it.

A slight flash of concern crossed his eyes, but he recovered at once so that none of them would notice anything. However, nothing escaped Thais' attentive gaze, who perhaps sensing that they were on delicate ground decided to change the subject.

“I still can't believe we've really finished... Are you going to the dinner? I ran into Marcos and Fran, and they're taking care of organizing everything, they want to know how many people are going to sign up to find a place. It would probably be on Tuesday.”

Both were the class delegate and sub-delegate respectively, and they were always very active and visible in everything concerning the students. Pablo waved his hand in the air, disapproving, while saying in a shrill tone:

“The day before graduation? Just what we need, to get a championship hangover to throw up all over the poor rector when he gives us the diploma. And you, Thais, even worse, if you go a little overboard and eat your way out of there the next day you won’t fit in the dress, what a disgrace... You’re gonna have to put on a sofa cover.”

His friend covered her face trying to hold back laughter, unsuccessfully. “You’re such an idiot! I don’t know how I put up with you.”

They went outside. Outside, a large congregation of students divided into groups of various sizes contributed to the noisy chatter that reigned in the atmosphere. Many clung to their cigarettes as if they feared losing them, others held beer bottles, the healthiest opted for fruit and water. The plurality of clothing and backpacks seemed to compose a diffuse rainbow. Neither did hairstyles seem to follow a defined pattern, just like the variety of opinions of all kinds (political, sexual, religious) that anyone who bothered to pay attention would have heard. It was, in short, the living image of a campus, where everything and everyone had a place. *Even someone like me*, thought Juanjo.

Pablo wielded his laptop bag as a shield to protect himself from Thais’ jovial wrath when Fran approached them.

“Hey, are you coming tonight? We’re all gonna go out for a drink and celebrate, without a plan or anything. Just our class. In the Old Quarter...”

The girl nodded, enthusiastic.

“Of course! I really feel like disconnecting, beginning now.”

“Then I’m gonna have to go, because without me no party is worth anything,” Pablo added in turn.

“Tonight, you say? Hmm, I don’t know, I might have something.”

They looked at Juanjo in surprise. It was strange for them not to be aware of his plans, especially when they knew all his groups of friends and what he was up to with them.

“I think I didn’t hear you right. You were saying you were going to come party with us, right?” Thais challenged him, narrowing her eyes threateningly.

“‘Something,’ he says, as if you had actual physical existence in this plane of reality when I’m not present,” his friend finished with jocularly.

Juanjo smiled. For now, it would be better not to resist. There would be time to deal with the situation later. The night could be very long.

“It seems I have no choice,” he gave in. “Where did you say we were going?”

“It’s like talking to a wall,” Fran laughed. “You never get anything.”

The night smelled of youth and eternity, or perhaps summer. Everything had an end, but from the start of the journey it was hard to see it from so far away. And it was easy to feel immortal when life had barely inflicted wounds yet.

Everything had to be perfect. Everything.

He arrived on the dot, when hardly anyone had started to gather. That annoyed him, but if his classmates had never shown formality during their studies, much less were they going to do so now after the end of the course. He waited patiently, unalterable, until one by one they began to appear. The meeting eventually reached a respectable figure. No one wanted to miss the occasion nor had a plausible excuse to do so, except him.

The first hour passed as they toured the leisure area that they already knew like the back of their hand, contributing once again to raise the tertiary sector of their city. They drank, laughed, sang and danced, reminiscing about feats and also other moments perhaps less dignified but equally imperishable. Juanjo imitated them, but his mind was far from there and he frequently glanced at his wristwatch, with a calculatedly casual appearance. The moment came when he could no longer postpone it and he prepared to say goodbye to the rest.

“I have to leave now, I’ve made plans with other people. If I can, I’ll come by later, I’ll let you know if you’re still around.”

Many did not hear him due to the loud music and other ambient noises. Of those who did, many were unable to understand him due to their

level of alcohol intoxication, but they smiled and nodded anyway. Among the others, there was some gesture of surprise that went as quickly as it had come. Pablo and Thais frowned.

“But who have you made plans with? Where are you going?”

He had also anticipated that question.

“They’re from the chess club... I don’t think you know any of them.”

“You can bring them here, we don’t bite, and we can all party together,” said Pablo.

