

# ARIADNA



AND THE CIRCLE OF AUDACITY



THE SWORD OF THANATOS  
SILVESTRE VILAPLANA

**bromera**



**MORE INFO**  
EDICIONS BROMERA  
**Carol Borràs**  
carol@bromera.com  
www.bromera.com

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Apartado de correos 225 - 46600 Alzira

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FIRST PART

THE FORGING OF  
A CIRCLE





# 1

## IN THE DEPTHS OF THE SEA

I had always thought that my life was strange. As I grew up and went from being a girl to a grownup, every day the world seemed more incomprehensible, as if I was lacking the instructions manual. I thought the reason for this feeling came from being a teenager with a mind that battled between what it hoped for from the world and the monotony that everyday life had in store for me. I was wrong. My existence was normal, boring, predictable, just like yours, I imagine. However, destiny was about to intervene and everything would be turned upside down.

What I could never have imagined was that, as I yawned for the third consecutive time in my maths class on any old Monday at eight in the morning, my future and that of all of humanity was in the balance in a place very far away from that school room. Precisely 41.73 degrees north and 50.14 degrees west. In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, some 600km southwest from the coast of Newfoundland in Canada, where the clock showed four hours and thirty minutes less than the one in my classroom.

While my teacher, Marta Rius, told us which exercises we had to do for homework to revise our knowledge of the last topic and I reluctantly jotted them down in an already overloaded diary, two ships were lowering their anchors at the coordinates shown on their electronic compasses and beginning an extremely dangerous operation.

The sea was choppy, the temperature was cold and the mission those men had been given was almost suicidal. However, the reward they would earn for carrying it out was eye-watering, even if it meant risking their lives or losing them, if necessary.

They were professionals, the majority of them former soldiers who hired their services and their weapons to whoever paid the most. So every one of them knew perfectly well what had to be done.

The divers got ready while the two small submarines the ships carried were hoisted up and suspended by the side of the service boat. The communications operators checked that the sound and image had reached the control centre correctly and that they had established the encrypted connection that was to show everything that was going on, in real time, on the other side of the world. To be precise, in a remote mansion in Europe, where a man was watching on a screen, with apparent indifference, the well-coordinated movements of his subordinates.

‘Shall we begin?’ the expedition leader asked the camera in front of him.

‘Proceed!’ ordered a stern voice from the Old Continent.



The two small submarines were filled with men in overalls resistant to low temperatures and the cranes lowered the crafts down until they touched the water. Then, they were released.

The choppy tide made them bob dangerously and threw them against the hull of the ship until the engines managed to stabilise the vessels. Soon, they plunged down to the depths. The night-vision cameras, designed for the darkness, revealed the sights of the sea: fish surprised by this invasion and marine life disturbed by unexpected visitors who fled in fright.

However, none of the mercenaries paid attention to the extraordinary views. They had neither the time nor the interest and their aim was not to discover the beauty of the sea. The submarines' descent was dizzying, pushing the limits of the pressure a human being can withstand at those depths without suffering grave consequences. They had to act in a hurry. The idea was to avoid taking risks with the security forces because they knew what they were doing was illegal. They were aware that they were going to alter one of humanity's subaquatic treasures protected by dozens of laws and conventions. But that would be a minor crime compared with the importance of their ultimate goal.

Barely a few minutes later, the first images of their target appeared on the screen. For several seconds there was a respectful silence. The image in greenish tones shown by the infrared camera impressed them with its immensity,

because of the ruins it showed, because they were before a historic place and because they knew that in this very location, more than 1,500 people had lost their lives.

‘The *Titanic!*’ confirmed the man who was in command of the first submarine. And, for an instant, images flashed through his mind of the world’s most famous transatlantic cruiser, which set sail from Southampton for New York in 1912 with a white-haired captain at the helm. They never reached the intended destination. An iceberg was waiting for them to cause one of history’s most famous marine tragedies.

For a while, the captain of the first submarine delighted in observing the ship, aware that he was standing before legendary ruins. A cough from the other end of the line warned him to carry on with the job. They weren’t a luxury tourist group. Their aim was to commit a robbery.

