

*The House of the Scorpion*  
by Nancy Farmer

“Matt is to be treated with respect, just as though I were here in his place. He is to be educated, well fed, and entertained. He is not to be mistreated.” El Patrón looked directly at Tom, who flushed red. “Anyone- *anyone*- who harms Matt will be dealt with severely. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, *mi patrón*,” murmured several voices.

“And to be absolutely sure, I’m leaving one of my bodyguards behind. Which of you louts volunteers for the duty?”

“Overcome with shyness, I see,” El Patrón said. “I picked up this lot in Scotland, breaking heads outside a soccer field. Always choose your bodyguards from another country, Matt. They find it harder to make alliances and betray you. Well, Matt, you make the choice. Which of these shrinking violets do you want for a playmate?”

Appalled, Matt looked at the men. Anyone less playful could hardly be imagined. They were thick-necked and brutal, with flattened noses and scars wandering across their arms and faces. They both had curling, brown hair that grew low upon their foreheads, ruddy faces, and bright, blue eyes.

“That one’s Daft Donald- he likes to juggle bowling balls. Tam Lin is the one with the interesting ears.”

Matt shifted his gaze from one to the other. Daft Donald was younger and less battered. He seemed a safer person to have around. Tam Lin’s ears appeared chewed, they were so misshapen. But when Matt looked into Tam Lin’s eyes, he was surprised to see a glint of friendliness.

Friendliness was so rare in Matt’s life, he instantly pointed to the man.

“Good decision,” whispered El Patrón. With the introductions disposed of, energy seemed to desert him. He sank back in the wheelchair and closed his eyes. “Good-bye MiVida. . . until next time,” he murmured.