

THE RING OF THE WITCH

The Curse Of Apollo

IVAN DEL VALLE

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CHAPTER 1.

INTERVIEW WITH THE "HOPE" VAMPIRE

[The place was dark, and the euro techno music was too loud for her taste. What a weird place, she thought... The decoration combined bold & dark Gothic, Retro, and Industrial elements like she hasn't seen before. Most people inside looked like in their 20s and 30s, and the trendy place was full of accentuated waists, amazing perfumes, luxurious clothes, and expensive accessories. The whole ambiance had a flair for the spectacular...]

Nunzio: Ms. Charise... Mr. Beltoldo will see you now. Please, follow me...

[Nadine Charise got her Master's degree in Media and Communication from the prestigious London School Of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She just got hired by the 'Independently' newspaper, and although she always dreamed about covering politics, the only opportunity available was within the yellow journalism team. She wasn't happy about it, but she was very hopeful to be able to move teams soon. Her first assignment was to interview a so-called vampire, so she was expecting an awfully ridiculous experience. A few days earlier

she received in the mail a one-time pass to the exclusive “Kora’s” bar near Baldassare Street, with specific instructions on what to wear that day. Friday night, 10:00 p.m....]

Ambrogio Bertoldo: Welcome to “Kora’s”, Ms. Charise! It is a real pleasure to have such a beautiful woman in our humble private club.

[Nadine felt uncomfortable with a comment like that coming from a total stranger. Although she felt uncomfortable by such a greeting, she couldn’t resist feeling attracted instantly to the man. She told herself... ‘OMG... He speaks like a rebel nobleman, perfectly taken from the cover issue of the “Signor” men’s fashion magazine...’]

Nadine: Thank you very much, Mr. Bertoldo.

Ambrogio: *[With a tranquil, subtle smile on his face]* Please, call me “Ambrogio”. The meaning of my last name would make me sound too pretentious.

Nadine: Pretentious? *[timidly saying]*

Ambrogio: It means “The Bright Ruler”... *[changing his eye contact to the wine glass in his hand]*. Oh, sorry...Would you like some 2005 Château Lafite-Rothschild? *[continuing without allowing her to respond]* By the way, Nadine... Do you know what your name means? *[now looking at her again directly into her eyes.]*

Nadine: Thanks, but I don’t drink alcohol. Is it a good time for our interview? I am sure you are a very busy businessman, and it’s late and I would like to leave soon.

Ambrogio: For Artemis’ sake, Nadine... How

rude...*[saying in low voice while smiling]*. Your first name means “hope”, and your full name would mean something like “the charming hopeful”.*[After three seconds of silence that felt like an eternity...]*

Nadine: Should I assume I need to ask now the meaning of your first name?

Ambrogio: Nadine..... It means “immortal”. Isn’t that why you are here today? I thought we already started the interview, but I don’t see you either writing or recording. You should have a privileged memory... *[showing an ironic smile on his face]*...

Nadine: *[Confused for about two seconds]* Sorry about that, Mr. Bertoldo. Give me a...

Ambrogio: *[interrupting]* I said... Ambrogio...

Nadine: *[now nervous as she finalized the set up for the interview]* Thank you very much for giving this exclusive interview to the ‘Independently’, Ambrogio. We have received multiple confidences that real-life vampires live among us, and pointed us to “Kora’s” as their primary headquarters around here. Mr. Bertoldo... I mean, Ambrogio... Are you a vampire?

[Ambrogio laughed]

Ambrogio: The ‘Independently’ used to be a serious newspaper... How low it has fallen for a few British pounds... Nadine... Don’t you think it’s extremely ridiculous thinking that monsters are living among us in year 2027? Don’t you think it’s still a bit early for

Halloween? *[with a mocking expression on his face]* What do you think, Nadine? What do you think about all of this?

Nadine: I'm just doing my job.

[Ambrogio jumped from his chair towards Nadine in a sudden movement, with both hands pointing at her, and his mouth widely opened showing his teeth]

Ambrogio: BOOOO!! *[laughing loudly]*

[Nadine almost fell from her chair, scared and extremely nervous].

Nadine: I'm getting out of here. You are crazy... All of this is insane... I'm getting out of here. *[She stood up and was ready to leave when suddenly...]*

Ambrogio: We are people you pass on the streets every day. Usually we keep this aspect of our lives as a guarded secret. We are everywhere... In schools, parks, doing any kind of job out there. We might be in your family, and even at your church. We don't die in the sun. We can't fly. Holy water and crosses don't harm us, and garlic... Oh, I love garlic so much...

[Nadine stopped; thought about it for a second; turned back, and returned to her seat.]

Nadine: So you simply drink blood, and that's it?

Ambrogio: *[laughing softly looking at the floor]* Artemis, please forgive her, as she doesn't know what she's saying... *[making eye contact again]* Nadine, vampires don't

drink blood anymore. We haven't done that for centuries now. That is so brute... So out of style...

Nadine: But I thought...

Ambrogio: *[interrupting...]* Blood symbolizes life. We don't drink blood, but rather live on life energy. Our bodies and minds cannot generate energy and ideas, so we depend on draining the energy and the creativity of others to exist and be successful. We find infinite satisfaction from that. That makes us powerful, and immortal. Yes, we are vampires, but it's not about blood, but about 'hope'.

Nadine: *[very confused...]* Energy? Hope? I am confused...

Ambrogio: *[with a subtle smile on his face]* Think about it, Nadine... Of all the attributes of being human, what is it that generates the most energy? What is it that drives people every day to continue their existence? It's their belief in something. It's believing in a tomorrow. It's faith... It's hope... We vampires live from that... We live out of taking dreams out of people. We live out of taking all that energy from those poor souls... Hope is a feeling of trust. A feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.

[Nadine was speechless...]

Ambrogio: What? Did you think all vampires needed blood because we had 'Sangue Debolezza' or 'Porphyric Hemophilia'? hehehe No, Nadine...

Nadine: But... Everybody needs hope... Everybody needs

something to do; someone to love; and something to hope for...

Ambrogio: The only consistent feature of mankind is their ability to minimize and take out the dreams of each other, creating plenty of dissatisfying meaningless lives. None of us is as cruel and bad as all of us together.

Nadine: I don't believe that. People by nature are good and encouraging. You may not always be able to solve all of the world's problems at once, but don't ever underestimate the power of beautiful souls coming together. One wise lady once said that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own.

Ambrogio: *[clapping his hands]* Bravo, Nadine... Bravo... You are a believer. Like Cecelia said... "Shoot for the moon, even if you fail, you'll land among the stars."... How lame... It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a satisfaction to others. Some people live on hope, faith, and dreams, while other people live to crush those. Hope is just an illusion. A fountain of energy that is meant to feed those of us that laugh to see it leaving bodies and minds. I thought the definition of an interview was to ask questions rather than to argue, but obviously, you have your own style... *[smiling ironically]*

Nadine: People will always have hope; always putting a little more persistence into everything they do; a little more effort... And what at times might have seemed as a hopeless failure, more often than not turns into a glorious success.

Ambrogio: People give up easily... It only takes a few

words from a friend, a family member, or even a stranger, to make them give up their dreams. It's so easy to make them fear trying by just putting some simple doubts and words of uncertainty in their minds. It's so easy to take that spark, that energy away from them, simply because they easily allow us to do so.

Nadine: We, as a society, dream to give ourselves hope. If we stop dreaming, that would be like accepting that we can't change our fates.

Ambrogio: Exactly! *[saying loudly while pointing at Nadine]* When you have lost hope, you have lost everything!

Nadine: *[interrupting]* But as Lore said... and when you think all is lost, when all is dire and bleak, there is always hope...

Ambrogio: Attitudes are contagious, Nadine, but believe me... Yours are just a pre-defeated effort. On the other side, mine might destroy people... Mine destroy dreams... My contagious attitude eliminates any desire of fighting for something. I make people believe that starting any new journey will only end very, very badly. Like some people wisely say... No single raindrop believes it is to blame for the flood. No one wants to risk being seen as a failure. Why take the chance to try to be different; to do something that they haven't tried before. That is risky, and they might become the joke of everyone, especially their friends and family members. Why even try? It's much safer and better not doing anything. That way you don't need to fear being considered a loser.

Nadine: Like someone very wise said... No matter what sort of difficulties, how painful experience is, if we lose our hope, that's our real disaster. Take this also from Neruda... You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot keep Spring from coming... There will always be faith and hope on earth, Ambrogio. Faith that goes well beyond your simple desire of satisfying you and your people. Hope is a powerful force... It's not magic, but a core characteristic of who we are.

Ambrogio: Your quotes [*making a "quotes" gesture with his hands*] bore me, Nadine... Evidently hope and faith are strong in you, darling... But look at you... A loser; interviewing a so-called vampire; earning a lame salary, and with the ridiculous hope of being a real journalist one day. Don't you think that makes you a loser, Nadine? You are a simple young woman that will never have the things that you want in your life. And you know why? [*raising his voice*] Because you believe in people. You believe in society. You believe that you can make a difference by believing that together, people can do great things... Ohhhhh, Nadine.... You are sooooo wrong... You can't see it... Simple human beings were made to suffer through life; barely surviving; disappointed and confused day after day... Hopeless, always wondering what happened to their strong and beautiful "society"—a word that you seem to say with such pride. You can't see that real greatness resides in being egoistic; in making sure that you don't allow people around you to grow; to fulfill their dreams; to fight and work hard for what they believe. You don't feel it, Nadine.... You can't feel this energy... You can't feel this infinite power and satisfaction of crushing dreams...