Since the *Titanic* had been found in the year 1985, there had been various expeditions that had visited it and even an Oscar-winning film based on the events. Some of those who had gone down to the depths to discover the old transatlantic liner had managed to extract a variety of objects that they displayed in touring exhibitions. But the mercenaries in the submarines weren’t interested in any of the historical or sentimental relics hidden on the old ship.

They had studied their options in detail and they knew that neither of the two submarines could get any closer than where they were at that moment. It was impossible to navigate the labyrinth of corridors of an old ship



full of unexpected pitfalls without risking their lives, so they relied on the help of several small, state-of-the-art remote-control robots. That was the advantage of having an unlimited budget.

The expedition leader pressed a button and trapdoors opened beneath the submarine. Three small devices of various shapes and sizes were released to the outside. They looked a bit like drones, but each one of them had a different structure because each was adapted to the function it had to carry out in that underwater mission.

One after the other, the three devices approached the ship and roamed its corridors, following the route from a map that the technician controlling them had memorised and knew like the back of his hand. Now and again, the first drone had to clear the way. If a door or obstacle blocked their passage, the machine used its inbuilt small thermal spear to drill a hole for the robots to pass through.

Fifteen minutes later, they reached the most luxurious part of the *Titanic*, in the heart of the ship, where the richest guests wouldn't feel the vibrations as much and would have a more pleasant journey. Everything was designed with the first-class travellers in mind, down to the very last detail. Now, though, everything had changed. The surroundings gave off a phantasmagorical air: lamps with cloudy glass, rusty metal, the remains of furniture that in another time was the fanciest around, torn curtains...its splendour transformed by time and the sea into a gloomy panorama.

The three drones stopped in front of a room.

‘We’ve arrived,’ the captain of the first submarine confirmed to the control centre.

‘Proceed with caution.’

The technician controlling the first drone exhaled. His hands were trembling from the cold and the tension.

The thermal spear cut through the cabin door as if it were butter and the three devices went inside. The camera showed a panoramic view of the space. The bedroom was similar to the other first-class ones on the ship, but they knew that this one held something special. The drone scientifically measured the length of the southern side of the room, made its calculations and approached a specific point in the wall.

‘Commencing the extraction,’ the technician announced.

The thermal spear struck into the wall. The blueish light began to dissolve it with some difficulty. Clearly, the material covering this wall was much tougher than anything they had encountered until then. Slowly, the spear drew a two-by-two metre square in the wall. Then, the first drone withdrew and made way for the second device. The technician realised that, despite the cold, he was drenched in sweat.

The steel sheets at the head of the second machine carefully entered the cavity that had just been made in the wall. The machine’s arms applied force until they were sure the square they’d made was well supported. Then, the



drone's propellers switched position and engaged maximum power.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, but then, gradually, an object became detached from the wall and was captured inside the drone.

'We have the safe,' confirmed the submarine captain.

There was general rejoicing and their cries could be heard over the microphones. Even in far away Europe, the man in the mansion smiled and was leaning forward, attentive to every movement.

However, the mission wasn't finished. They were 3,800 metres deep, inside a sunken and badly deteriorated ship, and they had to get the drones out.

The machines repositioned themselves in the same order. In front, the thermal spear, in the middle, the device that carried the safe. Bringing up the rear, the third drone, keeping watch.

Their exit was simpler. The path was made and they just had to go back the way they came. Thus, they soon reached the two submarines.

'Go home,' said the submarine captain when he saw them, as if machines were able to hear and understand him.

Then, the tragedy began.



## 2

### FIRE IN THE DARKNESS

The first explosion struck the sand right next to the drones as they emerged from the *Titanic*. Suddenly, an intense flame lit up the darkness of the ocean and left a crater in the sea floor. The drones were knocked off balance and, inside the submarines, the shockwave jolted the occupants and set off the alarms. The interior of the vessel glowed red.

The second attack was more precise. The machine at the front of the trio of drones was torn apart in the midst of a blueish explosion. The oxygen from its thermal spear intensified the detonation and multiplied the chaos. Over the radio, nervous voices giving orders could be heard.

The men on the submarine manoeuvred quickly, while the ships on the surface prepared weapons for the fight and lifeboats. But they hadn't discovered who was attacking them or how. The high-end technology they had seemed blind in the face of this attack.

The technician controlling the third drone acted straight away. He was a veteran soldier who had taken part in many battles and never got nervous. He knew that in situations like these, a quick response was the best solution.