“I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything. Anyway, don’t worry, there will be plenty of opportunities to go out... We’re young,” he reassured them before waving goodbye to everyone and walking away, while Thais watched him with a worried look.

He moved forward at a steady pace, blending in with the people and the night in equal parts. No one looked at him more than once since he did not stand out. He liked to feel invisible, camouflaged with his surroundings, without strange behaviors and with absolute control of his facial expressions in order to convey a specific and very studied image. People were generally more credulous and trusting than they would ever admit, especially when they moved in groups. If you knew how to act, it was very easy to deceive them. But not all of them.

In a few minutes, he was leaving the leisure area behind and entering increasingly peripheral and empty neighborhoods. It did not take him long to reach the university campus, with its green esplanades and modern glass buildings. He stopped just before crossing the perimeter and stepped aside behind a large hedge. He took off his watch and put it in a pocket to avoid treacherous reflections. From a small and almost flat fanny pack that he had worn close to his stomach, he took out a black balaclava and gloves, and put them on following the same ritual of movements as always. There were cameras installed on poles and facades. He had no intention of being seen by any

of them and anyway the recordings would not be checked without a good reason, but in case that happened he would not be compromised.

He moved looking for shadows, advancing through stretches of grass with hardly any lampposts and through alleys between the buildings, well away from the main transit points. A couple of vehicles were still visible, surely young couples who could not afford a hotel and resorted to the ever so helpful parking lots. Nothing that worried him. Slow but sure, he climbed a small promontory in the twilight and jumped a fence. The metallic noise startled some animal that shook nearby bushes. He waited lying down for his pulse to calm down, looking around, scouting. His building was a few yards away. A security company car drove up to the entrance illuminating it with its headlights. They were doing the usual round and at that time of night they would already be quite bored and with diminished senses. They circled around the place without getting off and then moved away towards another sector, leaving the path clear.

He got up and finished covering the distance that separated him, but with an indirect trajectory that led him to skirt part of the building to one of the side entrances. It was much less exposed than the main one and the streetlights illuminated that area little. From another pocket, he took out a small case, and from this a set of lock picks. He operated on the lock for a long ten minutes, constantly interrupted by glances to the left and right. It was taking him too long and he grumbled with annoyance. Finally, the drum turned and the door was unlocked. He put everything away and opened it slowly, without noise. It used to squeak horribly, but the previous week he had sprayed it with oil, foreseeing. He closed the door behind him and locked it again, as sometimes the guard staff would check the doors. If they secured it, he could open it again, but he did not want them to notice anything strange that would be reflected in some report.

He went to the janitor's office, next to the front entrance. Here he did not need a key: he had procured a copy some time ago, almost by accident. He opened the main electrical panel and lowered the switches of the automatic lighting system, which worked by motion sensors and would have left him completely sold out. He was not looking forward to move at one pace

per minute. Now calmer, he walked to the stairs, passing by a window through which the street light was leaking.

He saw something to his left, out of the corner of his eye. He turned. A guard, standing outside, was staring at him. His heart stopped and he did not know how to react.

Those few seconds felt endless. The other man approached the glass without taking his eyes off him. He did not speak or make any attempt to sound the alarm, and Juanjo did not quite understand what was happening. Then, he smoothed his hair, readjusted his cap, turned around and walked away. The young man controlled his agitated breathing and wiped a drop of sweat that was sliding down his forehead, confused. After thinking about it calmly, he remembered that those glasses were very reflective, and at night and with the interior lights off they would basically be a mirror. The guard had used them as such, unable to see him.

He cursed himself. He was thankful that none of his friends had been there to witness it. He hated appearing vulnerable, imperfect, out of control. Being afraid seemed to him something unworthy of the standard he had set, a stain that lowered him from the pedestal he wanted to see himself on top of. He had never been caught and did not even want to think about that possibility. He wanted to truly feel the assurance he appeared to have in public, without tarnishing his image of excellence which, according to some, only made him seem distant and unattainable. The last of which did not bother him at all anyway. He focused again on what had brought him there.

He climbed the steps towards Suárez's office on the third floor. He walked down the hallway. He had counted the steps but it was not necessary, his eyes were gradually getting used to the darkness. He only lost a couple of minutes with his lock. Careful not to touch or move anything, he sat in the chair. It was adapted to the professor's physique and was uncomfortable for him, but he did not adjust it for fear of not leaving it exactly the same before leaving.

