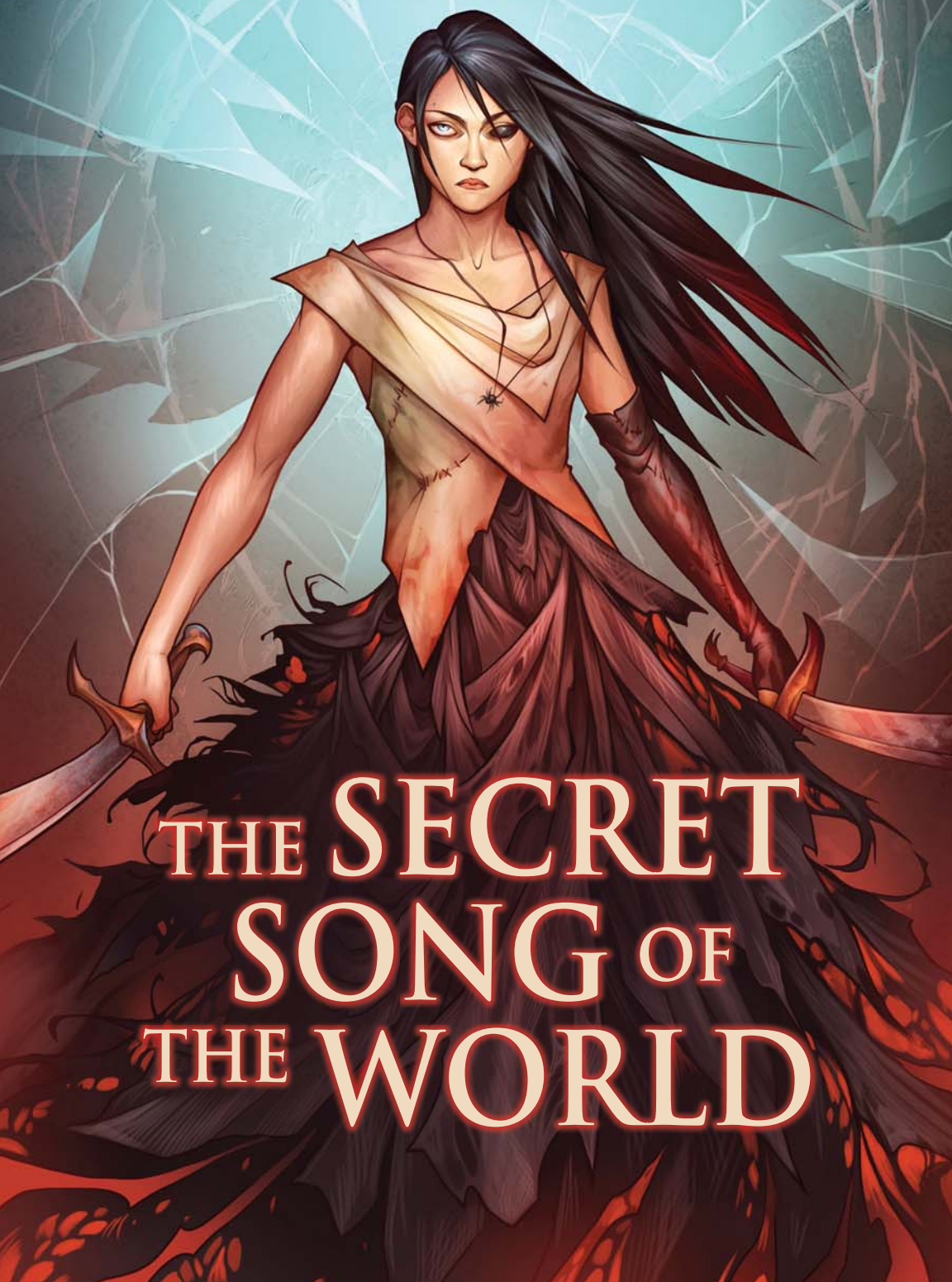


JOSÉ ANTONIO COTRINA



THE SECRET  
SONG OF  
THE WORLD

José Antonio Cotrina

# The Secret Song of the World



# PROLOGUE

## A sackful of dead children

It was just another morning, a morning among so many others.