The war machinery built into the drone opened fire. He didn't know where the enemy was, so he fired in several directions. However, none of the missiles appeared to hit the target. After a few seconds of indiscriminate firing, the drone stopped its defence. For a moment, there was no reply, as if the attacker had fled. A second of silence, two, three...ten. The devices approached the submarines to resume their manoeuvres. The crew held their collective breath and prayed the attack was over, while the device with the safe moved towards the submarine's access point. It was just a few metres from the trapdoor when all hell broke loose.

A dazzling beam of light flashed through the sea and the second submarine imploded. It looked like the submersible had folded in on itself due to the pressure of the depth. In a flash, the vehicle had disappeared and all that remained was a tangle of unrecognisable metal. The sailors' bodies had evaporated.

The drone with the safe took advantage of those seconds of frenzy to enter the first submarine. Then, the captain moved the controls, closed the opening and began to ascend at full speed.

The third drone started firing again in a circle, looking for a target that it still couldn't find. The device span round on itself and shot until it ran out of projectiles.

While the submarine rose, the ships on the surface launched depth charges looking for the invisible enemy. Their high-end radars still weren't able to find the origin

of the attack. It was as if this threat had appeared out of nowhere, as if it had spawned naturally in the water before colliding violently with the drones and submarines.

The orders from command were clear, specific and repeated over and over through the connections. They had to defend that safe with every last drop of blood they had. Saving it was non-negotiable. Nothing else mattered. Not the machines and not anybody's life.

As a precaution, three lifeboats were launched from the sides of the ships. The sea remained choppy and those flimsy rubber vessels bobbed delicately on the waves. It was far from certain that those small boats would hold out amidst the darkness, but they had to prepare for all eventualities. The ships illuminated the surface of the sea with powerful searchlights.

Suddenly, the shape of the small submarine emerged from the water. Its captain opened the main hatch just as a huge breach opened up in the hull of one of the ships. In the night and over the storm, the screech of an alarm and the anxious cries of the sailors could be heard. They didn't last long. The hole was very wide and the ship tilted towards the damaged side while the structure was filled with a torrent of seawater. In a minute, the ship was decidedly swallowed up by the waters. On the surface, a few sailors tried to reach the lifeboats or look for scraps to hold on to.

The other ship went into a state of maximum alert. Before collecting the survivors, it had to protect itself, but from what? The crew put on lifejackets. From the



ship, they fired into the deep waters. Somewhere in the darkness lay the enemy, the problem was they seemed to be invisible.

The submarine captain had been skilful. With the help of one of his men, he had managed to load the safe from the *Titanic* onto one of the lifeboats and the two of them began to row towards the surviving ship. They had to reach the service boat as soon as possible because, in open waters, they were an easy target.

They didn't make it in time. There was a deafening roar and two huge cracks opened in the sides of the ship which remained afloat. Water rushed inside with the wild force of an assassin. In a few seconds the ship had disappeared.

The submarine captain, on the unstable lifeboat, could see beneath the water the dim glow of the searchlights sinking lower, following the same route as the cruise liner they had come to rob had more than a century before.

Without the ships' lights, darkness took hold of the sea. Here and there the cries of the few sailors who hadn't drowned could be heard. Voices calling for help while the irrepressible coldness of the water began to freeze them.

The submarine captain, inside the lifeboat, looked at his colleague. They wanted to go and search for the survivors, but they didn't move. They were afraid that any slight movement would alert the enemy. The floated on the water like just another scrap of the wreckage. The other man understood and put his hands over his ears to avoid hearing the cries.

Gradually, the sound became more noticeable. At first it was like the whisper of the wind, but soon they realised that noise wasn't natural, that it came from the blades of a rotor: a helicopter was approaching.

Some of the men who were trying to survive in the sea heard it and began to optimistically.

A powerful searchlight emanating from the helicopter swept across the surface of the ocean and revealed what the night was hiding. There were barely seven or eight people alive in the water. Some of them waved their arms to make themselves visible, while others, seeing now where they were, headed towards the lifeboats that had been launched previously from the ships.