He pulled out a USB stick full of files that, like the balaclava or the lock picks, were part of that parallel life that no one who knew him was aware of. He connected it to the computer and booted it up. He had to correct just

half a point to raise his average and end up first. There were good and bad teachers, and Suárez belonged to the second group. Those who are not so concerned with explaining the subject well as with selling themselves to the public. Those who, for no apparent reason, developed animosity towards certain specific students who perhaps brought them memories of someone from their past whom they hated, or made them aware of their own shortcomings. It did not matter. It had happened to him and this animosity had been the cause of his “low” grade in the subject. He knew exactly how much he should have gotten because he had a copy of the exam questions, and he had reviewed it a thousand times. He never made a mistake. He asked for a review, but his answer sheet had been magically misplaced, which the professor did not find important because he was sure of the judgment that his spurious (that adjective had hurt him) explanations deserved.

When he finished what he had to do, he would leave and add his faculty to the collection of places where he had infiltrated. He accumulated a not inconsiderable record. He had made many other places his own before, of course. He had never known very well what had led him to it, whether it was the dose of adrenaline it provided, whether it was the idea of a real challenge, whether it was the prospect of doing something so forbidden, on the margins of society, or having a secret that only he would know. He did not care. He had started in high school, taking his first steps with caution in what he already handled as an art. He soon sought new goals. Other schools followed his, then warehouses, public buildings, shopping centers, even the homes of acquaintances. He felt a kind of superiority during this intrusion into other people’s lives, although he never caused the slightest damage and left undetectable, like a ghost. This also pleased him. To pass through the lives of others without leaving a trace, doing everything as best he could but incognito, knowing that he was so good and was so above them, and with the certainty that no one else would know. He would leave the building and return home walking under the moonlight. He would miss all that, and treasure the best moments of that time, but he would not torment himself over decisions made or things not done. He had to do the right thing, now and always, and he was satisfied with himself.

The system finished loading and opened an automated tool with which he deciphered the user password in a few seconds. He ran others to deactivate all protections. There was no point in risking it so close to the end. Then, he reset the computer and logged in with the professor's account. Once inside there was no barrier: Suárez was so confident that he allowed applications to save his credentials, saving himself from typing them each time. And even if that was not the case, he had already extracted them previously from the classroom computer. The internal website for posting final grades would not close until the following week, and in a glaring design flaw, it did not show the latest actions performed by the user, which would cover his tracks. It also did not block access after hours. When he finished, he would erase all traces of his presence and the passage of time itself would establish the validity of the change made. He was not going to have any remorse: that first place was his by right.

When the desktop appeared, he knew how those remote tomb raiders must have felt. The possibilities were many, but methodical and orderly as always, he dedicated himself to his main objective. He opened the university intranet with the teacher's session, followed the links to the grading application, and navigated through dozens of subjects and hundreds of students until he saw his own name. He clicked the button to modify the current grade, entered the new value, and sent the change to the central server. He examined his work, proud. Nothing stood out, and Suárez would never find out. He closed the browser, not before deleting all data from the last hour.

He closed his eyes for a minute, taking a breath and savoring the sweet aroma of victory. Almost too easy. He still had plenty of time and did not think he would ever return to that office. No, he could not leave yet. He wanted to see what surprises awaited him in that life he had intruded into without permission. He opened a file browser and an email client. He rubbed his hands literally and metaphorically before diving into them, like a schoolboy who steals a classmate's agenda from inside her drawer.

The subject of a specific email caught his attention, as did its sender. It was not very recent, it was a couple of weeks old.

“SPECIAL EXAM CALL REQUEST.” It had been sent by Miguel, the classmate who had been on the verge of snatching first place from him. Piqued by curiosity, he opened it and began to read.

“Greetings. As we discussed yesterday morning, I confirm that I will be available on the 19th, so it would be the best of the possible exam dates you have offered me. I ask you to confirm if you have no objection.

Once again, I appreciate the effort you have made to adapt to my circumstances, as I understand that...”

Juanjo reread the email, stunned. He did not quite understand. Had the professor examined him, and only him, out of term? The truth is that he did not remember having seen him in the classroom that day, but there were many people. Special circumstances?