Nadine: *[raising her voice as well]* I am not your darling... I feel sorry for you... Am I a loser? Like Rand said... "Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark in the hopeless swamps of the not-quite, the not-yet, and the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration for the life you deserved and have never been able to reach. The world you desire can be won. It exists.. it is real.. it is possible.. it's yours." Hope is mine, Mr. Bertoldo. Hope is the nature of being alive. There will always be hope that will not be taken away from the world, regardless of what you and your people do; regardless of what you say. I choose to have faith. I choose to have hope and believe I can control my destiny and fulfill my dreams. Neither you or anybody can take that away from me, or from our collective society. We are much stronger together, and yes, we can change our destinies; we can make a better world. Look at you! *[raising even more her voice]* Do you think you have everything because you have money and take pride of crushing people's dreams to exist? You have nothing! You are nothing! You don't deserve having me here, wasting my time with a jerk like you!

[Nadine took her things, and started her way out of "Kora's"]

Ambrogio: Come here, Nadine... Come here, charm of hope! *[said in a sarcastic tone while raising his voice]*. You won't be able to change them! Their nature is weak! They defeat themselves without even trying! *[now with his voice much louder, with a scary angry expression on his face]*. Waste your time! Futility!! Futility, Nadine! Nadine Charise, come back here right now! *[now fully out of control and*

disfigured]/Who do you think you are! I am Ambrogio!! I AM AMBROGIO BERTOLDO!!! NADINE!!!!!!!!!!!!

[Nadine opened “Kora’s” dual doors with a confidence that she didn’t know she had. She didn’t look back... She continued walking forward with a firm pace, with a different, strong look on her face, and the only thing going through her mind as she walked away—while showing a subtle smile on her face was... ‘And I am Nadine Charise, and I AM HOPE!’]

[Several minutes later...]

Ambrogio: *[once again calmed]* Nunzio, do we have anyone working at the ‘Independently’?

Nunzio: We have Merticus there. Master... In others... We got notice that one of the objects has been found. It’s in an old apartment building near...

Ambrogio: Excellent!!! *[interrupting and ignoring Nunzio’s comment about the object]* Ms. Charise... We’re going to meet again soon... Very, very soon... I need to make a few calls...

[He continued...]

Ambrogio: Nunzio and Faramundo, bring me Merticus here.... Now!!

[Nunzio was going to start moving, when he got interrupted by a soft voice]

Selene: Not so fast... Apollo is also working there...

[Ambrogio slowly raised his head, looking at Selene directly into her eyes, with his face fully disfigured again...]

CHAPTER 2.

GREY IS THE NEW BLACK 'N WHITE

[I've been here before... This darkness... The trees at each side of the narrow path, making a tunnel with their branches... A giant raised pond full of water hyacinths floating on it... A rusty '53 Bel Air frame covered by undergrowth with the German license plate 'W-MM 9615'... Where am I?... Wait! Something moved!!! For God's sake! That thing moved!! It's... a woman... Her face looks gaunt... She looks like... a witch... Is she dying? Oh, my God, Is that a...? Does she have a wedding dress? It is almost disintegrated by time... I can still see the silk sleeves with the crystal elements. She still has the tiara and veil... She has a dead bouquet, a pearl bracelet, and a turquoise handkerchief in her hands. She looks... familiar... Her fingers are so thin... Is that thing glowing... a wedding ring? I've never seen anything like that before... I feel the urgency to... touch it...]

[WHAT THE!!!!!!—The witch sat down in an unexpected violent movement. He fell and started screaming, trying desperately to run away from that place—falling over and over with total lack of coordination. The witch was shaking uncontrollably, screaming repeatedly in an unsupportable high

*pitch... “VAHN!” “DAH!” “KORA!” “VAHN!” “DAH!”
“KORAAA!!” “KORAAAAA!!!!”]*

[Feeling a vibration on his left wrist coming from his label-tattoo life concierge device...]

Eachann: Happy Birthday, Grey!!!! August 6th, 2027!! Fifty-seven years old, buddy!! Fifty-seven!! Wake up! First breakfast awaits, and we don't want to be late for our first snack, followed by second breakfast!!!

Quique Grey Rodriguez: Eachann! *[still between being awake and asleep]* For God's sake! It's 5:30 a.m. on a Friday... My birthday is on August 11th, and I'll be fifty-six, not fifty-seven years old... Is this for real??

Eachann: Ahhhh... Come'on, Grey! Details... Simple details... Aren't you the same guy that always says that nobody is ever 100% right or 100% wrong? That there are infinite shades of grey tones between black and white? Open your mind, man... Open your mind... *[laughing]* You promised to help me with landscaping the front of my house today, and then watch the game with me before going to teach your class tonight. Hey, I'm hungry! Speed up, buddy. It will be a looooong working day!!

Grey: Oh, please... Stop with the motivation... I'll meet you at “Moby's Coffee” in one hour. See you... Yes, yes... See you. *[Quique still could hear Eachann speaking over his label-tattoo, when he ended the call. He sat down; spent a few seconds touching his eyes, followed by putting both hands on his head... He once again woke up with a terrible headache, caused by the recurrent nightmare that takes control of his dreams]*

again and again. Those words... What do they mean — he asked himself... Why can't I find any reference to them... Vahn... Dah ... Vahn Dah Kora Kora...

Eachann: *[At Moby's Coffee...]* Hey!! Quique Grey is in the house!! *[saying loudly while smiling]* Sit down, buddy. How are you today?

Grey: Do you mean before, or after someone called me at 5:30 a.m.?

Eachann: Shut up, old man... *[laughing]* Hey, Peter! Peter!! *[calling loudly the guy in the counter]* Same thing as always! A continental, with a ginger tea with 'cremora' for the old man!!

Grey: Stop calling me that... *[in low voice, shaking his head in negation while taking a deep breath and looking at the floor — with his mind still on the words said by the witch.]*

Eachann: What's going on, man? It's Friday!! Come'on, buddy! Let me feel some excitement!

Grey: It's the nightmare... I had it again... The dying witch that scares the heck out of me. She seems so...

Eachann: *[interrupting abruptly]* No, no, no, no.... Sorry, pal... Not today... I've heard about that dream too many times, and today is Friday. Change that face. You might be the master of all nightmares, but for me, you are just 'Quique', and we have a lot of work to do today!

[Several minutes later, both left the coffee/tea shop towards

Eachann's house. He talked and talked for hours without giving Grey a chance to participate in the conversation. Among his extensive monologue, he covered topics such as how expensive the dependency on creating artificial rain for survival had become, and blamed 'the big mistake of 2016' as the starting point for all the major issues in the world. Even though Eachann was very serious on what he was saying, it was impossible for Quique to not look at his friend without smiling from time to time... Gosh... He's a machine... He just can't stop talking...]



[Friday, August 6th, 2027 – 6:00 p.m....]

Grey: Good evening, class!

[Giggling could be heard in the back. Quique turned his body towards his students...]

Grey: What? What's going on? Did I miss something?

Student: Professor, you look like you went through the fifty shades today! *[all students began laughing.]*

Grey: Oh, Gosh... That joke again? Again?? Really? Dear God... *[looking up]* Will I ever be free of this curse? *[students laughing harder.]* Ok, ok, guys... Let's get to work. Today we are going to talk about what is good and what is bad...

Student: Let's start with the bad! Yeah!! *[a student said in the back, causing everyone to laugh, including the Professor...]*

[Quique was a new Professor at Birkbeck, University of

London. He taught several social sciences and ancient history courses after completing his dual Doctoral degree in those fields just recently. Ten years ago, he was a well-regarded Information Technology security expert, but decided to explore new horizons and reinvent himself (once again! — as he used to say when asked about the career change). He was opinionated, and his thoughts and theories were considered controversial... He didn't have a big fan base among his colleagues, but the students really liked taking his classes because of his unconventional style.]

Grey: Who likes flowers here? *[almost all the female students raised their hands.]* Would you like to receive flowers today? *[most of them nodded while smiling.]* Well, in certain countries that would mean that you just died... Clocks, handkerchiefs, straw sandals and flowers are all associated with death and funerals in certain places. Presenting those gifts would be deemed extremely inappropriate and morbid. By the way, guys... Never put a turquoise handkerchief in the pocket of your suit...

Grey: *[making a short pause]* Did you know it's insulting to your host to sprinkle salt on your food in certain areas? For them, it would mean that you find the meal's taste repulsive... Talking about food... How would you eat a sandwich? With utensils or with your hands? *[continuing without allowing a response]* Go to Norway, and let me know what you find out on that...

[students smiling while avidly listening]

Grey: Are you aware that most Europeans would consider bread in the US extremely sweet? Sometimes jokingly compared to cake? *[smiling...]* What about

wearing a bikini with the flag of your country? Is it wrong if toilets have handles instead of buttons on top? Did you know that in some places, the light switches being up means off, and down, on? Those are just simple examples of cultural differences. Let's not even start talking about social, political, or religious definitions of correct vs. incorrect depending of your background or location... Believe me... You don't want to hear my theories about the Star of Bethlehem, the Transfiguration, or the Assumption...

Grey: *[pausing]* What is right, and what is wrong? Who defines what is right or wrong?

Student: Society? *[student replied, participating with enthusiasm]*

Grey: Well... If society dictates that it is right to eat cockroaches... Would you do it? *[a few students showed a disgruntled face while negating in silence with their heads.]* That's perfectly normal in some areas of the world... Who really defines what is right or wrong?

Krissy Ramos: It's a personal choice! *[someone said with a lot of confidence]*

Grey: Wow! So much energy! Even if everybody does it, would you stand against it because it's your personal choice?

Krissy: Definitely ... if it's part of my core values!

Grey: *[smiling, now looking at Krissy directly into her eyes...]* But... Aren't your core values based on what society dictates to be right to begin with?

Krissy: *[confused, quickly searching on her mind a response]* My core values are my core values, regardless if society agrees with them or not.

Grey: What's your name, student, and what's your Major?

