

The Legend of the Lost Oven

Chapter 1

The Recall of the Past

The Lost Letter

The first light of dawn bathed the papal kitchen in hues of gold and orange, warming its pristine walls. Peppeniello was already at work, as he was every morning. His hands moved with absolute precision, forming small flakes of puff pastry to be filled with apricot jam and ricotta cream. The sweet, buttery scent began to spread, filling the corners of the large kitchen and awakening the first servants.

For many, that kitchen represented the pinnacle of culinary perfection. Despite its prestige, Peppeniello viewed the kitchen as a gilded prison. The days passed at a regular pace, punctuated by orders, ingredient lists, and impeccable dishes. Yet something was missing from that perfection. Something that even the compliments of the papal court could not fill.

That evening, tired but restless, he retired to his small room in the apostolic palace. It was a simple room, a refuge he had personalized with a few items from his past: an old apron from his grandfather, a faded photograph from the family workshop in Naples, and a stack of recipe books he always carried with him.

As he tidied the room, searching for a book he had not found in a long time, his fingers paused on a timeworn cover. The title, written in elegant cursive, was now almost illegible: *"Peppe's Recipes."*

Peppeniello smiled, running his palm over the book's surface. His grandfather's calligraphy took him back to the days he spent in the workshop in Naples, among sturdy hands that kneaded with love and words that taught the value of tradition.

With delicate gestures, he opened the book and began to leaf through it. Between the yellowed pages, filled with notes and small sketches, something slipped out.

A letter, folded into four.

Peppeniello bent down to pick it up, examining it curiously. The paper was fragile, and the ink had faded in places, but the name written on the outside was clear: "To Peppeniello."

His heart beat faster. It was his grandfather's handwriting, recognizable by its slightly crooked slant. He had never seen this letter before. Why was it hidden in the book? And why had Grandfather written it for him?

With trembling hands, he opened the paper and began to read:

"Peppeniello, if you are reading this letter, it means that my time is over, but our bond is not broken. I want you to know something important. Our workshop in Naples is more than a business. It is a special place that holds a family secret. The oven we have been using for generations is not like any other. It is unique, and its history is intertwined with that of our family and the city itself."

Peppeniello stopped, his breathing quickening. Grandpa's handwriting became shakier in the next few lines, as if he had written them in a hurry or with great effort.

"I know life has taken you far from Naples, but the time may come when you feel the call to return. When it does, look for the oven. And remember: it is the heart of our story."

He dropped back in his chair, staring at the letter as if it were an enigma too big to comprehend. Grandfather's handwriting took him back in time, to days spent watching those sturdy hands lovingly kneading bread or finishing a pizza. But what did it all mean? A special oven? A secret?

He closed his eyes for a moment, letting the silence of the room envelop him. For years, he had been estranged from his roots. He had sought success in Rome, becoming the most esteemed cook in the papal palace. But those words awakened something in him that he could not ignore.

He carefully placed the letter back between the pages of the book and stood up to look out the window. The eternal city shone under the stars, but Peppeniello felt an absence: the smell of the sea, the sound of narrow alleys, and the warmth of his homeland.

Naples.

The letter had reopened a door he thought he had closed forever.

A Cook Among the Palaces of Power

Peppeniello was not destined to become the papal cook. As a child, he never imagined leaving Naples, its narrow, noisy alleys, and the scent of the kitchens that mingled with the salty smell of the sea. But life, like the dough he loved to work with, took unpredictable shapes.

His passion for cooking was born in a modest store in the heart of Naples, among the timeworn counters and the sacks of flour that piled up in the corners. His

grandfather Peppe was a man of few words but firm gestures, and everything he did in the kitchen seemed like an act of magic. With his hands kneading bread or creating a perfect pizza, he conveyed a silent message to his grandson: food was love, tradition, and respect.

"Remember, Peppeniello," Grandpa often said, "every ingredient has a soul. And you must know how to listen to it."

It was those teachings that prompted Peppeniello to leave Naples after his grandfather's death. The workshop no longer belonged to him, and he felt that staying meant betraying his grandfather's memory, tied to a past he could no longer recreate. So, he decided to follow his dream and seek his fortune elsewhere.

Rome, with its opulence, was the opposite of the lively simplicity of Naples. The early years were hard. Peppeniello found work in a small osteria, where he began to distinguish himself for his skill with traditional dishes, and his desire to innovate. He was a careful cook, and every dish he prepared reflected his dedication to perfection.

It was in that small tavern that fate knocked on his door. One evening, a monsignor stopped by for dinner, attracted by the young Neapolitan cook's growing fame.

After tasting the evening's main dish—a lamb stew seasoned with a secret mix of herbs—the monsignor called Peppeniello to the table.

"Young man," he said with a smirk, "you are talented. Have you ever thought about cooking for people who are... more important?"

Peppeniello blushed, not knowing whether it was a compliment or a provocation.

"I cook for anyone who appreciates good food, Excellency," he replied modestly.

The monsignor laughed. "Well said. But I want you to know that your talent should not be hidden in a tavern. Come and see me tomorrow. I have an opportunity for you."

That "opportunity" turned out to be an interview at the apostolic palace.

Peppeniello had never seen a place so vast and imposing. Papal kitchens were the realm of rigor and precision, where every ingredient was measured to the milligram and every dish was a demonstration of culinary excellence.

The first day was a disaster. Peppeniello, used to the creativity and chaos of Neapolitan cuisine, found himself uncomfortable in that rigidly structured world.

But he did not give up. He studied, listened, and worked harder than anyone else.

Within just a few years, he climbed the ranks to become the Pope's personal chef, a role that required exceptional skills and iron discipline.