It was such a common morning that one would think nothing worthy of mention could possibly happen. Winter was near and the forest had awoken covered in frost. Clouds moved slowly through the leaden sky, coming from no place, on a path to nowhere.

The door in ruins that stood in the forest glade was as peculiar as the ungainly man who walked toward it. The man wore a shabby aviator's cap, a black raincoat, and carried a sack on his shoulder. He walked at a good pace and the shadow he projected was never the same: with every step, it seemed to change its form. Sometimes, the puddle of darkness at his feet took on a number of arms and legs that hardly corresponded to the body it came from; other times, it became an amorphous smudge that had no relation to anything a human eye would ever recognize. The strange individual wore a gun and a sword at his belt, both enveloped in a sickly green light. But what was most outstanding in his appearance was not his shadow or his weapons, it was sack he was carrying. The sack was of rough burlap and, though its contents were out of sight, the shapes it made against the cloth were sinister enough to convey something of their disturbing nature.

The man with the sack and his warping shadow crossed the glade and arrived at the door in ruins. It was a huge door, made of grayish wood, with a pointed arch full of carvings; there were still remains of the wall which used to support it scattered around: broken bricks that hugged its frame as if afraid of falling. Behind the door there was nothing, just the same stretch of barren land that led up to it. The arch curved to bend into what could well be a sarcastic smile, and its movement carried the creaking of strained wood. The bas-reliefs that adorned the arch seemed to group together at the top, forming two shadows that looked like half-closed eyes.

“Who goes there?” said a voice coming from the actual door. It was a worn and broken voice, a voice that wood would use if it could talk. “Who dares enter the domains of The Carrion?”

“May the Dead King take you,” grumbled the man. His voice was hoarse and his breath stank of liquor. “You know perfectly well who I am.”

“As I also know what you’re carrying on your shoulder, Legion,” the wooden voice added. “A sackful of dead children, no more, no less. Just tell me something: have you any to spare for a hungry door?”

“That’s for Barrabas to decide. Let me through, you damned door, or I’ll blow you apart with gunshot.”

The door laughed, and, as it did, its panels opened slowly inward, revealing a landscape bearing little resemblance to what could be seen beyond the frame and its wall. Beyond the door’s threshold was an unkempt terrace of large slabs covered in black moss, which lay before the shadowed outline of a huge building that might belong to a castle or an abandoned mansion. Legion adjusted the grisly load on his shoulder and crossed the threshold. The door closed behind him while speaking in its voice of rot and splinter:

“May the darkness protect you, may shadows give you shelter. Here dwells The Carrion. You are welcome, soulless creature: you are home. You are in the Umbra.”

A grunt was Legion’s only answer.

The morning sky disappeared as soon as he set foot on the other side. It turned into night, a deep night without stars, a night that floated up above like a colossal specter. The door was still behind him, but now seemed to be framed by a red brick wall that surrounded the terrace and the fortress-like house. The most peculiar detail of the building – apart from the malignant aura that floated all around it – was its total lack of windows. Not even the smallest opening appeared on its walls, making it ever more robust, ever more real. The man with the sack picked up his pace. He avoided the main entrance, preferring to skirt the building’s facade until he found another door, half-hidden among pillars.

He rapped on the door with his knuckles and it opened on his third try; it drew back with a tired sigh and showed a winding staircase that sank into unknown depths. Before entering, the man removed his cap and hooked it onto a clasp on his belt. He felt a strong pang in his gut as he approached the first step. A harmful spell was on the attack, but retreated as soon as it recognized him. The building’s defensive magic withdrew, allowing him to continue, and Legion – muttering a swear word under his breath – began to descend.