The helicopter hovered over the boat where the safe was and dropped down a harness hanging from a metallic wire. The captain knew what they wanted him to do and was furious. The priority was that box and not their lives, it had always been that way. So, for an instant he remained motionless. Many of his colleagues had died thanks to that box holding who knew what and it wasn't fair. He took a deep breath. But he was a professional and at least he was still alive. First they would save the safe, then they would save them.

With the help of the other man, he attached the box to the harness. From the helicopter, they pulled on the cable and in a few seconds they were pulling the safe inside the vehicle.

Then, the helicopter sped off northwards while the men begged for help. They knew if they weren't rescued



quickly, the rough sea and the coldness of the water would kill them.

Suddenly, the helicopter turned around. It was coming back to look for them! Despite the hidden danger lurking in the sea, the order had been given to rescue them. The men gave cries of victory and some of the mercenaries were moved to tears of relief.

The helicopter stopped a few metres above some survivors who had grouped around the three lifeboats. The aircraft descended a little, hovering just four metres above them. It shone a light on them and opened fire.

The sound of the machine gun filled the night with a rattling that carried away the souls of the survivors of that adventure. When those in the vehicle were sure there was no one left alive, the helicopter flew away. There was still another hour before dawn. At that very moment, in my school, the bell rang to let us know it was time to go out to break.



### 3

## THE TEMPLE OF SACRIFICES

You might find it incredible that such strange and violent things, that happened on the other side of the world, could have any impact on my life, but soon you will find out how these events affected me. And I can tell you, that's nothing compared with what will come afterwards.

But you'll have to wait. First I have to tell you something else and introduce you to someone, because we haven't got to my role in the story yet. And if I am able to narrate these things to you, it is because they were told to me after the events and I have checked myself that they are correct.

Meanwhile, I continued with my routine. At that time, the most important and exciting thing I had going on was a History exam that was keeping me up at night because I had so many pages to study. Sad, right? But I'm sure you can relate.

The second event that pushed me towards forming part of this adventure also took place very far from me and my school, over on the other side of the Mediterranean. There lived Nikos Saitis, a boy, seemingly just a few years



older than me, who worked as a shepherd on the wildest slope of Smolikas, the second highest mountain in Greece.

The cabin he lived in was hard to find amongst the snow that was typical in the area and the lush pines, firs and beeches that covered the hills. Not even lovers of mountain sports tended to go near the area where Nikos lived. It was a place that was the very image of wild nature, without electricity or any electronic devices to change it, a spot that appeared to be from another time.

Nikos was seldom seen, he had no friends and no one really knew him. He never went to the village of Samarina, the nearest to that site, and only old Giorgios went up the mountain from time to time to bring him something or other that he might need, or simply to talk. If you asked the people in the village about the residents of that area, it is unlikely they would recall the name of that young boy who lived in the depths of the forest, but who no one had ever seen.

That day, old Giorgios had lost his colour. His usual tough face and rough movements appeared hidden behind an expression of deep worry. With that pale and unshaven face, the old man looked as if he was at death's door.

They saw him hurry quickly past the houses in the village carrying a small travel bag on his back. It seemed as if he were fleeing a great danger. No one had time to ask him what was going on because the man was soon lost in the depths of the forest at the beginning of the trail to the mountain. Later, many thought that would be the

last image they had of him, because he seemed to have disappeared.

Giorgios had no choice but to stop a couple of times on his journey to catch his breath. The path was steep and he was far too old to go so fast. He wasn't sure if his breathlessness was due to age, the great weight of the bag he was carrying, or the astonishing news he had to communicate.

The cabin seemed to form part of the landscape. Over the years, the ivy had grown, covering the roof and a good part of the walls, so it went unnoticed by anyone who got lost and found themselves in those parts.

Nikos was as he always was. Literally. He'd had that the same look of a boy in late adolescence since the first time he had seen him. And that, despite the years that had passed, still unsettled Giorgios. There was a time when both of them had appeared to be the same age, but now the visit was of an elderly man to an adolescent. He thought that his grandfather, long since dead, must have felt just as awestruck in his day when in the presence of Nikos.

'Have things changed? Has it all begun?' asked Nikos when he saw him come in carrying the bag.

'Yes,' confirmed Giorgios with a trembling voice. 'It's time.'

'Then let's get going.'