Krissy: Krissy Ramos, Professor... And my Major is Psychology.

Grey: Psychology!! You know that Psychologists have scary super powers, don't you, Ms. Ramos? *[A few giggles were heard in the background. Krissy didn't laugh at the comment.]* Let me read you something compiled by Joltes twenty years ago... *[Quique starts reading...]* "In the past, societies often saw prior eras as "golden ages" in which people were stronger, wiser, more religious, longer lived, or otherwise "better" than in the present. The Old Testament, Greek Mythology, and other traditions idealize the first generations of humans as being somehow closer to, or even descended from the divine. Such societies seek to explain modern woes by claiming more recent generations have fallen from grace, or are physically diminished in stature or vitality. Clergymen frequently use this imagery to convince members of their congregation that they have "fallen into evil" and can only be saved by returning to the allegedly more pious traditions of the past."

Grey: *[pausing for a second]* What do you think about that, Ms. Ramos?

Krissy: *[hesitatingly...]* Well... First, I thought we were not going to talk about religion... Second... We live in the present. We don't live in the past... Staying in the past is a

way to negate the current realities. We value and respect our heritage, but it's time to let things go, and focus on the present and the future.

Grey: Are you implying that the definition of what is right or wrong is defined by your current circumstances? Isn't that very convenient, Ms. Ramos? Changing your definition of right or wrong depending on your current reality? Let me see... So, would that mean that if the lover of a married person settles down by marrying another, that would give her/him the right to judge others because her/his reality changed?

Krissy: *[confused]* What are you talking about? You are confusing me... I didn't say that... That wasn't what you asked. I didn't say that. *[very uncomfortable with Quique's statement.]* I didn't...

Grey: *[interrupting...]* Relax, Ms. Ramos... I love the passion! I was just teasing... My point with all of this is that nobody is 100% right or 100% wrong. That there are infinite shades of grey between what some would consider either black or white. *[quickly stopping with a move of his hand a student that was about to interrupt.]* That judging only comes from minds that can't seem to understand that the strength of the whole depends on the differences of the individuals. That we need to live with more tolerance and acceptance, even if we don't agree with the acts or points of view of other people. That even when hypocrites visit temples every weekend, and that "perfect families" are full of masks, lies, and have thin glasses as ceilings, we have no right to force them into something different. That nobody has the right—regardless of their social, political, or religious

point of views—to hurt or take away the lives of anyone... We are different, and that's okay... We think different, and that's ok... Respect! We need to truly understand and put into practice what that word means... Respect!

[After exchanging further thoughts and words with his students, the class ended, and the students were dismissed. Quique felt tired... He went to his office, and fell asleep at his desk while preparing the content of his lectures for the following week. When he woke up, he noticed that it was already late, and rushed his pace to get home. He started to walk towards the library—which had just closed -, when he approached a few students that were talking and laughing loudly...]

Student: Come'on, Brian! *[overheard Quique, while passing by...]* You would never have the look or style to make it to “Kora’s”!! *[laughing, while mocking exaggerated moves of etiquette behaviors].*

[Quique stopped brusquely...]

Grey: What did you just say?

[Students surprised...]

Brian: Sorry, Professor. I didn't mean to mock...

Grey: *[waving his hand, and negating with his head...]* No, no... Did you just say “Kora”?

Brian: It's “Kora’s”, sir...

Grey: And what is that? What is “Kora’s”?

Student #1: That's the house of the vampires, sir... *[exploding in a laugh, with his friends doing the same. Quique remained serious, while losing a bit of his patience...]* Sorry, Professor... It's an exclusive bar near Baldassare Street. It's impossible to get in there. People say that only the "crème de la crème" can get in, and only if you are a vampire.

Student #2: Yes, Professor! Those vampires should be having fun with so many Koras'! *[laughing loudly]*

Grey: Vampires? Koras? *[very confused]* What are you talking about?

Brian: He's just joking about the 'vampires' thing, Professor. It's an urban legend that weird things happen in there. In terms of Kora, if I overheard well when someone asked the question some time ago, it means "maiden" in Greek...

Student #2: *[interrupting...]* Vampires love the blood of virgins!!! *[laughing while mocking a scary movement...]*
[Nobody else laughed...]

Grey: Kore... It's Kore... *[the student was going to interrupt him, when he made a 'stop' movement with his right hand, and continued...]* and a maiden is not necessarily a virgin... A maiden is an unmarried woman... *[no response or comments from the students...]* Okay, guys... Thank you very much. My apologies for the interruption. Please, enjoy the rest of the evening...

[Quique accelerated his pace, leaving the students confused. He told to himself... Baldassare Street... That is not far from here!]

[Quique decided to walk a few blocks to Baldassare Street—instead of driving there. He needed some exercise to wake up and be alert so he could find the exclusive bar. It was late and dark... He continued walking, and walking, until he suddenly stopped in the middle of the road he was crossing, in total disbelief looking at the big Bank building in front of him. On its entrance, there was a giant plaque with an inscription... “VAHN DAH”. He couldn’t believe his eyes.... He couldn’t move... Still shocked, he looked to his left and saw a beautiful young lady elegantly dressed in black that was walking at a firm pace crossing the street. He had to look twice, as he thought he was seeing a bright energy emerging from her body. He changed his line of sight once again towards the Bank, and when he took another step to go there, he felt as if he was stepping on something. When he looked down, he saw something very bright, and when he picked it up to see what it was, he realized it was just a piece of hard candy on its wrapper. He threw it back to the ground, and looked again to the front of the bank where the plaque was, when suddenly he saw a strange silhouette right there, who slowly raised her arm pointing to his right. When he changed his sight towards that direction, he suddenly heard a daunting loud noise, and was blinded by a bright light coming from a double-decker bus that approached at a speed so fast that it didn’t allow him to do anything other than cover himself while expecting an imminent sudden death...]

CHAPTER 3.

THE TWO GIRLS FROM THE BROKEN ELEVATOR

Voice #1: Wouldn't it be easier to kill her in the same way I killed her father?

Voice #2: *[in a calm, paused voice...]* Tempting... Your boss, and his obsession with Sutcliffe and Erskine together in the worst grotesque way... But no... Not yet. Her time will come, and I would like her to face the same death her ancestors gave to my kind. we just want to send her a message... A "candid" one... For sure she will be more intelligent than her father. The building doesn't mean anything to her... And... Don't forget she is the friend of someone that is key for us... We need her alive.

Voice #1: Don't you think her father told her about Orpheus and the box?

Voice #2: Humanity has forgotten where they came from. These unworthy bastards refer to those stories as tales, and read them for amusement when they don't have anything else to do. I would have loved to have seen their faces in front of Cerberus... *[laughing with irony]* The box

had once the power to soften the heart of the son of Rhea. We now know it's there somewhere, so find it... Do what you have been entrusted to do, and... remember that failing is not an option...



[Charissa, thinking to herself... I can't believe my dad didn't demolish and rebuild this apartment building years ago. Look at all this mess... This should be the only place in the whole West Brompton in this condition. I am sorry for the German investors, but even though their offer was good, there was no way I could have sold this place. It meant so much to my dad... My dad... I miss you so much, daddy... You were such a good person. Your death won't go unpunished (toughening her expression for a second...) This building has been in the family for generations... I still remember how he used to bring me here when I was a little kid; always saying that it was the most precious legacy he could leave me with...]

[Charissa climbed the few stairs that led to the entrance, and opened the big doors. When she got into the commons area, she imagined how gorgeous the place must have been when being a hotel decades and decades ago. Wow... (she thought) It still has some of its original furniture, and some of the walls still show artistic designs painted by hand. This place must have been incredible. Look at all those strange signs... I didn't notice any of that when I was a kid. I was too young... Dad... Oh dad...]

Anastasia: Hi, stranger!

[Charissa turned back, scared. She couldn't avoid looking from head to toe at the young punk lady in front of her.]

Charissa: Gosh... You scared the heck out of me...

Anastasia: *[laughing]* I'm good at that! Do you need any help? Are you new in here?

Charissa: No, no... My dad is the... I meant, "was" the owner of the building, and I came to...

Anastasia: *[interrupting]* Are you Gregorios' daughter? Nice!!

Charissa: *[giving another good look at Anastasia...]* Yes, I am the daughter of "Mr. Klemenis"... I'm Charissa. Nice to meet you...

Anastasia: I'm Anastasia... What did you mean by "was the owner"? Did he sell it?

Charissa: No... My dad... My dad died three weeks ago...

Anastasia: What?? No way! It can't be! What happened? *[asked in disbelief]*

Charissa: Sorry... I don't feel comfortable talking about that... Dad always came in person to collect the rent from each tenant, and that is the only reason I came here today. He felt blessed by providing such a central location to people that normally wouldn't be able to afford living in an area like this... He always said that this building contains within its walls the power to soften the heart of anyone, and I guess he was right. I won't break his tradition...

Anastasia: I am sorry about your dad... He was a good man. He...

Charissa: *[interrupting]* Sorry... I don't want to be rude, but I have other things to do... I have this list of tenants, and I would like to start collecting the rent.

Anastasia: Oh! Sure! Let me go to my apartment, and I'll come back with the money in a second.

Charissa: If you don't mind, I would like to go up with you. My memories of this place are from when I was a little kid, and I barely remember how it was. It will be good for me to familiarize with it.

Anastasia: No problem! Let's take the elevator...

Charissa: You mean... that... thing? Does that still work??

Anastasia: Sure! It's so retro... And very, very cool! Come on!

Charissa: I should have taken the stairs. The squeaking everywhere around this thing sounds dangerous. I think we should...

Anastasia: *[interrupting]* Calm down... Enjoy the ride. Just imagine all the important people that once would have taken it to go to the upper floors. This building is full of...