Each full turn of the staircase led to a corridor. Legion ignored them all. As he went down, all kinds of sounds reached him from the many galleries that bordered the staircase: the sound of machinery, of chains, of metal banging against metal, of lashes, of gurgling, cries, moans and pleas that no one heeded... a pandemonium that spoke of torture, horror and imprisonment. Someone wept - a child, maybe - and Legion could barely hear the crying under the brutal laugh of their torturer. On one of the landings he bumped into a woman dressed in a blood-stained lab coat. She wore old-fashioned goggles and a leather muzzle. They greeted each other with a nod and stuck to their path: she went up and he went down.

After a long descent, the stairs finally led him to the floor he needed. There, at the end of a short passage, a lonely black door came into sight. This was where he was headed.

He stretched his hand toward the doorknob and it turned before he could touch it, as if anticipating his desire. The space before him was lit with hanging burners and with candles, strewn across the room on any surface flat enough to hold them. The place was filled with jars of unknown substances, deteriorated books and much, much dust. A large L-shaped table covered the wall across from the door. At the table sat an old man, rake thin, hunched over on a wheeled stool, who stared at the book that lay open before him. Legion managed to glimpse the soft amber glow coming from the book's cover.

"You took your time, Legion," the old man nagged as he swiveled his chair to meet him. He had a predatory air, the look of a carrion bird anxious to feed. His naked and hairless torso, his extreme thinness, and his aquiline nose all contributed to such an impression. He looked like a vulture turned into a human being.

"It wasn't easy to find four recent stillborn babies, Barrabas," he apologized. "They don't grow on trees, you know?"

The old man nodded half-heartedly and then gave a longer nod that gestured toward the table right behind him.

Legion approached it, took his sack with both hands, loosened the rope that he'd used to tie it, and dropped the contents on the table. The sound of the small bodies falling against the surface was sad and soft, but neither of those present seemed even slightly moved.

"Were they all born dead?" asked the one called Barrabas.

The other nodded.

“None were alive when they exited their mother’s body. And they’re all recent, or as recent as I could find, given the circumstances. Pure children; died with no violence. Just what you asked for.”

Barrabas dragged his stool alongside the table and approached the pile of inert little bodies. He leaned forward, so hunched it seemed his vertebrae might shoot out of his back. His bony nose started to move with agitation, engaged in a frantic sniffing. He grasped one of the children by a leg and set it apart.

“Been dead for too long,” he grumbled. “And so has this little girl, she must have died days ago inside her mother,” he pointed to her while he pushed her aside with little ceremony. Then he sniffed at the other two bodies, taking his time. “These, on the other hand...” he began. He licked his lips as he continued his examination. “Yes, yes.” His eyes glowed. “These are perfect. Exactly what we needed.”

The old man grabbed both cadavers, a boy and a girl, and hauled them to the other end of the table. There was an apparatus there, a huge thing that looked like an enormous sewing machine with an added, complicated group of test tubes and flasks, all full of bubbling liquid. A control panel stood next to the machine, bursting with levers, wheels and dials, and many sharp instruments lay beside the panel: scissors, needles, surgical knives, razor blades and scalpels.

“Can I stay and watch?” asked Legion.

“You can do whatever you want, as long as you don’t get in the way,” Barrabas replied as he rose from the stool and walked toward a nearby shelf at a fast pace. These children would work, but he couldn’t wait around or he’d lose them, too.

Despite his urgency, his touch was delicate as he chose a jar full of yellow liquid from the shelf. Inside, two eyes floated. Both were totally black, with no trace of whiteness, nor any separation between iris and pupil; two spheres that seemed molded from tar. He carried the jar to his dead couple. He sat back down on his stool, placed the girl inside the strange apparatus, put his feet on the pedals, and started up the machine. At that very moment, the liquid in the flasks and tubes began bubbling. Squeaks dotted the old man’s pedaling.