The way was long and their destination was a long way from that cabin lost in Mount Smolikas. Nikos prepared a bag with the few things he needed and paused outside



the cabin. He gazed at it and observed the scenery that had accompanied him for so long. He didn't know if he would ever return. Giorgios wondered how many years, decades, centuries that young man had spent hidden up the mountain waiting for an event like the one that was beginning now.

Just a few kilometres from there, the world changed. The rural landscape of the timeless meadows made way for that of modern, twenty-first-century Greece. Noise, pollution, factories and people, lots of people, too many people. Nikos stopped in his tracks when he saw a car go by on the road at high speed.

'Do you know what that is?'

'Yes, it's like a carriage.'

Giorgios nodded, but he continued to look out the corner of his eye at his companion throughout his discovery of the modern world. He knew he'd never seen any of this, hence he allowed himself to be guided by the old man, often not daring to ask questions. His expression wasn't one of surprise, only of being attentive to everything and trying to learn the new codes of the era.

They stopped in front of the bus that was to take them to their destination.

'Do we have to travel in that?'

'For now, yes,' the old man confirmed.

Nikos looked at that enormous, long vehicle. He walked the length of it twice, observing every detail from the outside.

‘How does it move? It doesn’t have any horses.’

‘With a motor.’

‘A motor?’

‘Yes, a mechanical device that allows it to gather speed. The driver controls it with a steering wh...with a rudder, which is at the very front.’

They sat down on the bus. Nikos looked at how people sat there talking and laughing calmly, but Giorgios noticed that, since the bus started moving, Nikos hadn’t loosened his tight grip on the armrest.

‘It’s going very fast, isn’t it?’ asked Nikos, his voice cracking.

‘It’s very safe. Don’t be afraid.’

‘I’m not afraid,’ replied the boy, ‘don’t worry.’

Nikos was in the window seat. His gaze was lost in the horizon and he was thinking. His time had come, what he had been waiting so many years for. But he didn’t know if that was good news. He observed the vehicle’s passengers and the world outside: local people, tourist families, workers, children...none of them could suspect the threat hanging over them, none of them was aware they could be about to die.

When they arrived to the town of Delphi and got off the bus, Nikos seemed confused. All around him were huge groups of noisy tourists taking photographs of themselves. The boy looked at his surroundings, like someone looking for familiar face in a crowd.

‘Everything must have changed a lot,’ said Giorgios.



Nikos nodded repeatedly. That place didn't remotely resemble the one he remembered.

They decided to wait until night fell to carry out what they had planned. To pass the time, they wandered through the town. Nikos stopped in the old parts and looked, spell-bound, at the surviving ruins: the falling down theatre, the remains of the sanctuary of Dionysus... At times, it seemed to Giorgios as though the boy was holding back the tears.

When night fell, they headed towards the ruins of the Sanctuary of Apollo. They walked slowly along the Sacred Path, entered the area of the old temple and stopped in front of the place where sacrifices were made.

'The treasures in homage to the great cities are no longer here,' observed Nikos.

Giorgios didn't know what he was talking about, so he simply shook his head slowly.

'We need to hide until they can't find us,' he said.

Gradually, as it became darker, the masses of foreigners went to their vehicles and left Delphi. Only the security personnel remained, but they seemed as tired as the tourists and didn't notice a couple of men hidden in the shadows of the night. When the guards had checked there was no one left in the temple, they also headed towards the town seeking rest and their families.

Nikos and Giorgios were left as the only inhabitants of ancient Delphi. In the darkness, with its silhouettes blurry in the night, the city resembled more closely the place the youngster had known.

Nikos approached the enormous stones of the Altar of the Chians. He stood at the base and carefully pulled out the weeds that had sprouted between the gaps in the stones.

‘Did you bring it?’ he asked Giorgios when he’d cleaned the area.

The old man nodded and from the bag he carried on his back he took out, wrapped up in cloths, a small chest with symbolic drawings on it. He handed it to Nikos ceremoniously.

‘I also have the gold you told me to keep safe.’

‘I know, we need to find somewhere to exchange it for current money.’

Nikos bowed and muttered some unintelligible words in the language of his grandparents. It was time for the sacrifice.

Very carefully, he opened the chest and emptied its contents onto the stone. Thousands of grains of gold dust shone brightly under the waxing moon and fell into the grooves of the stones of the Delphic Oracle.

