

# The Saltamontes Chronicles, Part 3:

## New Life

### Chapter 11

#### In their natural element

A flock of pigeons swirled in a grey cloud above their heads. Leo looked up, concerned that one, or worse, several of them were about to drop bombs on him. The tourists who were crowded around the densely-packed café tables also looked up at the sky. A man made a show of unfolding a large bar umbrella, jostling other customers in the process, and took refuge with his sweetheart under it.

‘All they do is make a mess and spread disease,’ he muttered. ‘Filthy, disgusting things ...’

The woman sitting next to him looked sympathetically at the birds, then at her companion.

‘There are a lot of them in Venice, yes, did but you know,’ – the woman said, trying to defuse the tense situation – ‘they used to be a staple in local chefs’ specialities?’

The man glared at his partner. Leo and Chiara stopped and listened to the conversation.

‘Don’t get upset, hon,’ the woman went on. ‘Pigeons are protected by an ancient law related to a certain custom. Now these birds are subject to worship. And custom’s a sacred thing.’

The man leaned back in his chair, displaying his protruding stomach, which spilled over his tight trousers.

‘What are you talking about again? What customs?’ He scowled. ‘All these superstitions ...’

‘Superstitions or not, the pigeons in Venice are very important. Poor things ...’

‘You feel sorry for them?’ he said.

‘Apparently, in the past, weights would be tied to their legs so that they couldn’t fly away quickly and were easy prey for chefs.’

‘Maybe it’s the best way of dealing with them ...’ the man said gruffly, looking in disgust at the winged menace that was trying to steal a few crumbs from the next table.

‘Legend has it that they’ve survived thanks to the intervention of the saints. Saint Mark in particular.’

‘More like the intervention of the self-preservation instinct,’ the man chuckled, and noticed that people were listening in on their conversation. He got somewhat flustered and straightened up his jacket, waiting for the curiosity and staring of the other customers to subside.

Leo felt one of the pigeons land on his shoulder.

‘Well I never!’ Chiara was surprised. ‘He likes you!’

A second pigeon now alighted on Chiara’s shoulder. She started to giggle. The grey cloud of birds swooped down, settling on tables, chairs and paving stones.

‘They should get them all out of the city!’ another customer cried. ‘It’s a plague!’

Chiara laughed out loud. The pigeon sitting on Leo opened its wings and took flight. Leo wanted to touch its feathers, but it was too late.

'Cool birds. They're a tourist attraction here, but people just abuse them,' he said.

'They *are* nice, though, aren't they,' Chiara agreed.

They moved on, ducking in and out of the maze of cool alleyways. It was impossible to understand the thick, moving carpet of people who were all talking in different languages, but judging by their expressions, they were totally spellbound. Sometimes they just walked, looking around, and sometimes they hid in cafés and restaurants, listening to the yells of the gondoliers, or the mix of instruments and operatic singing that expressed sorrow, pain, or unrequited love. The sun was beating down, and Chiara started whining about ice cream and cold water, not to mention the air-conditioned rooms in the hotel.

They came to a club housed in one of the dilapidated buildings. In front was a grey stone fountain, some marble statues, and a jungle of meandering plants. They looked at each other. Chiara's hand found Leo's, but just lightly brushed his fingers.

'A garden? Here?' she asked, smiling.

'What's so strange about that?'

'There's no soil. And look how everything's flowering so beautifully! If we want a garden like this in Tuscany, it's a hard job with secateurs, but here, look, it's like a fairy tale, even though everything's in containers.'

'They're obviously happy in them; that's why they look so beautiful. To be honest, I can't say I'm that bothered about gardening, but that doesn't mean I don't like it. Your grandpa likes it, right?'

Chiara nodded.

'Gramps has always been crazy about seeds, soil, flowers, grains, corn, anything that grows and you can make something nice to eat or drink from. And the grapes for making wine and juices! Ah! All we see is people poking around in the dirt, but Gramps says it develops your personality.'

'You what?!'

'Yeah. He's drummed such a love of nature into me that I can't help not noticing gnarly old vines or strange flowers, like these ones here.'

Leo took a look at them. The lush vegetation created a symphony of contrasts. On lead violin were the purple wisteria clusters that cascaded into the pots bursting with red geraniums, fuchsias gazing downwards, and petunias popping with purple, which clashed with the ugly building and filthy windows. Loud music was drifting over the canal, but was drowned out by the buzz of all the voices.

'Are we going in?' Chiara asked.

Leo nodded. They passed through a heavy door. They bought tickets from a large, surly young man with a pointed nose, a black tailcoat and a trimmed goatee, and dived into a room full of cigarette smoke and music so loud that it made their hearts quiver. Leo squinted and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He wanted to say something, but quickly realised that with the noise level, no one would hear him. So he bent down to Chiara's ear.