Extremities now emerged from Barrabas’s sinewy back. They sprouted from his shoulder blades, his spine, his waist... As soon as they

were born, these new skinny arms with small hands and minuscule fingers jumped to the machines' controls and the cutting utensils. A couple of hands grabbed the jar with the black eyes, opened it skillfully, and took one out. The chaos of arms became so great all of a sudden that from where he stood, Legion could no longer see the old man. His feet pressed the pedals on the wheel faster and faster. Barrabas whispered to himself, engrossed, lost in his task.

Legion took one step back and studied the warlock's frenetic activity. For a long while the clattering of the machine, the humming of the old man, and the bubbling of the liquids were the only sounds in the room.

And then, suddenly, a little dead girl burst out crying.

## Fourteen years later

The building - a huge ramshackle house in the older part of Berlin - began to burn just after midnight. The neighbors heard a fierce explosion right before the flames appeared, so at the beginning everyone thought the fire had been sparked by a gas leak. Two firefighter crews showed up and immediately set to work on extinguishing the fire, while the police evacuated nearby buildings in case the fire should spread.

The house was an old-fashioned construction with a badly kept garden, and an ancient looking swing peeking out among the weeds. One of the building's wings was aflame and a good part of its façade had crumbled down; however, the other wing and the main structure still seemed to be safe. While a team of firefighters tried to control the fire, another entered the house to help any possible victims. Not two minutes had gone by when one of the team members ran back out, with his helmet in his hand and an ashen demeanor. "It's full of dead bodies," he announced. Both the tone of his voice and his appearance made it very clear that what he'd just found was far from a normal fire scenario.

Once they'd secured the entrance, the first police officers entered the dwelling. Cadavers were strewn throughout the interior, so torn apart that it was impossible to even begin to estimate their number. The fire had cut off the electric supply, and police and firefighters advanced under the brightness of their own torches, their moving beams illuminating the massacre. Blood stained everything. One of the torches showed the impossible: an enormous forearm, hairy and muscular, with

sharp, black nails. They found no more remains for such a colossus, but they did find mammoth-sized footprints in blood that disappeared abruptly right in the middle of a hall packed with bodies burnt to a crisp.

No one could believe their eyes. An actual battle had taken place right there, there was no other way to describe it. Weapons of all kinds were scattered on the floor: swords, daggers, strange-looking guns... The firefighters and police officers felt plunged into a feeling of unreality that only grew deeper as they penetrated the building.

They soon found the first flames. Even the fire had chosen its guise in accordance with this nightmarish landscape: a yellowish, bilious tone. The smoke snaking up above moved like a living being, trying to escape from their sight. The high-pressure water from their hoses managed to extinguish the fire and allowed the firefighters to break through. And as they marched, they came upon more and more corpses. They discovered the body of a naked woman, nailed to the wall by a gigantic harpoon; a bandage covering her eyes had a drawing on it of an eye with an iridescent pupil that, under the lighting of torch and flame, seemed to move, vigilant and alert. Further along, to their growing surprise, they found a dead horse; lying on its side with its belly open and its guts spilling out. The animal's presence was so disturbing that nobody even realized it had a horn on its forehead.

Finally, after an eternity of horrors and torn bodies, they arrived at what seemed to be the epicenter of the explosion. They battled hard against the fire, and could then see the extent to which the space had been damaged. Walls were destroyed, furniture was unrecognizable, and the human remains sprinkled around the room were too small to even distinguish which body parts they came from. But the most amazing thing of all was that, amidst all this devastation, there was a safe place: a circle with a five-foot diameter that, surprisingly, had not been touched by the destruction: the floorboards were intact, clean of dirt and ash, with a chair, undamaged, lying on its side.

In the center of this isle lay a child, a girl of about fourteen years of age, curled up into a ball. A firefighter started walking toward this incredible discovery, but just as he reached the edge of this impossible circle he seemed to bump against the air, as if he'd come across some kind of invisible barrier.