Ah! You probably don’t know what I’m talking about. Well, I didn’t know either at the time, but then I had to learn about these things and other even more complex ones. Sometimes it’s easy to find out everything. There’s always a web page that can explain it to you. The thing is that the theory is one thing and the reality is quite another. This is what Wikipedia says about the place Nikos and Giorgios were in:



The **Delphic Oracle** was a sanctuary dedicated to the serpent Pytho, nearby the city of Delphi, where divinities were consulted on a wide range of issues and their answers and predictions were held in high regard.

So, now you know. Nikos was paying the price for a prediction that would guide his way (and mine, although at the time I was still studying history in my house) in the future. But let's get back to the story, which is just getting interesting.

The gold quickly ran through the cracks towards the depths of the earth and for a few seconds nothing happened. The night breeze became icier, or at least so it seemed to old Giorgios, who felt a chill shivering up his spine.

A few seconds later, the sound of stone shifting in the furthest corner of the old temple gave the old man goosebumps, but lit up Nikos' face with a smile.

'They have accepted our offering. They heard our call!' said the boy. 'Adelon's Way is open.'

They walked towards where the stone had moved. There was an opening in the ground, barely two metres by two metres, which sunk into the depths. Although it was already nighttime, the moon shone brightly, but the rectangle that revealed the underground passage appeared darker, with a violent and terrifying blackness.

'Do we have to go in?' asked Giorgios.

'Of course.'

‘Both of us?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘And what will we find down there?’

‘Answers, surely,’ said Nikos. ‘Or perhaps death.’



## 4

### THE DEPTHS OF THE CAVE

‘Death?’ asked Giorgios, frightened among the ruins of Delphi. ‘We could find death?’

But Nikos had already begun the descent into the darkness and didn’t respond.

Giorgios stood outside, unable to move. Many years ago he had sworn an oath of loyalty to protect that youngster. He was just a boy himself when they explained the situation to him, the commitment that his family had made. Back then had taken on the challenge with pride and a certain yearning for adventure. For years he had studied all he could because he knew one day his knowledge might be required.

Now, the time had come but he was no longer an adolescent craving risk and adventure. He was an old man who should have been playing cards with his friends and enjoying his twilight years in peace, but he found himself a step away from descending into a world of magic and shadows. Half hidden in the darkness of the night, atop an ancient temple, he was about to enter an underground chamber where he had just been told death might be awaiting him.

If they had told him that when it all began, he would have refused point blank. At the end of the day, he was just a simple human.

He looked at his surroundings. The moon threw shadows over the ruins and gave them a mournful appearance. It was too late for second thoughts. There was nothing else for it. He had to renounce the few years of life he had left. He walked forward and entered the depths of the earth.

Giorgios treaded the path with caution. He couldn't see anything and didn't trust the nimbleness of his feet, so he groped his way through the narrow passageway on a continuous downward slope. The rock all around him was warm and humid and it gave him the feeling he was inside a living, repulsive being.

Further on, he saw a clearing. He had reached a wide, oval-shaped area, which was surrounded by five small caves, meaning the path diverged. Everything was illuminated by a high, yellowish light that seemed to have no clear origin. Slowly, he entered that bright space and there he found Nikos.

In the middle of the cave there was a spring and a large tripod over a natural crack in the rock from which came greyish clouds of steam. Next to it, a huge laurel filled the air with a delicious scent.

'Do we have to choose an option?' asked Giorgios, pointing to the various holes.

'Not choosing is also an option. Let's wait.'



Minutes went by. Giorgios approached the entrance to one of those cavities and looked inside, but he couldn't make out anything. Only darkness.

'And if we try...?' he began.

A faint noise emerging from one of the tunnels made him jump. Giorgios moved away and stood behind Nikos. He could feel his heart beating quickly and for a moment he thought its old mechanism wouldn't be able to handle so many emotions and would fail.

He heard a soft murmur that was getting closer and growing more and more noticeable.

'Who goes there?' asked Giorgios in a low voice.

'It's the priestess,' said the boy at the same time as they were able to make out a women's head appearing in the entranceway.

Her inexpressive face called to mind that of a mannikin. On her head she wore a crown and in her left hand she carried a long stick. Giorgios noticed that her eyes were very strange, with yellow pupils. The priestess stopped and stood half-hidden in the shadows of the cave she had come from.