There were more emails belonging to the same conversation thread. He unfolded them. Sure at first of finding some kind of scam or favoritism, a pang of guilt overcame him when he discovered what it was about: his classmate’s mother was suffering from cancer and, being an only child and she divorced, he had to take care of her when her ailments worsened. The family economy did not allow them to hire a full-time assistant. The professor had agreed to examine him on a different date, and he had not been the only one judging by other messages he had exchanged with the faculty. Thinking about Miguel and his painful situation made him feel bad. It was not what he had expected to find out.

Something started to spin in his head. In the file explorer, he probed the shared network folder that all the teachers had access to. Suárez could not see everything, but he could because he had the administrator credentials, which he had seen one of the faculty’s IT staff type when he called him to his post under a false pretext. There resided all the contents of each subject, including the syllabus, presentations, and practices and work submitted by students. He reviewed Miguel’s one by one. He accepted, moved, that his classmate was really good: equally intelligent, but perhaps more human. In many of his materials, Juanjo hid haughtiness and contempt for his educators, whom he

believed were beneath him. In others, he limited himself to responding like an automaton, not considering the career worthy of one hundred percent of his efforts. The now second-best student in the race garnered praise from teachers and students alike, as evidenced by Suárez's inbox. And what was even worse: on some occasions he had given up getting more grades in order to help a classmate. With such a family situation, he had taken time to collaborate with bodies such as the student council or the campus magazine.

Minutes passed, so many that the screensaver jumped, but he did not even notice. He was busy thinking. The taste of victory had been replaced by a bitter one, like ashes. Guilt troubled him, because he could not be on the wrong side. Not him.

He made a decision. But first, he longed to know more. He continued snooping in everything that was offered to him, not only from Miguel, but from all the others. And in doing so, his presuppositions were being knocked down one by one, and with it his belief system.

Some had delivered truly admirable work, with flashes of brilliance that he would never have believed them capable of. Others had passed without pain or glory through much of the subjects, but excelled in others, on rare occasions even above Juanjo himself. A small group, with Miguel, Marcos, and Fran at the helm, had offered their help in studies to the most lagging classmates by taking hours out of their free time. It was overwhelming, but at the same time fascinating, to discover in this way those people whom he had ignored for four years because he did not even consider them the least interest, as if it were the first time. There were traces of personality in their lives that he would never have dreamed of, for not bothering to lose even a class change talking to them for lack of incentives to do so. Now he regretted it.

When the files and emails were not enough, he opened a private session of the internet browser and searched for their profiles on social networks. He had never seen the slightest attraction to that nonsense, but he gossiped their publications with something like an inner shame. He confirmed how wrong his prejudices had been about many. He was invaded by a kind of nostalgia, or anguish for the lost time without delving into the personality of some. And even for having neglected all the facets of those with whom he had

made friends, like Pablo and Thais. They too revealed themselves as a small enigma halfway to being solved, like his female friend, who had obtained a resounding A+ in one of the elective subjects they did not share, showing a vocation he was unaware of. It seemed that humanity did have a few things to teach him.

He had idealized them in his head, turning them into ineffable machines whose purpose was to rival him, almost enemies. He had imagined the major to be a struggle where the best had to win, and where being surpassed in grade was equivalent to humiliation. But now, in the face of the intimate details of his life, he saw them as what they were, human beings as imperfect as he, with dreams and illusions, some vices but also many virtues. And what about him?

He had never wanted responsibility or power over anyone other than himself. He had turned down a position on the student committee, had refused to lead any team work, any project. He had abstained from voting in anonymous polls to evaluate the faculty, or to award the most popular students, among whom he knew he was not. He had navigated life avoiding all responsibilities as a member of society, as they made him uncomfortable. Always equidistant, correct but cold, focusing on his personal improvement and his results, overtaking the rest on the right. *An island, entire of itself...*

But now everything he had learned had served as a revelation to know that something had to change. And he was grateful for it.

He found what he was looking for, did what he had to do, and left as he had come.

The auditorium was bustling with activity. Hundreds of students accompanied by their sometimes very large families flowed in barely organized streams, looking for their reserved seats, muttering apologies when they stepped on someone or forced them to shrink in their seat to be able to pass. Many were wearing suits for the first time in their lives, and perhaps the last except for job interviews and weddings. Some still appeared pale, showing

the effects of the post-dinner binge. The rector, the dean of the faculty, the faculty body and some local authorities chatted animatedly or personally welcomed the attendees. No one seemed sad or serious, at most, nervous.