He took one step back, shook his head and advanced again, more carefully this time. Whatever had stopped him now seemed to have disappeared. He crouched down next to the girl and examined her with



care. She was a brunette, with long hair and sharp features. There was a stony stillness about her that made him think she was dead, and that maybe this wasn't such a miracle after all. But then her eyes opened wide and she sat up with a speed that almost knocked the startled firefighter off balance. For an instant, he thought the girl was missing her left eye, but soon realized that what he'd first assumed was an empty socket was actually an eye that was pitch black, with no iris or pupil. The girl was terrified.

“Ariadna!” she shouted and the anguish in her cry eclipsed the devastation that surrounded them, as if every single corpse they'd found in the house had lent her their voice, to better express the horror they'd experienced right here, tonight. “Ariadna!” she repeated.

Then she lost consciousness, submerged in a deep faint that she wouldn't recover from for days.

# Ari

## 1

For the fifth night in a row, Ari had the same dream. In her dream, she marched through a city enveloped in mist, knowing that some unknown entity chased her and would show no mercy once it caught her. But she also knew she was searching for something amongst the badly-drawn, blurry buildings that surrounded her: it was something important, something she'd lost.

What was significant wasn't that her dreams were always identical. What was significant was that, until five days ago, Ari had never dreamt in her whole life. Or at least she hadn't dreamt in her last four years of existence, the only period she could remember. The first time she had the dream, she was so surprised that she awoke with a fright, unable to grasp what had just made its way through her slumbering mind. She knew of the existence of dreams, of course, but after her initial bewilderment it took her quite a while to calm down. In fact, she didn't manage to fall asleep again until the early hours of morning.

Night after night, the dream returned. There were some variations, but it was identical in its essence: that continuous search, the knowledge of being chased... It wasn't until this fifth time that she really started to worry. Up until then, the city she'd crossed in her dreams had been a dim mass of shadows and colors, but in this fifth dream she'd started to recognize the buildings and streets that ran up to meet her: this was her city, this was Madrid, and very close to her neighborhood too. But that wasn't the most disturbing part: in her dreams she knew that her pursuer grew closer and closer, and would soon catch up with her. Ari walked down her dream streets with a quick stride, under fast and cold rain. The morning sun shone in the skies, but its rays could hardly break through the blanket of black clouds that hung over the city.

A sudden wave of putrefied air assaulted her from a nearby side-street. She knew her hunter was there, just several feet away, and about to find her. She could hear his breathing: a broken bellow, an atrocious and bestial wheeze. She forced herself to retrace her steps, very slowly. She was finished, she knew it. She couldn't take her gaze off that street entrance. A shadow was starting to form, something enormous, grotesque. Whatever it was, it wasn't human. And it was just a second away from revealing itself.

And then, to her relief, a strident noise pulled her out of the

dream. For a moment, she thought it was her alarm clock and batted around the bedside table trying to find it, but soon realized it was her phone's ringtone.

"Tell me the most disgustingly romantic thing you can think of, quick!" urged the voice on the other end as soon as she picked up. It was Marc, her boyfriend.

"What?" she asked as she sat up in bed, her phone stuck to one side of her face and a sheet stuck to the other. The rude awakening, the anxiety of the dream and this weird and unexpected request totally threw her off balance. She glanced at her clock sideways. The bright numbers told her it was ten in the morning. She didn't normally get up so late.

"Have you seen what it's like out there?" Marc asked. "It's raining cats and dogs and it's freezing cold. I need something to get me out of bed! Tell me something nice or I'm going to hibernate until spring. You won't see me in months. Do you think you can deal with that?"

"Just try me," she grumbled in a slurry voice, as she slowly returned to reality. "Ugh. My breath smells like dead rat."

"That's not very romantic," he complained.

"And I have to go to the bathroom," she said. "Urgently too. Do you want me to take my phone with me? We can chat some more while I'm sitting on the toilet bowl."