'I can't believe how crowded it is!' he shouted.

'I thought people would come somewhere like this at dusk and leave at dawn,' she replied, and thought about the world outside and how they were only a few metres away from the sun-drenched pavements and yelling gondoliers.

They tried to move on. Squeezing between the clubbers, Leo looked back to see if Chiara had got lost in the crowd. Someone elbowed him but gave an instant apology and went on. The closer to the bar he got, the headier the aroma became, a mixture of sweet and sour drinks and exotic spices. Young people were sitting,

talking and gesturing, on large leather sofas which lined the walls. On the opposite side, a powerful male voice was trying to shout over the music, encouraging people to dance. A hit track came on, and suddenly it seemed that everyone sitting on the sofas or standing along the damp walls was rushing out onto the dance floor. The graffiti on the wall behind the stage seemed to come alive, forming mosaics and paintings from bygone eras. Leo had the impression that the pictures on the wall were moving, but he ignored them and kept going. He glanced up at the ceiling. Only after a while, when the revolving silver ball had spun round a few times, did he notice an old bicycle frame without wheels, daubed with a few smears of bright greenish paint. Chiara could hear the clattering of crockery, which meant that they weren't treading water, but were moving forward. When they reached their destination, they breathed a sigh of relief. By some miracle there were three empty bar stools in front of them. They immediately took two but couldn't stop looking at the dance floor, which attracted their eyes like a magnet. A crowd of young, scantily clad people were bobbing up and down to the music. Some were huddled together, others danced side by side. Somewhere in the distance loomed the figure of a woman in a ball gown, while beside her stood a man who looked as if he'd come straight out of the first act of a serious opera, where he was playing the part of a stuffy, stern judge.

'I think anything's possible in Venice,' Chiara bellowed into Leo's ear, glancing at a muscular tattooed couple and an old man with a beard with a piece of lettuce dangling from it.

By the door, hidden from the crowd, a skinny girl with short spiky hair, wearing a crumpled dress made of sheer muslin, was dancing. Her gaze kept falling on the good-looking boys in the room, then she would close her eyes briefly and hug herself, imagining that she was dancing with one of them. The crowd seemed to be getting more and more tightly packed together when suddenly it started to get lighter. There was so much smoke that in the first few seconds it was impossible to realise what was happening; it took a while for it to be obvious that the walls were coming down slowly and the floor was rising like a huge platform. Leo and Chiara could also feel the bar stools they were sitting on begin to move with the dance floor. Chiara grabbed Leo's hand.

'Oh, wow!' she exclaimed in delight. 'This is just amazing! Did you see what's going on?!'

But the crowd seemed to be oblivious to the fact that the floor was moving. By now, the walls had come down and the dance floor was in the courtyard of one of the Venetian tenement houses; nothing was visible behind the people except a piece of blue sky, round lights shining white and buildings looming in the distance. Chiara could feel a gentle breeze. The music was playing at full volume, yet there was no vibration, no echoing around, as if it existed only there, in that one spot, under an invisible lampshade. The people danced in a wild frenzy, trading places, squashed together, hugging, kissing, round and around and again and again, gyrating their hips and shoulders, tossing their hair.

About ten minutes had passed when the stools began to shake again. Chiara grabbed hold of Leo's hand and noticed that the platform that must have been supporting the dance floor was beginning to descend slowly. The people went on dancing without noticing any movement. Chiara sucked in a breath, and only now understood that the impression wasn't an illusion. When they were outside, the smell of fresh air mixed with the stench of the sewer and rotten fish. The clubbers didn't seem to react, and only now did Leo notice that they all had their eyes closed and were dancing as if in a trance. Chiara also closed her eyes for a moment, still holding Leo's hand. When she opened them, the walls were back around the yard, and suddenly, out of nowhere, the ceiling with its same badly-painted bicycle reappeared. The smoke began irritating their nostrils again, and there was no sign of the wind blowing. The people continued to dance, squeezing themselves into a seemingly tighter and tighter space.

Chiara took off her silk scarf and tossed it onto the bar stool. She strode onto the dance floor, giving the impression that she'd done it a million times before. She completely ignored the crowd thronging around her. People moved away from her, paving her way. Leo was waiting for the waiter, but he still kept an eye on Chiara as she tried to get to the very heart of the dance floor. When she eventually made it there, she totally gave herself up to the dance. The interior began sparkling in different colours. The music throbbed in every nook and cranny, forcing people to communicate by shouting. Chiara danced by herself, blissfully

happy, immersed in the rhythm and in her natural element. Overwhelmed, Leo couldn't take his eyes off her.