[Anastasia didn't finish the sentence when suddenly the electricity went down; the lights off; and a loud noise was heard, followed by the small elevator falling down the equivalent of a floor and a half in a brusque movement. Both Charissa and Anastasia started screaming, but got no response back.]

Charissa: My label-tattoo communicator doesn't have signal here! Help! Help!*[screaming]*

[Anastasia did the same... Then, after three minutes...]

Anastasia: We need to stop! Calm down! *[said loudly to Charissa.]* It's Friday afternoon. Most tenants should be out. They'll come back... We just need to wait, and when we hear any noise, we start yelling again. We need to calm down. Let's wait here some time. Nothing will happen to us here.

[Charissa didn't reply. She stopped yelling, but continued moving from left to right, and from right to left, while nervously touching her hair all the time...]

Charissa: I can't breathe... I can't breathe... I don't feel well... I can't...

Anastasia: Calm down!! Stop moving like a crazy woman. Come on... Let's sit down. Come with me. Let's sit down...

[Anastasia grabbed Charissa, and both sat down in the elevator.]

Anastasia: Breathe... Breathe... Count with me.... Ten... *[Anastasia said in low voice, very slowly.]* Come on, say it...

[Charissa started counting with Anastasia, each number more and more slowly until they got to number one...]

Anastasia: Feeling better?

Charissa: Yes... Sorry about that...

Anastasia: No need to apologize... I'm used to anxiety

attacks... I'm a nurse at a Center that specializes in autism, and we have some patients that require assistance from time to time...

Charissa: A nurse? I would never have guessed that...

Anastasia: *[laughing]* Why? Because of how I look and dress? No worries... I'm used to that. *[now saying seriously...]* Society is full of stereotypes... People generalize and think that because I have a punk look, I am lazy, unpredictable, unreliable, unprofessional, and I'm not willing to follow the rules of any workplace... Those stereotypes are toxic and prevent an inclusive culture. It's demoralizing, discriminatory, and damaging... I resist to be "normal" if being normal means being and thinking like everyone else. I choose to be unique... To be different... To be me, regardless of what people might think of me.

Charissa: I agree with you... Those blanket assumptions are often wrong... I finished my Master's recently on Human Resources, and did my thesis on "Lookism", that is a term used to describe discriminatory treatment towards physically unattractive people; mainly in the workplace but also in social settings. I'll never forget something I read from a law Professor from Stanford when doing my research. She gave the example that if you're in a society where you have trouble getting ahead because you're not attractive, and hence have to use public services, then improving those public services will make your life substantially more pleasant and less unequal-seeming. In other words, society is unequal and unfair, and we can't always get rid of the unfairness, so we ought, within reason, to try and reduce the inequality...

Anastasia: Wow... That was a discriminatory statement in disguise...

Charissa: I thought the same...

Anastasia: Well... Aristotle apparently said once that beauty was a better introduction than any letter...

[both laughed...]

Charissa: So, you are a nurse, and specialize in patients with autism?

Anastasia: Yes... Autism Spectrum Disorder... It's better known as "ASD". It's considered to be on the "high functioning" end of the spectrum. Affected children and adults have difficulty with social interactions and exhibit a restricted range of interests and/or repetitive behaviors. Individuals with ASD often have a great need for "sameness" which can make them upset if objects in their environment or time schedules change. The manifestations of ASD can differ considerably across individuals... You have a tenant here with ASD. His name is Peter. He is such a nice guy...

Charissa: Peter? I don't have anyone on my list with that name...

Anastasia: The apartment should still be listed under his late mom's name. He said that he has been living here for a while. He is such a noble man. He works at the "Moby's Coffee" shop that is close to here... *[laughing...]* We are good friends... Krissy and I always have chocolate cake for him at the apartment. He loves chocolate cake, and

believe me... No one makes a better pumpkin spiced latte than him!

Charissa: So, you have a roommate?

Anastasia: Yes, her name is Krissy. I've known her for some time, and we have become best friends. We were four before, but now we are just two, and need two more roommates in order to split the rent payment. Your dad was very generous allowing us to live here, but even with the low rent, we need some help with it. I love my work, but...

[Anastasia was interrupted by a sudden explosion that shook the entire building. Both women screamed, and started yelling again for help, when suddenly they heard someone yelling....]

Peter: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! *[he yelled the same word repeatedly.]*

Anastasia: PETER!! Is that you? We need help! Call the police!

Peter: FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

Anastasia: PETER! *[yelling]* PETER!! It's me! Anastasia!! What happened? What's going on? We are trapped here in the elevator! We need help! Call the police!!

[Peter started hitting the wall, yelling even louder...]

Peter: ANASTASIA! FIRE! FIRE! FIRE! *[hitting the wall repeatedly harder and harder.]*

Anastasia: CALL THE POLICE! *[yelled]* Call the police, Peter! Call the police!!

[Suddenly, the sound of the wall being hit went away, now replaced by the crackling of wood burning. Smoke started to come from everywhere, and both Anastasia and Charissa were yelling uncontrollably.]

Anastasia: PETER! PETER! Are you still there? PETER! HELP US! WE NEED HELP! WE ARE TRAPPED IN THE ELEVATOR!! WE ARE GOING TO DIE!

[The next thing they heard was the strong sound of hammers breaking walls, and a lot of people yelling. Both Anastasia and Charissa yelled back, and the last thing they remembered was being pulled brusquely out of where they were... They woke up coughing -out of the building-, surrounded by ambulances, policemen and firefighters. There was smoke and chaos everywhere, and they could barely see beyond five feet in from of them.]

Anastasia: I NEED TO FIND PETER! *[standing up, and starting to run back to the building when she was tackled by a big fireman.]*

Fireman: What do you think you are doing? *[yelled at Anastasia.]*

Anastasia: I need to save him! I need to save him!

Fireman: LADY! CALM DOWN! There is no one left inside! Everybody is safe. The whole building was almost empty. Although this looks chaotic, we could contain the fire quickly, and it only damaged part of the building. Your friend is fine.

Peter: ANASTASIA! ANASTASIA! *[yelled from a distance.]*

Anastasia: PETER! *[started running towards Peter, hugging him.]* Peter, Peter... Too strong... The hug is too strong... I'm okay... I'm okay... *[while pushing back Peter.]* I'm okay, Peter... I'm okay...



[Hours later...]

Fireman: *[to Charissa, Anastasia, and other tenants that had arrived by then.]* Anyone know who the owner of this place is?

Charissa: I am the owner...

Fireman: I'm sorry for this situation, Madam. It looks like the fire started at the left-wing hall on the fourth floor. The fire seems to have been triggered by a short circuit in one of the main lamps.

Charissa: Are you telling me that the explosion that I heard that shook the building was caused by a short circuit in a lamp? Are you kidding me?

Fireman: Unfortunately, things like that are not uncommon in buildings as old as this one. We could contain it quickly due to a timely call to the emergency system. We can say that only two to three rooms and part of the hall on that floor were severely damaged. Most people should be able to return to their apartments tonight or early tomorrow. I need you to sign some paperwork for me, and I want to show you something...

[Charissa left with the Fireman, and returned after several

minutes. When she returned, she saw Anastasia comforting and hugging someone that was crying.]

Charissa: *[to Anastasia...]* What happened?

Anastasia: Charissa, this is Krissy, my roommate. Our apartment was one of the few ones with severe damage. We lost everything... I am ashamed to ask... Is there any other vacant apartment in the building that we could use temporarily? It doesn't matter if it's not ready. We just need a place, and we'll figure out the rest...

Charissa: No way... You two are coming with me tonight. You can stay at my apartment with my friend and me. We have plenty of space, and I'm sure she won't mind.

Krissy: Thank you so much for your kindness, but it's not necessary. We prefer to...

Charissa: *[interrupting...]* Krissy, right? *[she nodded]* Nice to meet you. Don't worry about it. Just come with me. Let me make a call through my communicator... *[calling through her label-tattoo device.]* Hello, Nadine? Please, call me back when you get this message. There was a fire in dad's building at West Brompton. I am fine, so no worries. Hey, I have two friends here that might need to spend a few days with us. Hope you don't mind. Give me a call when you have a chance. I know your weird interview is tonight, and you'll probably arrive late. Take care. Talk to you later.

Charissa: *[showing an object to both girls...]* The Fireman gave me this... *[showing them a small box.]*

Anastasia: What is it?

Charissa: I have no idea... *[She said while opening it... When opened, she saw that there was another box inside the first one.]* Oh, my God... It is so beautiful... Look at those inscriptions... I have no idea what they say... *[She opened it, and...]* It's a music box... It's... a... music box... *[The three of them remained there in total silence, listening in fascination to the celestial sounds coming from the mysterious music box...]*



[Minutes later...]

Voice #2: I am sorry, Master... I lost control of the fire, and I had to call the emergency system...

[silence in the other side of the communicator...]

Voice #2: Master, I...

Voice #1: *[interrupting...]* Silence...

Voice #2: I am sorry...

Voice #1: The box... Just tell me if you found the box...

Voice #2: I saw it... I hid among the emergency personnel, and I saw when a fireman gave the box to the daughter of the vigilant watchman...

Voice #1: Excellent... The first object has been uncovered... Three more will lead us to the ring... You were lucky today... I told you that failing wasn't an option... And you didn't fail... We'll come back to Ms. Klemenis soon. In the meantime, I need you to pay a visit to the chosen one. I need you to visit... Nadine Charise...

CHAPTER 4.

THE CURSE OF THE RING: THE FALL AND RISE OF APOLLO

[8th Century (B.C.) – Location: Mount Parnassus, Greece – Temple of Delphi]

Artemis: Yes, I cursed him, but I also gave him the gift of immortality. Let them live together forever... He lost his soul to Hades, and the only thing that he has left is Selene...