"I'm not ready to take that step in our relationship," Marc confessed in a slow and deep voice. "And I don't know if I ever will be. I'll see you at twelve, right?"

"Twelve at the Cannibal's," she confirmed. "But only if getting to see me is a good enough reason to get out of bed."

"Let me think about it," he said. "You're cute and you make me laugh. And sometimes you smell really good." She heard a heavy sigh over the line. "I'd say those are more than enough reasons to get you into bed, but for me to get out? Not sure, not sure..."

Ari laughed.

"I love you, you imbecile," she said. "Is that romantic enough for you or should I look for a better insult?"

"That *imbecile* really moved me," he assured her. "You'll see me there at twelve. I love you, silly."

“You better,” she said.

She allowed herself another smile as she hung up. Those insulting *I love yous* were the only space they granted for cheesiness in their relationship. No romance and no sentimentality: that was the deal, and both were sticking to it. She stretched out on the bed, with her arms over her head and her fingers interlocked. Out of the blue, a vivid remembrance of the dream she'd just awoken from overtook her. There were too many shadows, too many shapes she couldn't identify in the murkiness of her room. The feeling of being chased returned; the feeling that something awful was about to catch up. She went from uneasiness to real alarm, searched for the lamp switch on her bedside table and turned on the light. In an instant, all the shadows transformed into her bedroom's familiar objects: her furniture, clothes hanging on a chair, her mum's puppets, her backpack on the floor... There were no monsters lying in wait. Everything was fine.

## 2

The creature stumbled along the side street's puddled ground. It was over six feet tall and was covered in shiny, black, natural armor; each plate clumsily engraved with a rune. It walked in a hunch, as if the multitude of twisted bones that emerged from its back made it impossible for the creature to stand up straight. It opened and closed its claws while it sniffed. The scent of its prey was still in the air, despite the heavy rain unloading from the sky. The scarce winter sunlight slipped on its armored skin as it abandoned the side street's shadows to step into a wide avenue.

Cars circulated slowly under the downpour, lights on, unaware of the monster that had just appeared on the sidewalk. The street was almost deserted; except for an elderly woman with a shopping tote on wheels and an umbrella she could barely hold onto through the charging wind. The old lady passed just a couple of feet away from the horror, seemingly unaware of its presence. The monster's sunken and listless eyes also ignored her, as it glanced up and down the street, still sniffing the air. Its lower jaw was much longer than the upper one and showed a mishmash of sharp fangs, as irregular as the chaos of bones that grew from its hump. The woman, not knowing exactly why, paused in her fight against the rain, let go of her cart and crossed herself quickly before setting off on her path once again.

A second later, the monster followed suit.

3

Ari wiped the steam off the mirror with the back of her hand to see her reflection, and so began the long ceremony of brushing her hair. It fell to the small of her back and she was very proud of it, of her silky and shiny black hair. Some said she was pretty, but she didn't share that opinion. She thought her chin was too small, her nose was turned-up and her ears were too big. She would have described her appearance as dull, if it hadn't been for that one facial feature that made life so difficult: her eyes.

As she so often did, Ari covered her left eye with the palm of her hand while studying the other. It was beautiful, perfect, of a light blue that would remind you of morning skies and untouched lakes. If the other eye had been the same she might have dared to consider herself good looking. She then covered the right eye with her hand and opened the left one. This eye was totally different, and not just in relation to its partner: it was different than any eye she'd ever seen in another human being. It was of a uniform black color, with no distinguishable pupil or trace of white in the sclera. During the first months of her adoption, her parents had taken her to a couple of specialists, but they'd just wrote it off it as a curious case of heterochromia, that rare singularity by which eyes, whether through genetics or illness, were different from one another. Her left eye worked as it should, the color was its only abnormality; a sinister darkness that, if viewed from a certain angle, almost gave the impression of an empty socket. To avoid questions and startled looks, she always wore sunglasses and pretended to suffer from a grave case of light sensitivity. Sometimes she also wore a contact lens that covered the full surface of her dark eye and gave it the appearance of its partner. Even so, many people came to believe that Ari had a glass eye.