'What can I get you?' a waiter asked, wiping the sweat from his brow. Leo opened his mouth to answer, but realised no one would hear him, so he pointed on a menu that was lying nearby. The waiter understood exactly what he meant. Leo looked back at the dance floor. The crowd was in a blissful trance, revelling in the dance. The music seemed to throb louder and louder. But it didn't matter because it was Leo's favourite song.

He looked away, reached for his drink and took a long sip through the straw. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a gentleman sitting on the stool alongside him. The man nudged Leo with his elbow.

'You like that girl on the dance floor, don't you?'

Leo was completely thrown and pushed his glass away.

'Which girl?'

'Well, any of them, to be fair ... I just wanted to talk.' The stranger leaned over Leo, surveying the entire dance floor.

'So how are you enjoying living in Italy?' he asked with a strange accent. The music drowned out his words.

'I can't understand you ... I-CAN'T-UNDER-STAND-YOU! It's loud in here!' Leo bellowed.

'So what language should I speak if I want you to understand me?' The man glared at Leo.

'Oh, right! I've just realised you were speaking Polish! So many languages around, you get lost. What languages can you speak?'

'Polish, Chinese and Swahili. Anyway ... I can speak any language in the world. Which one do you want?'

Leo felt shivery and only now noticed that the man was watching him closely and every so often glancing at the dance floor as if he was looking for someone. Meanwhile, Leo had spotted Chiara dancing to the rhythm of some Latin music and gaining more and more admirers.

'So, shall we have a chat, then?' the man repeated. 'Your friend'll be busy dancing for a while yet. Maybe I can get you something?'

'And who might you be to be getting me anything?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I'm asking you what you specialise in.'

'I'm a specialist in ... how should I say it ... guessing what's in people's heads.'

Leo laughed.

'I'll be straight with you, you're wasting your time. But okay, we can talk about something else before my friend's had enough of dancing.'

'Don't you believe in things like that? I beg to differ.'

'How do you know what I believe?'

'Apparently, strange things have been happening to you in Italy, haven't they?'

Leo felt nervous.

'Do you know me?'

The man didn't answer but merely smirked and, resting his arms on the bar, joined both hands in a triangle. As he separated them again, he jabbed Leo in the arm. Leo felt an icy drop of sweat trickle down his back.

He looked up from the dance floor. He was surprised that only now could he smell the man's expensive aftershave.

'Who are you? Are you following me?'

When the stranger gave a derisive laugh, Leo got scared. He reached for Chiara's scarf which was lying on the unoccupied barstool and headed towards her on the dance floor. It wasn't easy, though; the crowd seemed to have clumped into an even denser mass that it would have been impossible to stick a pin into. Leo noticed a waiter heading off with some drinks to the far end of the room, holding the tray above his head. He decided to hide behind him. The decision turned out to be a good one, because shortly afterwards he found himself standing next to Chiara.

Next to her, however, somebody else was already dancing – and unfortunately for Leo it was a handsome Italian man, who was getting ready to plant his fist in Leo's face. Chiara stopped dancing and grabbed the Italian's hand.

'Oh come on, he's my brother!' she yelled.

The young man pulled his hand back, pulled a silly face, and proffered his sweaty hand to Leo to say hello.

Leo tugged Chiara's arm and began to pull her off the dance floor.

'We have to get out of here, now.'

'What are you on about, he's not going to fight you! Didn't you hear me? I told him you were my brother!'

'That's got nothing to do with it ... Nothing!'

They tumbled out onto the pavement, stumbling over the steps. They had to close their eyes for a few seconds because they were dazzled by the light of the setting sun. They breathed in deeply. In contrast to the smell of the smoke, leather, damp and sweat, they were surprised by the extraordinary freshness of the flowers and citrus fruits, and the mixture of wind, canal and acrid smoke coming from a restaurant kitchen.

They ran towards the hotel, and after a few minutes Leo stopped, grabbed Chiara's hands and looked into her eyes.

'Now what?' hissed Chiara, 'I was just starting to having fun! What's got into you?'

'This guy at the bar was harassing me,' Leo replied.

'What guy? I didn't see anyone!'

Leo looked back as if he was afraid someone was listening.

'What guy, I said,' she repeated, emphasising each word.

Leo just stood with a blank expression on his face.

'Well, then? Don't you have anything to say to me?'

'I do.'

'What?'

'Okay, maybe we can come to a compromise,' Leo eventually said.

'What compromise?'

'Can't we just have a walk? You don't want to go back to the hotel yet, and I don't want to go back to the club because something about that place makes me nervous even if you don't understand it. Let's take a walk ... Don't look at me like that!'

'Just walk?'

'That's exactly what I mean. Yes, a normal walk! Just wandering around aimlessly. Can you do that?'

Chiara wiped the sweat from her forehead. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a rat dart between the water and the land. She focused on the animal, then looked back at Leo.