Apollo: You and your gift to that traitor... He stole her from me. She was one of my maidens. I see that not all your followers need to be chaste and unmarried anymore... sister *[looking at Artemis with fierce eyes]* He was not supposed to ever touch her; kiss her, or have children... Yes, you gave him immortality, but all the curses on him will remain forever. Their siblings will be as damned as them, and he'll be eternally frustrated by not achieving the greatness he believes he deserves. He is no god, and will never be...

Pythia: *[interrupting]* Apollo... Elpis will be here in a few

minutes... I foresee chaos. You should avoid that encounter... I foresee chaos...

Apollo: Pythia... You know this was going to occur sooner or later. My destiny is to be consumed by Erebus, the god of darkness... If that is my fate, I won't go against it. I don't need to be the Oracle of Delphi to realize that her silence only meant a chaotic finale. Let it then be...

Apollo: *[to Artemis...]* We haven't finished yet, sister...



[Minutes later...]

Nunzio: Elpis is here... *[Elpis enters the Delphi.]*

Apollo: Artemis, Pythia, Nunzio... Leave us alone... I want everyone out of the Delphi... Now!

[Elpis and Apollo are now alone at the Temple of Delphi...]

Apollo: My beloved Elpis... Your eyes look different today... Proceed with what you need to tell me. My only warning is that I can already foresee that you won't like my reply... Your silence during all this time was only a clear harbinger of what was going to happen today...

Elpis: Apollo... I wanted to have this conversation with you in person. I was not going to send a messenger for this... I thought it was important, in honor of what we have lived through together...

Apollo: So you consider your visit a favor to me? *[laughing ironically]* If it wasn't because I sent you countless messages with my followers, you wouldn't be

here. You didn't have the courage to face me earlier, and the only reason you are here is that you can't escape your nightmares anymore... You can't continue running from the inevitable. I know what you've been into, Elpis... You forget the Oracle is by my side...

Elpis: That is not true, Apollo. Your attitude is not the one of a mighty god. Did the Oracle tell you that all I wanted was to be happy? That I needed you to give me the opportunity to live, and experience life with intensity? Were you going to give me that, Apollo? Were you? Wasn't it you that repeatedly told me that we weren't meant to be together?

Apollo: How lame and convenient... And that's how it ends? With a simple, "I wanted to give an opportunity to myself to be happy"?

Elpis: Apollo...

Apollo: *[interrupting]* No... Now you are going to listen to me... You know that I've made a lot of mistakes in my life... Mistakes that I don't feel proud about. You know I've lived tormented by my sins, and you were the only pure thing coming out of my heart. You were my only hope for redemption, Elpis... You were the last of the treasures inside the Pandora's box... You knew that... You were my only hope...

Elpis: Apollo...

Apollo: *[interrupting]* I haven't finished, daughter of Nyx! *[Apollo raised his voice in anger.]* I put my essence in your hands... And this is how you pay me back? You

were supposed to take care of it, and look what you have done... I was so wrong about you... You were simply not worthy... I trusted my essence to you... You represented the only remaining innocence inside of me. We were supposed to live as gods together, feeling like owners of everything around us. All the temples would have knelt in front of us!

Elpis: Apollo... Don't make things more difficult than they are already. Let's at least be friends... I don't want to lose you... We can continue with some level of friendship... Don't leave me... I will not be able to live without having you as an important part of my life... *[with tears in her eyes.]*

Apollo: Your hypocrisy makes me sick... It has been a long time since I believed in the tears of a mortal. And yes... For me you were a goddess, even if you were a mere human created by gods. You know well that I don't tolerate insincerity... Look at you... *[sneering at her]* You are no more than dishonesty, selfishness, and egoism... You know those tears are as fake as your intentions... Do you think I am stupid? Do you really think I was going to believe in your chastity? I always knew you weren't a virgin maiden, Elpis... And you know what? I didn't care... You didn't have to lie to me. I just ignored the obvious... I played the game of your dumb lies. You never realized how much I really loved you...

Elpis: So, that is the real you... That is what you've always thought of me... I am so disillusioned and disappointed, Apollo... How could I never have seen the true prepotent god? I only wanted you to give me the opportunity to live with the intensity I deserved... To feel, Apollo... To be

happy... You were never there for me. I was always low in your priorities; always second to whatever you were doing. You were full of contradictions, and I knew I was not going to have a future with you. We don't need to do this, Apollo... We can still be friends... Let's stop this madness now...

Apollo: You brought stability to my life, and now everything is gone... You were the cure to my nightmares, and now you have become one of them. I should have foreseen all of this... The way you discarded your lovers simply because they were not good enough for you... Always you, Elpis... Always you... It was always about you... All the occasions in which you dreamed to be in union with a god, so you can be the envy of mortals, and get all the attention... Those mundane dreams of getting pampered without limits... So much selfishness... Who can trust you, Elpis? Your niece? Your sister? If they only knew the things that came out of your mouth... How could it have been possible that I was so blind...

Elpis: Let's stop this Apollo. No more! *[raising her voice]* We don't need to do this! Let's seal what remains of what we had with a simple hug and thereafter pursue our own destinies separately. There's nothing more to be done. Nothing more to be said... You were not who I thought you were. We were not meant to be together. Let's stop this now...

Apollo: So, I was not who you thought I was? And who are you, Elpis? Who do you think you are? Do you think you are better than I? You and I are the same... The only difference is that I don't negate who I am, and you try to believe your own lie of being the victim of the whole

situation... The innocent dove that didn't know what she was doing, victim of the evil god that cheated her...

Elpis: Stop! I don't want to hear anything else! I am not like you. You offend me by saying that. You are not worthy of being called a god! You have no honor! You can't even come close to Gaia! No wonder you killed her son Python to usurp the Delphi!

Apollo: Shut up, mortal! You can't handle the truth! You can't handle the truth, Elpis! *[escalating the intensity of his tone]* Do you really believe that through a last hug of death, you would be able to escape from your own lies? Do you really believe you can hide behind a veil of purity that you preach, but don't deserve or have? You are right, mortal... You are totally right... *[watching her with contempt]* Nothing else to be said... Don't you dare to touch me... Your hug would be full of hypocrisy...

[He continued...]

Apollo: Do you feel you have the right to judge me? You? You don't have but a ceiling made of the thinnest of glasses! Do you have the courage to look at yourself in the mirror? What do you see? Tell me, Elpis... What do you see? The innocent victim that didn't know what she was doing? The victim that was blatantly deceived? Tell me... How long have you been with him? What truth have you told him? The truth, or your version of the truth? Poor mortal... He has no idea what he is getting into. Your lies, your shame... Everything will come to light one of these days, and all your masks will fall by themselves. I might not be worthy of the benevolence of Zeus, but neither are you. You get offended when I say that, because deep

inside, you want with all your strength to believe your own lies.

Elpis: Enough! Stop! It's enough!

Apollo: Enough? Oh yes... I forget I'm dealing with just a mere mundane mortal... Just give me back what you are not worthy of, and never dare to talk or be near me again! The medallion represented my protection! The music box meant to be healing and had the power to soften the toughest heart! The letters were our dreams... Our now broken dreams... And the compilation... the book, Elpis... The book symbolized my purest feelings... You don't deserve any of that. I am not asking you to return them... I demand taking back what should have never been yours. You are not worthy!

Elpis: Stop, Apollo. Don't do this... You will regret this... Look at yourself... That's not you... Don't let Erebus take control of your mind and mouth. This needs to stop! This needs to stop!

Apollo: Regret? Listen to me Elpis... Listen to me very carefully... *[Apollo, with his face fully disfigured...]* I curse the symbol of your bond of union, which will become the demise of everything that exists. Your destiny will be marked by relationships that sooner or later will fail again and again, because I declare so as written in the books of the Olympus. Yes... You will achieve everything you want... You'll have the warmth of a home. You'll have plenty of gold and expensive jewelry. You'll be the envy of the maidens... But you will see how little by little, as time passes, everything will crumble to ashes, as all was built on half-truths that are nothing more than vile

lies. Each time you look at the symbol of your union, you'll remember my words and the prophecy I declare today, which will stay written in the house of Hades and Persephone forever, haunting you for lives and generations. The statues in your honor will always be represented with tears and suffering. I have foreseen your fate... I've dreamed about it, and it has been confirmed by Pythia. Sick... Alone... Dying, victim of a long-lasting plague. I can only feel sorry for you... You will have everything, but always with an empty soul... Knowing that at the end, you'll die alone and with nothing...

[Apollo rises even more his voice...]

Apollo: Just give me what I demand! I demand the medallion! I demand the music box of Orpheus! I demand my letters and the book you didn't deserve! I am not asking you for a favor, Elpis! I command you to return what you are not worthy of!

[Elpis starts her way out of the Temple.]

Apollo: *[shouting]* Leave, Elpis! Leave! Leave! You can't argue against the truth! Leaving the Delphi for you would have been the biggest mistake of my eternity! Leave!!!



[Elpis is gone. Apollo anxiously starts walking around the Temple. Pythia enters and tries to calm him. He ignores her and continues walking around. His face is extremely tense, and his eyes look unfocused and confused. He starts having an anxiety attack. He finally makes eye contact with Pythia...]

Apollo: Pythia! Pythia! *[screaming]* What have I done!

Who am I? WHAT am I? I am a monster! A monster one thousand times worse than Typhon! So much darkness in me! So despicable... Detestable, abominable, heinous... I was born to hurt... I was born to destroy everything that comes close to me... Zeus, please send the Charybdis and the Scylla to destroy me... To end this mistaken creation of yours. Bring this agony to an end... Bring ME to an end, as I don't deserve living among gods... Arrrrrggghhhhhhhhhh [*Apollo screaming, hurting himself...*]

Pythia: Apollo! Stop! Don't do that! You need to calm down!