'What do you want?' she asked with a cavernous voice.

'Answers,' said Nikos.

'Why?'

'The humans' lives are in danger and I want to know the way to save them.'

The priestess moved forward and Giorgios took a step backwards. Now he understood where the strange noise

had come from. The priestess didn't have legs. Her body narrowed from the waist down and ended in the long, elongated form of a serpent. The woman slithered until reaching the laurel and took one of its leaves. She put it in her mouth, chewed on it and approached the spring which was burbling with water.

'It's the spring of Cassotis,' Nikos told him quietly. 'The mixture/combination of the laurel and its ancestral waters will cause the priestess to go into a trance and be able to see the future.'

The snake woman drank and placed herself above where the fumes were rising from the earth through the rocks. In the midst of the steam clouds, the woman took on an even more phantasmagorical appearance. Suddenly, the priestess began to cry out and twist around herself, as if something was burning her from within. The sounds coming from her mouth were shouts which resonated through the caves with a sinister echo. Giorgios felt the hairs on the back of his neck bristle. Perhaps the death Nikos had predicted would arrive soon.

The women's screeches increased in intensity and forced the old man to cover his ears. Nikos watched the spectacle with fascination, but he didn't appear to be scared or affected, it was as if that ceremony were familiar to him.

Suddenly, the priestess appeared to calm down. She closed her eyes and her face became inexpressive, as if she had died. A second later, she opened her eyelids and Giorgios observed with horror how the priestess' eyes were



completely white. Then, the deep tone of her voice slowed down and she began to utter disconnected words that didn't appear to make any sense.

'The end of time has come,' she proclaimed. 'Only the circle can stop it. You have to gather the Circle of Audacity. The messenger of the gods will open the gates for you. But not everyone will live. The sacrifice is the key. You have to hurry. Time is running out. Time is running out! Time is running oooooutt!'

The woman's voice rose until she was shouting. A high-pitched screech that pierced the brain and forced Giorgios to throw himself on the floor and cover his ears. The sound was too intense. The vibration of that voice penetrated his mind and gave him the sensation that his brain was swaying. He couldn't stop himself. He went into the foetal position and covered his eardrums with his hands, but, even so, it was intolerable. Finally, the sound made him lose his senses.

It was raining on him when Giorgios woke up. No, actually, he realised, it wasn't rain. Nikos was throwing water from the sacred spring of Cassotis on him to bring him round.

'Are you alright?'

'What happened?'

'Sometimes the words of the oracle are only meant to be heard by a select few, either that or you didn't want to hear the priestess' speech and fell asleep,' said Nikos with a smile.

Giorgios got to his feet with difficulty. His head was killing him, as if he had a terrible hangover. He remembered that in his hurry he hadn't packed any medicine before leaving home and now he'd have to put up with the pain. Taking in his surroundings, he realised he was still in the room where the woman had appeared.

'Did she make the prediction?'

'Yes. And she's already left.'

'And what did she say?'

'You know how confusing oracles' prophecies can be. But what's clear is that we need to hurry because humanity is in grave danger. We have a lot to do if we are to save it.'

'Where do we need to go?'

'We need to gather a group.'

'Of warriors.'

Nikos shook his head.

'Not exactly.'

'Who are we looking for?'

Nikos looked towards the hole in the cavern where the priestess had appeared from.

'It's a long story, but first of all we have to go look for someone who fell from grace a long time ago and appears lost.'



## 5

### BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Although it's not yet time for me to appear in this story, I can't wait for you to meet me. I'll introduce myself and that way we can take a little break from such dark adventures. We'll leave our characters in the shadows of the oracle's cave for a minute. I hope these things don't scare you, because things are going to get even hairier down the line. I'm not easily frightened, in fact I like horror films because I know they aren't true and I enjoy the exaggerations and special effects, but dark caves and snake women...what can I say?