She caressed that dark eye's outline with her fingertips. There was something about the eye she had never dared tell anyone, neither her eye doctor nor the psychologists and psychiatrists she'd been seeing for so long: through that eye, she sometimes saw things she shouldn't. It was hard to put into words; it was some kind of deep vision, as if she could peek into the soul of whomever she gazed upon. On occasion, she could guess if someone was furious just by looking at them, even if they showed no external signs of anger; or she would know if someone was worried, even if they didn't seem to be. At the beginning, she assumed

these “intuitions” were pure coincidence, but she guessed right so often that she came to understand that her very peculiar eye could distinguish other people’s true feelings, if the feelings were intense enough. And that’s how she’d known that Marc was in love with her.

She remembered that day perfectly, even though it had now been two years ago. They were returning home after a long day in high school. Classes had been even more boring than usual and Ari – trying to make up for such a tedious day – hadn’t stopped chattering since they’d left school. First, she’d told Marc, in excruciating detail, how she intended to conquer the world, with the help of an army of winged cyborgs that her dad would build for her in the basement. After that, she told him what her first orders would be once she were in power.

“Before doing anything else, I’m executing Josefina and Clara.” These were two of the more unpleasant teachers they’d had to suffer during the year. “Something painful and humiliating. I’m sentencing them to be eaten alive by tortoises.”

“Do tortoises even eat meat? I thought they ate lettuce and stuff like that.”

“Well, my tortoises will. I’ll make sure they do,” she assured. “They’ll eat meat reeeeeeal slow. The next thing I’m going to do is change the name of the planet,” she continued. “Earth? Who came up with that nonsense? Why not Mud or Rock, while you’re at it? No, no Earth. From now on, all will know this planet as Beautiful Ariadna. And my face shall be carved onto the surface of the Moon, so everyone may admire my gorgeoussness.”

“And they shall be blinded by your humility.”

“Shut it, you heretic,” she said, as she furrowed her brow with theatrical flair. “And watch what you say if you don’t want me to name you Royal Cleaner of Her Sacred Majesty’s Toothbru...”

It was then that she saw it. It was then that she realized what Marc felt for her. It had nothing to do with how he looked at her, with his gestures or the expression on his face. In an instant, she peered into his soul with her tar-covered eye, and the feeling revealed itself to her, shining bright. It came with absolute certainty, more than if he’d declared his love out loud. Because words could lie, but language that went further than speech couldn’t. Marc loved her.

And, as usual, Ari just couldn’t keep her mouth shut:

“You love me!” she blurted out, astonished, and came to a stop. “Are you crazy?” she asked. “How can you love me?”

He stopped right next to her, as amazed as she was.

“What?! What are you going on about?!”

“You love me!” she insisted. The “vision” had disappeared, but she knew the feeling remained; not as obvious to her as before, but equally alive and real.

“You’ve lost your mind, young lady,” he assured her. “Your delusions of grandeur are playing tricks on you.” He spoke quickly and his cheeks were alight.

“You’re super cute when you’re blushing,” she joked. And that was the straw that broke the proverbial camel’s back.

“Ugh! You’re the worst!” Marc blurted out as he raised his hands to his head. He moved away from her with long strides, truly annoyed. “I love her, she says! Who do you think you are?” He turned back toward her and pointed with an accusing finger. “No matter how much you’d like it, the world doesn’t revolve around you, you crazy little brat!” Then he started to run away again.

She just stood there and watched him leave, with a fast beating heart and a weird sensation, halfway between total happiness and slight guilt for having joked about such an important subject. She didn’t think twice. She raised her hands to her mouth and cupped them into a loudspeaker:

“I love you too, you imbecile,” she almost shouted. And she almost burst out laughing at the way Marc stopped in his tracks.