Apollo: You have seen this! I know! I saw it myself! I resisted to believe what was destined to be! How could it be possible that it ended this way! So badly! So unfair! I feel like I'm burning! I AM BURNING!!! Each part of my body is burning in the worst agony! I can't! I can't!! [*hitting the floor repeatedly with both hands until blood starts to come out of his fists.*] Erebus! I know you can hear me! This is the opportunity you have been waiting for! Bring me to your darkness! Let me feel the obscurity of the no-return! Arrrrrrrrrrrgggggghhhhhhhhhh!!

[A female entered the room in total disbelief of what she was seeing...]

Female: WHAT IS GOING ON? WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?? The gods went crazy! Thunder is everywhere! What is all this chaos! What happened here! Pythia!! What's going on here!!

Pythia: I can't control him! He went insane! I can't control him!!

[The woman threw herself on top of Apollo. In a fast move, he took her by the neck with his left hand, and violently turned her, hitting her head on the floor. Apollo started asphyxiating her. She couldn't scream, and tried unsuccessfully to escape from Apollo's powerful grip.]

Apollo: How dare you! How dare you interrupt the fury of a god! Who are you! Who do you think you are! How dare you touch and challenge the fury of a god!

Pythia: Apollo!! Stop! Leave her alone! You are killing her! Apollo, stop! You need to stop! You need to stop!

[Apollo released the woman. He was on his knees. His body all tense, as if every part of him would explode into a million pieces. Pythia was extremely scared... Trembling... The woman on the floor was trying to breathe, still in deep pain... Suddenly all the screams stopped... The tension in the Temple could be felt one hundred miles away. Even though now there is silence, the chaos is evident all around. The woman on the floor, little by little, started to recuperate while touching her sore neck. Apollo, in silence, continued to be on his knees. The woman on the floor stood up with difficulty, and threw herself on top of Apollo again, this time with all her strength, turning him upside down; grabbing him with both hands on his neck while putting an incredible pressure with her right knee on his chest. Even though Apollo was a strong god, he was immobilized by the woman.]

Female: DON'T YOU DARE TO DO THAT AGAIN! *[still breathing with difficulty]* I am not your enemy! I AM NOT YOUR ENEMY! I only came to help you! Why did you do this to me? Why? *[the woman released Apollo...]* I am one of your warriors. I am here just to protect you...

[She came back, hugging him with strength. Apollo tried to push her out unsuccessfully... He started vomiting... He started shaking in spasms... After a few seconds, Apollo fell unconscious...]



[One day later...]

Pythia: He is waking up! He is waking up!

[Apollo slowly started regaining his consciousness...]

Apollo: *[looking at the woman beside Pythia...]* Who are you? Your boldness redefined the meaning of stupidity...

Female: I'm Sekhmet... One of your warriors...

Apollo: Thanks... Please, forgive me... Erebus took control of my being. I...

Sekhmet: It's okay, almighty Apollo... You might be a god, but even gods behave as mortals when they allow themselves to do so.

Apollo: I... I did something terrible...

Sekhmet: No. You did not. Pythia told me what happened... You did what you needed to do. You broke the chains that you imposed on yourself. Yes, you fell victim of the enchantment of a mortal, but the time has come for you to rise again like the Phoenix. You reclaimed your place as a god and taught that witch a lesson...

Apollo: A witch? What is that?

Sekhmet: Think of Circe...

Apollo: Elpis is not a...

Sekhmet: *[interrupting]* She IS a witch, and she will pay the price of her treason. I will make my own cause making sure she pays for what she did to you.

Apollo: You will not do a thing. What happened was all my fault. Let's leave things the way they are. What has been done was meant to be. It was part of our destinies. Now it's time for each of us to go our own ways.

Sekhmet: I don't care if you are a god of sun and light, among other things. I don't care what you think. She needs to pay. She must pay...

Apollo: Sekhmet...

Sekhmet: Yes, mighty Apollo... Call me by my name, as I will be by your side for lives... Generation after generation protecting you. I'll be your strength whenever you need it... Making sure no one hurts you ever again. I'll be by your side for all eternity...

Apollo: I don't deserve such loyalty from anybody. In addition, you are simply a mortal... Just go away... Leave me alone... I want to be alone...

Sekhmet: Never... *[pausing for a few seconds...]* Apollo... The witch sent this with one of her servants... *[showing him a box with several items.]*

Apollo: Yes... I know what's in there... Sekhmet... Listen to me... This is what I want you to do with the objects

inside the box. Those objects must be separated, as they will always follow their owner... It's imperative that they never come together again. I don't want you to destroy them, but you must follow exactly what I'm going to tell you... First...



[August 7th, 2027 (A.D.) – Location: Somewhere in London...]

Sekhmet: Nunzio... Faramundo... The traitors... The servants of the fallen one... What do you want?

Nunzio: The legendary Sekhmet... You didn't believe you were going to be around without us noticing, right? Ambrogio wants to talk to you. He has an important request... You owe him...

Sekhmet: He knows I won't harm Apollo. If he or any of you get close to him, I'll make sure you all burn in hell...

Faramundo: Hell? *[laughing]* That word is so... Mortal... It's not about Apollo... It's about the ring of the witch... We have found one of the sacred objects. He has a proposition that he wants to discuss with you.

Sekhmet: I'll never be by his side. I'll never betray Apollo... You know the sacrifice I did for him...

Nunzio: We are sure about that... But what if we tell you that Ambrogio found the chosen one?

[silence...]

Nunzio: What happened, Sekhmet? Should I interpret that silence as a sign of interest? *[smiling ironically...]*

Sekhmet: Okay... Bring me to him...

CHAPTER 5.

DO I KNOW YOU?

[Friday, August 6th, 2027 – 11:22 p.m....]

[The bus driver was on his last night-sightseeing tour trip of the night. He was tired after driving for so many hours across London, and that Friday felt like an eternity. The only thing on his mind was returning the double-decker, and heading back home as quickly as possible. He was close to the Niemiecki Bank when he noticed what seemed like a human figure in the middle of the road...]

Bus driver: WHAT IN THE HELL!! *[he yelled]*

[In a blink of an eye, a loud bus horn was heard... A woman screamed... The bus driver quickly moved the steering wheel, almost hitting a car coming from the other side of the street... Screams were heard from the small car... The man in the middle of the road was almost hit by the bus, but miraculously avoided an impact that, without doubt, would have him killed. Neither the bus or car drivers stopped, and what remained on the scene was someone laying horizontally in the middle of the road...]

Woman: OH, MY GOD! OH, MY GOD! OH, MY GOD!

ARE YOU OKAY? HEY, ARE YOU OKAY? TALK TO ME! PLEASE, TALK TO ME!

[The woman shook repeatedly the body of the man on the ground. He didn't move...]

Woman: OH, MY GOD! I NEED HELP! I NEED HELP!

[Someone arrived to the scene.]

Man in black hoodie: WHAT HAPPENED?

Woman: He was almost hit by a bus! He is not moving! Call an ambulance! Call the police!

Man in black hoodie: Calm down! We need to move him away from here! Come on! Help me! We need to get him away from the road!

[They both moved the man to the sidewalk.]

Man in black hoodie: Is he breathing?? *[he asked loudly]*

Woman: What?

Man in black hoodie: IS HE BREATHING??

[The woman barely moved, still shocked.]

Man in black hoodie: I need space. Move aside! I need some space.

[He continued...]

Man in black hoodie: Listen to me. Hey, listen to me! I need you to call 999 now. We need an ambulance. I said now!!

[The woman was about to make the call, when the man lying on the sidewalk started coughing.]

Man in black hoodie: *[to the man coughing]* Are you okay? Can you hear me?

[The man kept coughing, but acknowledged with his head.]

Man in black hoodie: *[to the woman]* Come here! Hold him this way. *[Asking her to hold him in a seated position.]*

Woman: But I was going to...

Man in black hoodie: *[interrupting]* I said come here. Forget the call. Come here!

[The man stopped coughing. He looked exhausted, and could barely open his eyes. With some effort, he focused his sight on the woman...]

Man: Nadja... Nadja... It's you...

Man in black hoodie: Are you okay? *[Taking the man by his right wrist.]* Your pulse is still accelerated, but that is more than normal. You seem to be breathing well.... Do you want us to call 999?

[The man made a gesture with his hand, implying a negative answer.]

Man: I'm okay... I just need to stand up...

Woman: Please, be careful! You shouldn't stand up yet!

Man: No, no... I'm okay... Just help me...

Man in black hoodie: How do you feel? Are you okay?

Man: I'm okay... Just a bit dizzy. I just need a minute.

Man in black hoodie: She says you were almost killed by a bus...

Man: I kind of remember... I got distracted, and stopped in the middle of the road. For sure it was my fault...

Man in black hoodie: What's your name?

Man: *[with difficulty...]* Quique... Quique Grey...

Woman: Mr. Grey, do you want us to call anyone? A family member? A friend?

Grey: I'm okay... I am... I... am just... dizzy... *[The man fainted again.]*

Woman: Oh, great! He fainted again! *[she said impatiently.]*

Man in black hoodie: Calm down... He'll be okay. He just needs some time. Do you know him?

Woman: No... I don't.

Man in black hoodie: He called you by your name... Nadja, right?

Woman: Yes, but that's not my name. My name is Nadine... Nadine Charise...

[The man in the black hoodie stood silent for a few seconds...]

Nadine: Sorry... Is something wrong?

Man: Oh, my apologies... I got lost in my thoughts... I just remembered that I forgot something I promised to one of my roommates. I need to head back to my apartment... I live close by, and she will get anxious if I don't arrive soon.

Nadine: Well... You will not leave us alone here... My car is not that close by. We need to call the police or an ambulance, so they can continue assisting him...