Juanjo should be too, but he felt strangely calm. Perhaps it was due to his clear conscience, or the tranquility that comes from knowing exactly what is going to happen in the future. The ceremony was not going to bring him surprises. In any case, he would provide some to the audience.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the personification of elegance. Did MI6 grant you leave to come?”

Pablo greeted him with vehemence, praising Juanjo’s dark suit with matching shoes and tie. He, for his part, had opted for something more modern and sophisticated, with a lot of personality. As could be expected.

“You know, I picked up the first thing I found in the closet.”

It was a lie, of course. He had spent quite a bit of time getting ready and thinking about what to wear. Maybe his recent epiphany had changed him, but not that much. He had a reputation to maintain after all.

“By the way, isn’t that the mayor over there?”

“Just as they’ve been telling us all last week that he was going to come, and repeating to us over and over that we should behave... You never pay attention to anything.”

And tilting his head to one side to see behind Juanjo, he added almost immediately:

“And look who’s behind you. The queen of Sheba in person.”

Juanjo turned around. Thais was approaching carefully, looking at the ground so as not to trip over her heels. She was very changed and it was almost hard to recognize her. She was wearing a spectacular dress that seemed uncharacteristic of her but suited her a lot, and she had made up less discreetly, let her hair down and straightened it and removed the piercing she usually wore in her nose. She was radiant, but seemed downcast or perhaps disappointed by something, as her smile was a bit forced. She greeted them with two kisses on the cheek before taking each one by an arm.

“Would you mind escorting me, gentlemen? A lady cannot go alone in this world.”

“Darling, for you I’d even become straight,” Pablo replied with a wink and a depraved smile.

They plunged into the human torrent and advanced calmly to their seats. As in all graduations, the students sat in the front area to be able to get up and collect their diplomas easily. Families occupied the back half of the pavilion. The classic-inspired clothing of some contrasted with the technology of the latest model cameras and smartphones with which they insistently immortalized the scene. The flashes followed each other like a fusillade, and at times it was impossible to keep one’s eyes open. It took a while to impose silence so that the rector could officially open the act and reiterate his warm welcome, followed by the usual generic speeches. The most awaited moment soon arrived.

“Special award to the students with the best academic record. First, and with a Grade Point Average of 3.92, the number one of this 2015–2019 class is...”

He did what could be considered a dramatic pause, raising his gaze with a smile. *Well, in the end he does have a sense of humor*, Juanjo thought. Suddenly he realized that Thais was squeezing his forearm, almost hurting him, biting her lips. The expectation was maximum.

“Miguel Herrero Velasco. Our most sincere congratulations for your effort, Miguel. You’ve earned it.”

The audience erupted in applause and cheers, shouts and whistles of admiration, and many stood up unable to contain their emotions. Miguel did not seem to believe it, and it took him a long time to get down to the stage as everyone wanted to congratulate him. Pablo and Thais, who appreciated Miguel but did not want to betray their friendship with Juanjo, got ready to console the latter by pretending to be upset, and were shocked to see that he was not displeased at all. He applauded and made gestures of approval like the best of them.

“In second place, with an average of 3.90... Juan José Domínguez Aguilar.”

More ovations even than he had expected given his lesser popularity. He did not consider himself deserving of them, and thanked them from the

heart. After hugging his friends, he also went down to meet Miguel and the authorities. Guillermo was the third and last honoree.

“As you all know,” the dean of the faculty continued, “in addition to a small financial aid, the award for the best academic record carries a larger reward, and that is a research contract in the largest national company in our field, whose executive president did not want to miss this occasion, so we have him here with us. Sebastián, if you don’t mind addressing us a few words...”

The coveted contract was for all intents and purposes a lifetime job offer and excellently remunerated. It was superfluous to explain the fierce competition that this provoked among the most gifted students. Juanjo had also coveted it in his day, four years ago, but that soon passed. Not winning it saved him from having to reject it, and besides, Miguel could fix his life as he deserved. He had other plans.