Ari smiled at the memory of that afternoon and resumed brushing her hair. Three years back, her psychologist at the time had persuaded her to write a list of moments to remember, reasons to keep on living. She always carried that list in her wallet; it had changed, of course, over the last three years. The afternoon she discovered that Marc felt the same way about her still held a place of honor on that list; it was number three, actually. That instant had opened a door to a time of peace, of smiles and kissing.

She examined her black eye in the mirror once again. If it hadn’t been for what it showed her, she never would have dared to tell Marc that she loved him, how could she? Back then she still considered herself

a weirdo, maybe even a monster. Now, however, despite all the inconveniences her mismatched gaze brought her, she had no choice but to admit that, in a way, she liked it. Maybe she wasn't beautiful, but that gaze made her special. Unique.

#### 4

The subway buzzed with people coming and going. Many had chosen underground travel to escape the storm that covered Madrid. Hallways, stairs and platforms came alive with the hustle and bustle of humanity, though it was nowhere near as busy as a weekday.

Just as the train approached the platform, a teenager ran down the escalator, descending five steps at a time, oblivious to the accusing cries he left behind. The kid moved with amazing agility, using the handrails to gain momentum on each jump. The black cape he wore flew behind him and gave him a strange look, the air of a character visiting from another time.

A woman shouted in fright as she saw him descend the last steps, almost tumbling down. He landed right beside her, with his legs bent and a hand placed firmly on the ground. He glanced back and started to run toward the train amongst the crowds. At that instant, two people at the top of the escalator were rammed from behind. The first crashed against the woman right in front of him, the second wasn't so lucky and was thrown into the abyss. The impact of the body against the floor and the crunch of breaking bones achieved the miracle of making most of the throng stop and stare in alarm. The fallen body hardly moved. The crowd's attention lasted less than a second.

Up on the escalator, chaos was on the rise. Something was mowing people down up there; something that no one could make out was pushing them over, launching them through the air or squashing them against the handrail. A child screamed and fell back, with a large gash on her forearm that cut through her warm clothes and right into her flesh. The sight of blood and the girl's cry finally allowed madness to overtake all those present. The stampede began.

The teenager managed to forge his way through the crowd, trying to reach the train doors. Hysteria grew as the invisible entity reached the end of the escalator and jumped forward, straight into a swarm of people who crashed into each other in their blind flight. Many simply slumped to the floor, crushed by a violent nothingness, others received slashes of



differing intensity, never knowing what caused them. An old man was flung into the air when that thing, whatever it was, bumped into him.

The teenager reached the doors just as they closed. That wouldn't stop him. In one strong jump, he reached the top of the car, right when the train was picking up speed, as if the driver had decided to escape as soon as possible from the craziness that now dominated the station. Passengers gazed at the spectacle in astonishment, keeping their distance from the windows, afraid of getting too close.

A roar of fury was heard under the accelerating clatter of the cars. It didn't come from the platform, but from the tracks. The invisible being that had provoked the all-enveloping chaos had jumped off the platform. Many thought they heard it chase after the train, though they couldn't say for sure, not with all the screaming of those who still fled, terrified. They didn't know where to run, nor what they were running from.

Later, no one could say what happened, not with any level of precision. Witness statements were contradictory and led nowhere; of course, no competent authority gave any credibility to the chance of an invisible creature running around a subway station. Recordings on the platform's cameras didn't help either; for the duration of the incident, strange distortions blurred the images. The official version spoke of a madman who, armed with a knife, had caused a mass panic, culminating in four persons badly injured and four only slightly injured.

The fact that nobody could say who had cut them or hit them was blamed on the stress of the moment, and was deemed to have nothing to do with supernatural entities. The only thing the witnesses could agree on was that all this was probably instigated by a young, dark-haired man, dressed with a black cape, and who, as some pointed out, only had one eye. One of the women interrogated assured it wasn't so: the teenager wasn't missing an eye. It just seemed to be missing, because one of his eyes – the right one, to be exact – was utterly, completely black.