Man in black hoodie: We shouldn't be here alone... It's late and obviously dangerous... Let's bring him to my apartment. We'll be safer there, and it's close by. My friend is also too impatient. The last thing I want to is deal with one of her scoldings...

[Quique became conscious again...]

Grey: Ohhhh... My head... What a terrible headache... *[touching his head]*

Man in black hoodie: Okay, Nadja, Nadine, or whatever your name is... Help me with him... Let's get him to my apartment, and we'll determine what to do next once we are there.

Nadine: It's Nadine... I can't. I need to leave... I need to...

Man in black hoodie: I'll take you to your car later. I promise I don't bite... Come on. Let's move. I can't do this alone...

Nadine: Oh, well... I guess my night has been a total disaster already, so one more thing won't make a dent to its "perfection"... May I at least know your name?

Man in black hoodie: My name is Apollo... Apollo Dione...

Nadine: Nice to meet you, Mr. Dione... Do I know you? You look very familiar...

Apollo: I don't think so... Keep walking... We're almost there...

Nadine: Do you really live around here? *[looking at the buildings as they walked]*

Apollo: Yes, I recently rented an apartment just around that corner.

Nadine: Wow... This area must be very expensive...

[Apollo didn't reply. They both continued walking until they arrived.]

Apollo: Help me with the stairs... Give me one second. Please, stay here with him...

[Apollo entered the apartment and looked for Sekhmet. He came back.]

Apollo: My roommates left a note saying that they would come later than usual... *[Asking Nadine to approach with a hand gesture]* Let's sit this big guy here... I'm sure he'll feel much better soon. Let me get him some water. What would you like to drink, Ms. Charise?

Nadine: I'm fine, thanks. Please, call me Nadine.

Apollo: Okay. I'll be back soon.

[Apollo headed to the kitchen, while Nadine made a call through her communicator...]

Nadine: Charissa, it's Nadine... [...] Yes, yes... I'm okay... I haven't had the chance to check my messages... [...] What? Are you kidding me? A fire? Stuck in an elevator? My goodness! Are you okay? [...] No, no... I have no problem with that. The apartment has plenty of space...

[Apollo overheard part of the conversation...]

Apollo: Is everything okay?

[Nadine made a gesture with her hand, asking Apollo to wait... After a few seconds, she got back to him...]

Nadine: *[to Apollo]* Yes... I'm speaking with my roommate... She just had a situation. *[to Charissa]* Yes... Give me a second... *[back again to Apollo]* Mr. Dione, what's the address of this place?

Apollo: Please, call me Apollo. It's 7th Bethel Street...

[Nadine continued talking to Charissa for about two more minutes, and then ended the call.]

Nadine: My friend is coming to pick me up. We'll take care of my car.

Apollo: Okay. That's good. If you need any help with the car, or prefer to leave it here and pick it up later, I have no issue with that.

Nadine: Thanks, Apollo. We'll be fine. Hey, this place looks like a museum... It looks amazing...

Apollo: Thanks... I like to collect Ancient Greek objects... It's a personal hobby.

Nadine: No doubt! It's kind of... Interesting...

Apollo: Do you like it?

Nadine: It might sound weird, but most of the objects—for a strange reason I can't understand—seem very familiar... Is that one of your “roommates” in that picture? She looks like an Amazon warrior! Those photos of her are impressive.

Apollo: *[laughing]* Yes, she's one of a kind. She would leave any man... Breathless... *[smiling]* Believe me... Nobody would want to mess with her... She's the strongest, most loyal, and determined woman I've met. When she wants something, she doesn't stop until she gets it... She's good company.

Nadine: Good company? Roommate? *[Said in low voice to herself, looking to the floor. She was overheard by Apollo.]*

[Apollo laughed...]

Nadine: Sorry, I didn't mean to... I just found...

Apollo: *[interrupting]* No worries... I know... My relationship with Sekhmet is... Complex...

Nadine: Sekhmet? What a strange name... Okay, let's change the subject... I'm almost certain I've seen you before... You look too familiar... My apologies for asking... What do you do for a living?

Apollo: I work as a researcher...

Nadine: Which University?

Apollo: No, no... I'm a researcher at a newspaper.

Nadine: *[taking another look at Apollo]* I knew it!! You work at the 'Independently'! I've seen you there! I knew I've seen you before!

Apollo: Yes... I work at the Library Department. I've just started a few weeks ago. Do you work there as well?

Nadine: Yes, I'm a reporter working with the "yellow team". *[making a 'quotes' gesture with her hands.]*

Apollo: So, you are part of the "special forces" team researching the Epping Forest; the Cane Hill Asylum; and things like that? *[smiling ironically]*

Nadine: It's much better than that! I'm in charge of the Vampires department!

[The expression in Apollo's face changed.]

Apollo: Vampires?

Grey: *[interrupting]* Where am I? Who are you? *[he said while touching his head.]*

Apollo: My name is Apollo Dione. You are at my apartment close to where you were almost killed by a double-decker. You look fine. You just need to rest a bit... Would you like us to call anyone?

Grey: No, no... Thank you. I'll call a friend. I'm sure he'll pick me up... What's the address?

Nadine and Apollo: 7th Bethel Street... *[both laughed after saying the same thing at the same time.]*

[Grey called Eachann—and spoke with him for a few minutes—while drinking water from the bottle brought by Apollo. Although Nadine didn't ask for anything to drink, Apollo brought water for her as well...]

Nadine: Thanks for the water, Apollo. I think I needed it more than what I thought...

Apollo: My pleasure... Would you like some juice or any other drink? I have a few things available...

Nadine: No worries. I'm fine. Thank you.

[Someone knocked on the door... Apollo checked, and opened...]

Apollo: I assume you came for Ms. Charise, right? Please, come in.

Charissa: *[She got it, and immediately looked for Nadine]* Yes... Thanks. May I? *[She pointed at Nadine. Apollo nodded. Charissa hugged Nadine...]* Are you okay?

Nadine: Yes... But it's me who should ask! Are you okay? What was all that about? A fire? An issue with an elevator?

Charissa: I'll bring you up to speed later on. It has been a...

Krissy: *[stepping in and interrupting]* Professor Grey? Is that you?

[Nadine, Charissa, and Grey looked at Krissy.]

Charissa: *[interrupting][to Nadine...]* Nadine, this is Krissy... And this is Anastasia... The two girls I mentioned in my voicemail...

Nadine: Nice to meet you, ladies.

Anastasia: *[to Nadine]* Wow... I love your shoes...

[Krissy gave Anastasia an “unfriendly” look...]

Apollo: Hi. I’m Apollo... Do you know him? *[asked Krissy]*

Krissy: Yes, he’s Professor Grey. He teaches ancient history classes at Birkbeck. What happened? Why does he look that way? He was teaching a class just a few hours ago...

Apollo: He almost got run over by a double-decker bus... He’s fine. He’s still a bit shocked, but he looks much better now...

[Grey stared at Krissy...]

Grey: It can’t be... The psychologist with mental super powers...

[Apollo took a step back while staring at Krissy. She noticed...]

Krissy: *[to Apollo]* For God’s sake... He is just joking... The Professor has a strange sense of humor... Right, Dr. Grey? *[Staring at him with her now famous “unfriendly” eyes.]*

Grey: *[to Apollo]* Always nod to what a Psychologist says, and never ever look at them directly in their eyes, because you will turn into stone...

Krissy: Professor!!

[Apollo laughed...]

Apollo: *[to Krissy]* You don't look like the Gorgon Medusa... *[still laughing]*

[The introductions continued until everyone presented themselves.]

Anastasia: *[to Apollo]* Hey, big guy... Can I have some water?

Krissy: Anastasia!! Oh, my Lord.... Please, give me patience... I just ask for some patience...

Apollo: *[smiling]* Sure! Come with me. Help me prepare some drinks...

Anastasia: Non-alcoholic ones, hunk...

[Krissy sighed in desperation and frustration with her eyes looking at the ceiling... Charissa and Nadine step aside and start talking among themselves.]

Grey: *[to Krissy]* Don't be that tough with her... You are not her mother...

Krissy: What? What did you say?

[Grey laughed...]

Krissy: I don't...

Grey: *[interrupting]* Sorry... What was your first name again? I'm so bad with names...

Krissy: Krissy Ramos...

Grey: Thanks... Krissy... *[looking at the floor]* Do you believe in God?

Krissy: What? *[confused about the question]*

Grey: You know... I almost got killed today... I would have died without telling my wife today how much I love her... I tell her often, but I didn't call her today... I didn't call her today, Krissy... *[he sighed, and continued...]* We have two dogs, Daisy and Cody, which just had four siblings a few days ago. The kids of the friend that will be picking me up are taking care of them... It's amazing how things can change in a blink of an eye... Don't you think?

Krissy: You are right Professor...

Grey: Call me Quique, or Grey... Whatever you prefer... Death has always been so mysterious to me. With way too much frequency I feel like if I've been in other places before that I haven't ever visited. The images are so vivid... I can describe places and objects with a level of detail that scare even myself. Deja Vu? I've always wondered what happens after we die... Do we simply stay in the universe as energy? Do we reincarnate? Do our souls go to heaven or hell? Are we going to resurrect one day? What do you think, Krissy?

Krissy: I believe there's life after death, Professor... *[She waited around three seconds before continuing.]* Let me show you something...

[Krissy projected a 3D picture from her label-tattoo communicator...]

Krissy: Do you see her?

[Grey nodded...]

Krissy: She is my sister... She died almost one year ago... Did you notice anything?

Grey: I'm sorry to hear that, Krissy... Yes, I see that there's a white light surrounding her body...