'So, how about it?' he asked again.

Chiara nodded and wrapped her silk scarf around her. As she threw it over her back, it gave off a subtle waft of perfume.

'Let's get going then,' she said softly.

They walked until night fell. Only a few tourists were still strolling down the streets, and cats darted along the walls. The lights dancing between the buildings turned the streets into a stage scene. Leo soaked up the view without saying a word.

'What are you thinking about? You aren't saying anything ...' Chiara asked.

Leo closed his eyes for a moment and swallowed.

'Don't you want to talk?' she repeated.

'You don't care anyway,' he snorted, staring at the droplets of water reflecting off a crumbling wall.

'Sorry. I was enjoying myself ... in my own way. I liked it there.'

'And in my own way, I didn't.'

'Because?'

'Because that guy was too bizarre not to be taken seriously.'

'Why?'

'Do I have to explain it to you? After what you showed me in that meadow in Tuscany? We're touching on some strange worlds that we don't understand, so we have to help each other out when we get all mixed up between reality and dreams.'

'What happened to us in Tuscany wasn't a dream.'

'I know that. And that's what all this craziness is all about! When something unusual happens to us, we feel that it's really happening, but as soon as we come back to normal life, we start doubting what's happened to us.'

'That's right ...'

'Then believe me, this guy was weird. Different. He wasn't some random guy you meet at a club. He knows a lot about us and maybe he wants to find out even more. Plus ...' He paused.

'Plus what?'

'He could speak lots of languages.'

'That, actually, isn't weird as far as I'm concerned. For as long as I can remember, everyone in my family's been able to speak lots of languages ...'

'It's not that,' Leo said, embarrassed.

'Did you hear him speak all those languages?'

The question caught Leo off guard.

'No ... But he said he could.'

'So maybe he was having you on. Haven't you thought about that? Besides, I can speak several languages, too. Does that make me weird?'

'That's not the point! He said he could to speak to me in *any* language.'

Chiara had no idea what to say. Leo looked into her eyes and saw that the light from the lanterns was reflected in them.

'Do you know anyone who's fluent in all the world's languages?' he asked again.

'No ...' she replied.

'So don't blame me for being scared of him.'

Chiara nodded.

'Did he speak Polish?' She tilted her head.

'Yeah.'

'Good. On the one hand, I agree with you that we're getting into unbelievable situations, but on the other ... We have to assume that this guy must've heard your accent, was also from Poland and was just making fun of you. That place was full of freaks.'

Leo nodded.

'Did you see all those weirdly dressed people?'

'Like all the historic periods were mixed up.'

'Yeah, exactly! Those women in the dresses, the men in tailcoats, and at the end, those people who looked like they'd come straight off a spaceship ...'

Leo took his phone out of his pocket and began typing in the address of the club.

'There's nothing about this place in the guidebooks ...' he said after a moment.

'So it must be a really fantastic place! One that only a select few can go to. Amazing people! Like us, for example ...' Chiara replied triumphantly. 'There you go! There's your explanation! It's a fantastical, fantastic place, so there are lots of weirdos. Listen, because I'll say it one last time: fantastic and fantastical. Or fantastical and fantastic.'

Leo calmed down a bit.

'If you just dance a bit, you get some perspective on everything. By the way, you could do to loosen up.'

'I can't dance, so you wouldn't exactly have a fun view.'

'Rubbish. Everyone can dance. No exceptions. They just don't know it.'

'Probably not ...'

'Then I'll show you next time.' Chiara snuggled up to Leo's shoulder.

'So that Italian guy who was all over you won't beat me up any more?'

Chiara chuckled.

'Not you! But he'll beat up anyone else who comes near me.'

Leo gave a deep sigh.

'Are you going to go out with him?'

'What's with all the questions? You jealous?'

'Me?'

They went quiet.

The street lights cast a yellow glow on their faces. An aspiring musician was torturing a violin somewhere in the distance. Leo's eyes met Chiara's. She froze, every fibre of her being trying to breathe in the beauty of

the night. Something inside Leo was simmering, giving his body shivers, spinning madly above his head. He brought his lips close to Chiara's, and she didn't protest; she felt the same desire. It seemed to her that there was nothing in the world except them, and that her body, although it was still as a statue, was going wild like it had done earlier on the dance floor. She wanted Leo to put his arms around her neck. She wanted to throw herself into his arms. Suddenly a cat meowed nearby and snapped Chiara and Leo out of it. Leo simply sighed, not giving away his feelings. Chiara, intoxicated by her fantasies, slipped her hand under his arm and they both walked silently towards the hotel, then went straight to their rooms with a simple, "Good night."

They completely ignored the sculpture, which was supposed to have been brought out onto the patio, and which now stood at one of the gates, fifty metres from her grandfather's hotel.