The businessman concluded his speech. Juanjo took advantage of the last few seconds to scan the rows of the auditorium, looking for familiar faces. Several girls smiled or winked at him. *Gotta behave*, he thought. Suddenly he came across Suárez, who seemed pleased to see him relegated to second place and was sporting a smirk of arrogance. He ignored him. He was already over that. Besides, he may have left the grades intact, but he had not left his office without leaving him a memento: the voluntary resignation to be considered for a stay of an academic year at a prestigious foreign university, something the teacher had dreamed of for a long time. Of course, he would never find out why it had not been granted to him. *We’re even*, he said to himself.

“Thank you very much for everything, Sebastián. Companies like yours honor us and improve education. And now, Miguel, as number one maybe you want to say something to your classmates...”

They handed him the microphone. He was trembling a bit, still stunned. He tried to speak, but his voice failed him and his humility had prevented him from preparing a speech in advance. But it was okay. Juanjo had done it, although he was more prone to act. He approached him and put a hand on his shoulder. He took the mic.

“Don’t worry, Miguel, because you don’t need to say anything... I think it would be better if the rest of us spoke, since you have shown us who you are through your actions, without keeping anything for yourself.”

He addressed the audience. Among his classmates, expressions of surprise sprouted like flowers. Many did not remember having heard him say more than three words.

“I will tell you who Miguel is...”

What followed was the best speech that had been given in that hall in many years. Juanjo left nothing unsaid, completely opening his soul to those strangers. Moved by his sincerity, tears came to Miguel’s face, and as the end approached almost the entire audience was crying ecstatically. The most formal nodded their heads, open-mouthed. Not even the teachers seemed to believe it. Now it was the others’ turn to discover him.

“And for all this, Miguel, let me give you a hug. And to all of you, if my words have served to convince you of his value as a human being, stand up and join me in a strong applause!”

It seemed that the roof was going to collapse from the noise. *Not even at a concert would they have applauded so much*, Juanjo thought. Miguel, shy and blushing, hesitated, so he grabbed his hand and raised it in the air, triumphant. And holding his gaze high and with a sincere smile, Juanjo knew that by losing he had won.

Their ears were still ringing from the noise. The somewhat less feverish mass was slowly dispersing, although dozens of groups remained chatting animatedly at the doors of the building. Everyone wanted souvenir photos before separating, perhaps forever. Pablo, Thais and Juanjo walked on the grass to cut a few yards, but with no particular direction.

“So in the end you are human, after all. I don’t know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. I think the latter.”

“We are proud of you. You did the right thing. The truth is that none of us expected it. You kept it very quiet...”

“Nah, I just improvised everything, you know I can’t stand it when someone gets stuck talking.”

“Idiot,” she laughed.

“What can I say, I like to give my best.”

“That’s clear to us, Mr. Nerd. You can afford it.”

“Oh, yeah? And what about that A+ you got, miss? You hadn’t told us...” Juanjo replied. Pablo, amused, looked at her with interest and a mischievous face. She, on the other hand, stopped and looked at her friend taken by surprise.

“How did you find out? I thought that...”

“That I didn’t care about anyone but me. I keep you well under watch, don’t worry. Congratulations, you did well. If you want something for real, you have to go for it.”

A few moments of silence. People passed by them, wondering where they had parked hours ago. Someone in particular stood out from the rest and went to them. It was Marcos.

“I loved your speech, Juanjo. It has touched us very deeply.”

“Bah, they’re all so sentimental.”

“No, seriously, it was fucking great. I’m glad about what you did.” He offered his hand and the other accepted it with a firm grip. “Hey, are you leaving already?”

“Yes, but not very far. There are many new things to discover this summer...” Thais said mysteriously.

“Well, we’ll stay in touch. I hope everything goes well for you. And I’ll call you later, okay?” he added looking at Pablo. In response, he kissed him on the lips.

“I’m looking forward to it, darling,” he announced with a wink before letting him go. Now it was Juanjo’s turn to be dumbfounded.

“But...”

“What?”

“How long have you been together?”

“Seriously? The whole university knows. Where have you been the last year, on Mars?” Thais laughed.

“Don’t ask so much of him, he’s already given everything today. Seriously, you’re unbeatable. I’m going with my family, they must be thinking that I’ve been kidnapped. I’ll call you on the weekend to do stuff. Bye!” and without waiting for a response, he walked away.

The two were left alone in the middle of the open area.

“Well, it seems that life still had some surprises in store for me.”

“Really, Juanjo,” she said, “you don’t get anything.”

And grabbing him by the nape of the neck, she drew him towards her and passionately kissed him.

