

Hong Kong: just before midnight

“*Bu shi-iii!*” sprang the cry, at once authoritatively, like a command, and dismissively, as if what was happening could never happen to him.

“*No-ooo!*” it was repeated a moment later in English, more plaintively if no less forcefully. It shuddered through the *wushu* training center, over the rows of neatly arranged bamboo mats, down a narrow hall adorned with photos of its owner – performing martial arts, accepting gold medals, mixing with celebrities, posing in movie stills – toward an open window, where it was consumed by the raucous city sounds below: night riders bleating horns, street merchants hawking goods, music from too many discotheques competing for attention.

The next cry came with even more force than the previous two, a wail really, a tortured plea. But it was lost to all, just like the others, save for the man in black, the man crouching down beside him, preparing to deliver the final, fatal slice. And this man held no sympathy for the owner of the scream.

“*Not my foot!*”

Amsterdam: the same night

With fame came precaution, Lazarius, the Golden Buddha, considered from the backseat of his private, armored limo, as it peeled away from the stadium. Yet even tucked behind heavily-tinted, bulletproof glass, he could still hear the cheers of the hometown faithful who would linger long into the night singing his praises.

“*Bu-ddha!*”

“*Bu-ddha!*”

“*Bu-ddha!*”

His nickname derived not from the shape of his stomach, rock-solid and muscle-taut like the rest of his body, but from the mane of flaxen hair that flowed like a river of gold off his forehead and the Zen-like composure he

possessed around a soccer ball. While many in his native Brazil took exception to this blasphemy, who could argue with such God-given talent? His new team, Ares Amsterdam, recently flush with a welcome injection of Gulf Arab petrodollars, certainly could not, its governing board shelling out a Dutch record-smashing \$100 million to lure Lazarius to The Netherlands. And, having just netted three sumptuous goals to single-handedly knock Real Madrid out of the Champions League quarter-finals, the investment already seemed justified.

“Bu-ddha!”

“Bu-ddha!”

“Bu-ddha!”

As the limo left the parking lot, the chanting finally faded from earshot, and only then did Lazarius’ driver and bodyguard, Rafa, ask if he should proceed to the usual place.

“*Pois não,*” Lazarius nodded in agreement, answering in Portuguese. Like his teammates, in their newly minted Porsches, Ferraris, and Lamborghinis, the Golden Buddha could have owned any automobile he desired, in an assortment of colors, but he preferred letting someone else navigate Amsterdam’s congested roadways. Soon they were gliding past cheap hotels, porno shops, and the famed pleasure houses where young girls recently arrived from Russia and the Ukraine, Africa and the Orient paraded their wares. While his agent may have argued otherwise, Lazarius knew Amsterdam’s red lights and liberal laws played no small part in his choosing Ares over one of the more celebrated teams in England, Germany, or Spain. Catching sight of his reflection in the window, he smiled appreciatively, for this place fit him like a goalkeeper’s glove: the respectable Dutch capital of Rembrandt and van Gogh to bolster his public image; the Red Light District to cater to his every private whim.

But there would be time for that later. Right now Lazarius was on his way to meet an old friend, as he did after every home match. Marcelo was really more like a father, he thought, as the limo rounded a corner and left the red glow behind them. While his real father had been busy introducing him to the profit of petty crime at age 10 and the pleasure of prostitutes by 13, before disappearing from his life altogether, Marcelo did whatever it took to bust Lazarius free from one of Rio’s roughest *favelas*. Countless letters written, phone calls made, strings pulled, and trips taken at personal expense eventually resulted in Palmeiras gambling on the young delinquent and

probably saving the boy's life. So, when the life of Marcelo turned south, a victim of acute lung cancer, Lazarius knew it was scant return on a priceless debt owed to bring the old Brazilian talent scout to Holland to see out his final days under the best of European comfort and care.

"Here," he instructed Rafa, who guided the limo to the curb a couple blocks shy of the blue-lit Medisch Centrum Claes Pieterszoon. A handsome donation to the hospital afforded certain privileges, like keeping most mouths shut, but Lazarius could never be too careful, especially when stepping out of a limousine. While the paparazzi lacked many things – including beating hearts, as far as he could tell – patience and cunning were not on that list.

Climbing from the vehicle, Lazarius carefully avoided a puddle before crossing the street and starting down a steep incline toward a sign marked "Emergency Entrance." No other foot traffic here, but he tucked his trademark tresses under a woolen watch cap just to be safe. Reaching the bottom of the hill, he began angling toward the back of the hospital, when he spotted someone approaching. *Maybe more cunning than I thought.*

Lazarius slowed and considered going back, when he saw it was only a woman walking alone. A nurse finishing her shift, he figured, until he noticed how she was dressed all in black, with a tight black sweater, a stylish black cape, and a hood of that same dark fabric shrouding her face. On her feet black leather boots ran halfway up bare legs, instantly turning him on.

But Marcelo will be waiting...

"Ola," he said, passing her by. The woman turned her head and held his gaze. In that moment, he caught something in her eyes that sent his heart racing faster than an incoming cross. There was an air of defiance in the way she looked at him, a challenge even, as if to say: *I am a lioness that won't be tamed.*

The soccer star chuckled. He didn't know this woman, but was certain he could have her. He was Lazarius, after all, the Golden Buddha, the savior of Dutch football, and the heir apparent to the reins of the Brazilian national team, one of the most cherished clubs in world sport, not to mention a man endowed with certain attributes found particularly pleasing to the opposite sex.