Right, I'll introduce myself. My friend Marta would say I like being the protagonist, but that's not true. I'm actually quiet and shy. In fact, I get embarrassed talking about myself, so I'll just leave you this sheet the teacher made us fill out at the beginning of the year. Now my life has changed a lot, but when this whole story began, I was like that. Rita, the teacher, gave us the sheet and told us she wanted us to be creative but honest in our answers and I came up with this:

TUTOR FILE:

NAME: *Ariadna*

PARENTS' NAMES: *I don't have parents. They died many years ago in an accident. I was very little and I don't remember it. I live in an old house with my granddad, who is blind.*

STUDIES AND QUALIFICATIONS: *B1 and going for B2 in English, elementary grade in flute at the conservatory, and driving myself crazy trying to pass my fourth-year exams at school.*

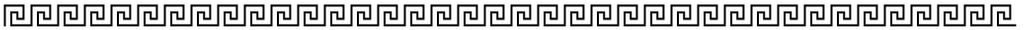
NOTABLE PHYSICAL FEATURES: *Long brown hair, but I'm thinking about cutting it short and dying it blue or purple, like my friend Núria's. I also want to get a tattoo (or maybe a couple), but I don't know what to get so I'm putting it off, for now.*

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS: *Serious, sceptical, bossy and, sometimes, bad tempered. At least that's what people say. But deep down I have a big heart and I'm empathetic towards everyone. I don't like injustices and I rebel against them.*

INTERESTS: *Music (I play the flute), debate club at school, television series, some influencers and, sometimes, reading books. Oh, and my phone! I couldn't live without my phone.*

AIMS IN LIFE: *I'd like to have more money and I also want to finish school and go to university. Every day I have a new aim, which is almost like saying I have no aims. Oh! And I want peace on earth!*

HATES: *Injustices, reggaeton, lentils, tomatoes and animals being killed so I can eat them.*



The teacher said I'd done a good presentation and I think it can at least give you an idea of what I was like when this story began. You'll see how the experiences I'll tell you about made me change many things. Not everything, though: I still don't have blue or purple hair.

There are people who, when they discover my circumstances, ask me with some embarrassment about my parents and what happened. They're curious, but they don't want to hurt my feelings. But I don't mind. Well, sometimes I do. There have been many times when I've felt I needed them. It's hard being the only student without parents and it's awkward when it comes to doing certain school activities. Also, there have been many nights when I've cried because I felt alone. But I have my grandad. And he does what he can to make me happy and I love him a lot.

My grandad doesn't like telling me anything about the accident or those dark days. The few times we've talked about it, I've gotten the impression it was painful for him. That's to be expected, his daughter and his son-in-law died in it. The accident, however, wasn't anything special. A car, the rain, the night, a coastal road... One more figure for the statistics on road deaths at the end of the year and another family destroyed. From the first day he took me in and I've grown up with him. They never found the bodies, so for a long time I liked imagining my parents as shipwrecked on an island. But I don't do that anymore. I know they're dead.

The other family mystery is grandad's blindness. I've seen photos of him when he was younger and he wasn't blind. What's more, he was very handsome. When I ask him what happened, he tells me. But the trouble is, every time he gives me a different version: he looked too long at the sun, he was wearing glasses and fell off his bike and the shards left him blind, some baddies burnt his eyes with a knife they'd put in the fire (I know this one is a lie, he got it from a book by Jules Verne), he looked at a goddess so beautiful he went blind, he was knocked down by a lorry...you get the idea. Maybe one time he told me the truth, but how to tell?

My grandad is blind, but sometimes he doesn't seem it. He walks around the house with ease, as if he had a radar in his brain that allowed him to know where everything was. When he goes out into the street, he carries the white stick that identifies the visually impaired, but he knows the streets in our neighbourhood so well that he has no trouble getting around. Only in places he's never been before, he hesitates a bit and grips my shoulder for me to guide him. I like doing it, it's as if like that I can repay some of the many things he's done for me over the years.

My friend Rosa says I'm like a character from a tear-jerking soap opera: the poor orphan girl who lives with her blind grandfather. But that's not the case, she just likes being dramatic. I'm old enough to know that sometimes life is tough, that not everyone lives in a big millionaire's house with perfect parents. If you watch the news, you'll



see there are lots of people suffering, dying of hunger or because of wars and everyone looks at them on the television with indifference. That's why I didn't complain. I had the usual teenage problems and my grandad and I lived without luxuries. But I was reasonably happy.

And now I've introduced myself, let's get back to the story. A couple more chapters and I'll appear with my conundrums. But first, pay close attention to the character you are about to meet.

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