Krissy: Exactly... As you can see, there were several of us that day, but only she is glowing... And it wasn't that way the first time I saw the picture. That was one of the last pictures I took of her, basically days before she died... I don't know what happens after we die, Professor, but I know there's something beyond death... I know she protects me and my family. She's with me all the time...

[Charissa and Nadine stepped in...]

Charissa: Interrupting?

Grey: Not at all... Krissy and I were just talking about life after death, déjà vu, and things like that. You know... Things that people that have gone through a near-death experience usually talk about *[smiling...]*

Charissa: I can imagine... Nadine just told me about the whole situation in detail... Are you okay? Are you sure you don't want us to bring you to an emergency room?

Grey: I'm fine... You said your name was Charissa, right? You both will need to forgive me with my inability to remember names... Your first name is Charissa, and your last name *[pointing to Nadine]* is Charise, right? How great

is that! There's no way I'll be able to remember that after I leave this apartment. *[laughing]*

Charissa: So, what was the conclusion?

Grey: I beg your pardon?

[Both Anastasia and Apollo joined the conversation with a few beverages...]

Charissa: Is there life after death?

Anastasia: *[interrupting]* Why is it that I always arrive late to the fun conversations? What's going on here?

Krissy: We were talking about what happens when someone dies...

Anastasia: Oh! That's easy... We never die... We are all immortals... *[She said while staring at Apollo...]*

[Apollo turned his head towards Anastasia and looked at her confused... Anastasia continued...]

Anastasia: Our immortality resides in our legacy. And when I say legacy, I refer to the good things we do here on Earth. Every good action that we make; every love letter that we write; every good thought and action that we have with those in need... That is what makes us human, but at the same time makes us immortals... With each life, you become a better version of you... Or at least, you should always strive to be better... Like one wise man once said... The key to immortality is first living a life worth remembering....

[Everyone stared at Anastasia in silence...]

Anastasia: What? You know Bruce Lee, right? The wise martial arts guy?

[The silence was broken by a few laughs. Apollo noticed that Anastasia and Krissy were looking at some objects of his collection, and went by their side.]

Nadine: *[to Grey]* Professor... I'm curious... Why did you call me Nadja when you first became conscious out there?

Grey: *[taking a second to respond...]* I... don't remember... The last thing I remember before seeing you guys was a silhouette in front of the Bank that pointed to my left, and then I saw a big light, and that was it... I remember that I stopped to pick something on the ground, and it turned out to be a wrapped candy. If I wouldn't have stopped, I would have died without doubt... I think that person "warned" me about the bus... It was a miracle... It's the only way I can interpret all of this...

Nadine: Miracles exist, Grey. I am happy that you are fine.

Grey: Thank you so much. I appreciate all your help... *[Grey started to stand up, and Nadine assisted him.]*

Nadine: You are welcome. The conversation we were just having... I have a recurrent dream in which I float in water... Nothing else happens... I just float very calmly in water... I wonder if it has meaning... *[Nadine looked at her communicator, and opened her eyes in surprise].* Wow... I think it's time for me and my friends to go...

Grey: Yes, me too... Look at what time it is... Oh, my

God... *[now staring at the objects in the room and hall...]* This is incredible... Look at all of this... My Lord...

Nadine: I know... He said he likes to collect ancient objects...

Grey: Well... Ancient Greek objects, to be more precise... *[looking around astonished...]*

Charissa: *[interrupting]* Nadine, could you please come here one second? Let's talk with Anastasia and Krissy about the apartment...

Nadine: Sure! *[to Grey...]* Excuse me, Professor...

Grey: Sure...



[Apollo joined Grey...]

Grey: You have an incredible collection of Ancient Greek objects, Mr. Dione... But I'm sure you know that already...

Apollo: Thanks, and I'm sure you realize they are all replicas, Doctor Grey...

Grey: Very good replicas, indeed... Where did you get them?

Apollo: You would be surprised at what you can find at flea markets...

[Both men laughed.]

Apollo: Please, call me Apollo. Doctor Grey... How familiar are you with Ancient Greece?

Grey: Just call me Grey... Or Quique. I would say very familiar, but don't ask me why... I've always felt fascinated by the era. You know... Who wouldn't be fascinated with Greek mythology, and all those stories?

[Nadine overheard Grey and Apollo talking, and hid behind the door to listen to what they were saying...]

Apollo: I fully agree... Maybe one day we can spend some time talking about that... Do you feel better?

Grey: Yes, much better... I really appreciate all that you have done for me tonight. I'm not sure how to pay you back.

Apollo: No worries... You are very welcome. It was my pleasure... I rarely get visitors, so we could say I had a great Friday night *[smiling]*. You'll have an interesting story to tell your wife when she gets back from her trip...

Grey: *[confused...]* How? *[pausing...]* How did you know she was traveling? I didn't mention that...

Apollo: *[smiling]* When you were semi-unconscious, you babbled a lot about her. It looks like she means a lot to you.

Grey: Oh! I see... Yes... She's my everything... The love of my life... She's a gift.

Apollo: The love of your life... *[sighing...]* That's great,

Grey. It should feel amazing living life in company of the right person at the right time...

Grey: You bet... Hey, it's late, and my friend Eachann should be arriving soon. I would like to reiterate my thanks. If you need anything at any time, feel free to call me here. *[handing Apollo a card]*

[Apollo laughed...]

Apollo: A business card? Really? Do they still make these in 2027? And I thought my collection of antiques was impressive... *[laughing harder]* How old are you, Grey? I am just kidding... I don't remember the last time that I saw one of these... *[still laughing...]*

Grey: Okay... Okay... Now you are making fun of me... Great... *[laughing as well]*

Apollo: I was just kidding... You would be surprised at how old I am...

Krissy: *[passing Nadine, and entering the room, interrupting...]* Professor Grey, your friend has arrived...

Grey: Thanks, Krissy. I'll be there in a second.

[Krissy glanced at Nadine when exiting the room. Nadine smiled at Krissy a bit ashamed...]

Grey: Thanks again for everything, Apollo. We have a pending conversation on mythology...

Apollo: Sure... *[smiling]* See you. It was nice meeting you.

Grey: Likewise!

[Grey left the room. Nadine came in...]

Nadine: Well... Time for me to go as well. It has been a long night... Thanks for all your help. I guess we'll see each other at the 'Independently' one of these days... *[smiling]*

Apollo: I'm sure about that. It has been a pleasure, Ms. Charise...

Nadine: *[interrupting]* It's Nadine... *[smiling]*

Apollo: Sure... Sure... Nadine... Nadine Charise... It has been a real pleasure meeting you... The circumstances were kind of weird, but everything always happens for a reason. Nothing is aleatory...

Nadine: Agreed... Apollo... I need to ask you this before leaving... The Professor never mentioned his wife when we were assisting him on the street... How did you know about her, and that she was traveling?

[Apollo thought about his answer for about three seconds...]

Apollo: Maybe I'm the one with special mental powers. Maybe I'm also a Psychologist! *[laughing]* I thought I overheard him telling that to Krissy... Well, Nadine... Take care, and enjoy a wonderful weekend. I think your friends started their way out... *[pointing with his finger to the door]*

[Nadine turned and Apollo put something in the right-hand pocket of her coat without her noticing.]

Nadine: What are you talking about? They are not moving. They are still there...

Apollo: Well... I think my mind played a trick on me again. It looks like I need some rest. Good night, Nadine...

[Eachann arrived, and Grey presented him, and quickly left after that. Nadine, Charissa, Krissy, and Anastasia followed. Apollo spent a few minutes looking at several items from his collection. He sighed, and told himself... "The time has finally come... Elpis, the time has come..."]



[Saturday, August 7th, 2027 – 1:15 a.m.... Location: "Kora's"]

Ambrogio: Well, well, well... Look who's visiting Kora's... Wasn't it late for still being at the Bank? *[laughing]* Please, sit down, Rytigier... Let me call one of my girls... I'm sure she will take good care of you tonight...

Rytigier: I didn't come to "socialize" tonight, Ambrogio. I came for an update... When will you have it?

Ambrogio: You need to calm down, Mr. Lombard... This will take some time. You won't be disappointed. I promise you that...

Rytigier: This is costing me a fortune! *[raising his voice]* I want results! I am getting tired of waiting! You better not...

Ambrogio: *[Yelling in a scary, hysterical way...]* WE

FOUND THE FREAKING MUSIC BOX! LET ME DO MY FUCKING JOB!

[Silence for a few seconds...]

Rytigier: Show it to me... I want to see it...

Ambrogio: *[Trying to speak calmly again...]* I said we found it... I didn't say I have it yet... I should have it very soon. We have a path now to find the other objects... We have waited a long time for this day to come, Rytigier...

Rytigier: You better not lie to me... My patience is quickly approaching its end...

Ambrogio: Ahhhh... Shut up, old man... You know you need me... We are in this together. Both of us will get what we want. You just need to be patient...

Rytigier: I'm still not clear on what you'll get out of this... If you betray me, I'll make sure your body is cut in pieces, and spread across every major street of London... I swear, Ambrogio...

Ambrogio: *[smiling...]* Do not... threaten me... You'll get what you want, and that's the only thing that should matter to you. In regards to me... Well... Let's say I'll have plenty of fun for a long, long time... *[smiling, looking at an infinity sculpture at his desk.]*

CHAPTER 6.

THANKS FOR READING THE SAMPLE CHAPTERS OF THIS BOOK

We hope you are enjoying the story as much as we do.
To learn how to order the full book, visit
'www.SevenHeartsPublishing.com'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ivan Del Valle is an Enterprise Architect, proudly born and raised in the beautiful Caribbean Island of Puerto Rico. He currently resides with his beloved wife and beautiful six dogs in one of the most romantic places in the world, which is the historical Charleston area in South Carolina in the United States. His experience working with geographically dispersed teams sets the base for his writing, which he describes as creative, bold, and full of spontaneity.