But Marcelo...

So he kept walking, putting her out of his mind, until he heard her speak behind him.

"Nice shoes."

Lazarius turned back to see the girl standing there, beneath a streetlight,

smiling. She couldn't have been much older than 20. Her face was striking, with fair skin, elfin features, and those laser blue eyes. Her hair remained completely hidden under the hood.

"Berlutis," she said in accented English.

It wasn't a question, but Lazarius answered anyway. "Right," he said, taking a step toward her. "Care to go somewhere?"

"You're very bold," she replied, still smiling, as she halved the distance between them.

"Don't you recognize me?"

"Should I?"

He ignored the question, more surprised than hurt, for his face was everywhere these days. "My limo's around the corner. My driver, very discreet."

Now she laughed. "I don't think so."

Lazarius frowned, for he prided himself on reading women. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

She gave him another sly smile. "What about here?"

"*Here*?" he said, looking around. "What do you mean, here? There's nothing here."

"Not *here*," she answered, pointing across the street. "*There*."

Now it was his turn to smile. This was not exactly what he had in mind. He typically preferred savoring his meals in privacy, lingering over each tender morsel. Then, again, this was not a typical night – three goals scored, the Champions League semi-finals reached. Nor did she seem to be a typical girl, and he wondered for a second if she might be a pro, setting him up. But there was something in her demeanor, the way she looked at him, that suggested otherwise.

Marcelo will just have to wait.

Lazarius took the girl's hand and started in the direction she had pointed. They crossed the street, moving toward an alleyway flanked on either side by dark buildings bathed in inky green neon from a flickering Heineken sign. She entered first, tugging his hand. He took a few steps forward before pulling back.

"Far enough, baby," he said, drawing her into his arms. He kissed her on the neck, the chin, the lower lip, until she stiffened, defiantly, like a feisty lion cub. This only spurred him on, kissing her more roughly, burying his tongue deep inside the girl's mouth. She responded with a light moan, meeting the

force of his tongue with her own.

Until, suddenly, *he* stopped.

She looked up and Lazarius placed his hands on either side of her head, sliding back the hood. A shaft of green light caught her skull and his reward was most unexpected.

She was completely bald.

“You like?”

“Very much,” he breathed, attacking her mouth again, harder than before, until this time she halted proceedings. Reaching up, she withdrew the cap from his head, releasing a cascade of blond hair tumbling down around his thick shoulders.

“*You* like?”

She just smiled and then dropped to her knees, disappearing below him in the dark. Lazarius felt her go to work and wondered again if she was a professional. He had been around the world many times, sampling the finest creatures placed before him, but few if any had ever done what she was doing now, at least not with the same style, unique flare. *What did it matter?* If she wanted money, he was loaded. More than he knew what to do with, by far. Better to put that business aside for now, lean back against the wall, and enjoy the ride.

“Ouh,” he said, wincing, opening his eyes. *What was that?*

Lazarius felt a sharp prick on his hamstring, just below the buttocks. Thank God his legs were insured for £10 million each by Lloyds of London, he thought, as she dug her nails deep into his flesh. *Easy now.*

Then he felt something else, something strange. It started high in his legs, working its way rapidly up his spine. It was difficult to define. Like a current of water, rushing waves racing through his veins, neutralizing his muscles, drowning his mind.

What was she doing? What had she done?

By the time these questions were formed, it was too late. The double dose of sodium pentothal housed in a glass vile connected to a syringe cupped in the palm of her hand had already reached his brain, begun performing its voodoo. At once he felt light-headed, confused. His breathing slowed, his heartbeat depressed. While Lazarius remained in a standing position, propped up by the wall, he could no longer move. His body was paralyzed, his senses warped.

In a trance, he heard the purr of an engine growing louder. Through a

green veil, he saw a motorcycle approaching, its rider a lanky dude in black, sporting a Mohawk, like some freakish skunk in reverse: black stripe on a starched white skull. Ruby red pins stuck in one eye.

Lazarius let out a laugh, at least so he thought, as his body collapsed, began sliding down the wall. Sliding... falling...*crash*.

He came to a jarring stop, legs splayed out in front of him, head level with the bald girl still on her knees, so soft and pretty. He reached for her now, or was it the other way around, she reaching for him?

So confusing, so hard to tell...

“Nize verk,” he heard the Skunk say.

Distant voices, funny accents...

“Shuddup,” the Bald Eagle squawked in his face.

The words buzzed around him like insects, a hornet’s nest inside his mind. He became aware of a hand on his forehead, pressing back on his neck. Careful now, he heard himself say. Or was that someone else?

So confusing, so hard to tell...

Lazarius sensed movement all around him, but was unable to focus any longer, his vision growing dim and dreamy. He suddenly felt like a character in a children’s nursery rhyme, like the ones the nuns used to read. Only, this fairytale had gone horribly wrong.

*See a brown leather satchel,
There on the ground.
Out pops a blade, dancing around.
Hurry up, scolds the Skunk,
With embers in his eye.
Fawkoff, comes the Eagle’s chirpy reply.
(Humph, that’s no way to talk! Chop-chop-chop!)
Puncture the skin, slice through it like lace,
A river of red rolling over a face.
Hear the crowd cheering, calling your name,
Singing so sweetly till the end of the game.
Bu-ddah!
Boo-da
Boo*