Despite the prestige, Peppeniello often missed the spontaneity and joy he had experienced cooking with his grandfather. Papal cooking was impeccable, but it lacked soul. Each dish was a perfect symphony but lacking the warmth and chaos that had characterized his grandfather's cooking.

One evening, after a long day's work, Peppeniello stood in the empty kitchen, observing the perfectly ordered tools and gleaming surfaces. He was reminded of his grandfather's workshop, with its imperfections, warmth and chaos. He closed his eyes, letting the memories wash over him.

When he opened his eyes again, the weight of distance from his hometown hit him like a fist. It was not success that he lacked, nor the approval of the papal court. It was Naples. It was the workshop. It was the bakery.

The Decision

Peppeniello spent a sleepless night, sitting in the chair by the window of his room. Grandfather's letter lay on the table next to the recipe book, its edges worn by time. Every word he read resonated in his mind like an insistent reminder, a voice from the past that he could not ignore.

Naples. The oven. The secret.

At dawn, Rome slowly woke up. The sound of church bells filled the cool air, while the first rays of the sun illuminated the Cathedral of St. Peter's. That sight, which he had always found comforting, now seemed oppressive. He felt that he no longer belonged there.

As he dressed, a thought plagued him: was he really thinking of leaving it all behind? The papal kitchen was every cook's dream, the highest accolade he could hope for. But was it really his dream?

The day passed like a dream, with gestures repeated automatically. He prepared the Pope's lunch-an elaborate dish of fine meats and sauces-and received the usual compliments from the court. But he felt no satisfaction.

That evening, back in his room, he took the letter and reread it for the umpteenth time. There was something in his grandfather's words that pushed him beyond logic, beyond the fear of uncertainty.

"The bakery is the heart of our story."

Peppeniello closed his eyes, imagining the oven he had seen as a child. He remembered the heat of the flames, the sound of bread baking, and his grandfather's smile as he told him stories about the store's origins. It was not just an oven; it was a symbol.

That night, he made the decision.

Preparing for the Journey

It was not an easy choice. Peppeniello knew that leaving Rome meant giving up everything he had built over the past decade. But he felt it was time to follow the call of the past.

Calmly, he began to pack his things. A small suitcase was all he filled, including his grandfather's recipe book and a few personal items. He did not need much. The trip to Naples would be a return to his roots, to simplicity.

Before leaving the room, he wrote a letter to his superior:

"With humility and gratitude, I inform you that I am leaving my post. My heart is calling me elsewhere, to a new adventure. This is not a decision made lightly, but it is something I must do."

With the letter in hand, he walked through the silent kitchens, pausing for a moment to survey the place he had called home for so long. Every surface, every utensil, seemed to say goodbye to him.

A Last Goodbye

At dawn, Peppeniello walked briskly along a dusty road on the outskirts of Rome. He had left the apostolic palace without much greeting, carrying only a small bag that contained his grandfather's recipe book, some clothes, and the necessities for the journey. The rest he had left behind, along with a chapter of his life that he now felt was closed.

After a few hours of walking, he reached a small roadside inn. It was a crossing point for merchants and travelers, a place where news traveled faster than wagons. He looked around, searching for someone willing to take him to Naples.

A stout man with a gray beard and a threadbare hat was loading crates of fruit onto a cart pulled by an old mule. Peppeniello approached.

"Good morning," he said, with a nod. "Are you going to Naples?"

The man looked at him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, but it will be a long trip and I'm not bringing people for free."

Peppeniello barely smiled, pulling out a small bag with few silver coins. "I can pay for the trip and if you're hungry, I can cook something good on the way."

The man laughed, flashing a toothless smile. "Then get on, boy. But be prepared: this mule is slow, and Naples is not around the corner."

Peppeniello climbed into the cart, finding a place among the crates of fruit. The journey began slowly, with the sound of wheels crunching on the dirt road. The air was fresh, and the rural landscape stretched as far as the eye could see.

During the journey, Peppeniello and the man, whose name was Tonio, began chatting. Tonio was a fruit merchant who shuttled between Rome and Naples, transporting apples, figs, and grapes to sell in the markets of the Neapolitan city. "What about you?" asked Tonio, casting a glance at Peppeniello. "What are you doing on a cart like this? You don't look like the market type." Peppeniello hesitated for a moment, then replied, "I'm going home. To Naples." Tonio nodded, without asking any more questions. "It's always like that," he said after a while. "The road takes people away, but sooner or later it brings them back."

Chapter 2

The return to Naples

Tonio in his cart stopped at the port of Naples where he dropped me off and we said goodbye. Before me it appeared alive with smells and colors that seemed to spring directly from memories. Boats laden with fish swayed in the red and gold reflection of the sunset, while fishermen shouted to the shore, their voices a counterpoint to the squeak of a wagon laden with citrus fruits.

Everything was so different from Rome. In the capital, I had spent the last ten years among the stoves of the papal kitchens, immersed in a world of rigor and perfection. Every dish had to be a masterpiece; every ingredient chosen with almost religious meticulousness. Yet despite the prestige, I had always felt that something was missing, as if that impeccable cuisine lacked soul.

Naples, on the other hand, with its chaos and vitality, seemed to pulsate with a life of its own. Here there were no rules or formalities, just the scent of something authentic, a connection to the land and people that I desperately missed.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead. The journey under the blazing sun had left fatigue on me, but it was the invisible weight of returning that really crushed me. Naples was unchanged, yet different. Or maybe it was me who was.

The letter from my grandfather, Peppe, was the reason I had come back. I had found it months earlier, hidden among our family's old cookbooks. Those lines, written with a trembling hand, had left me breathless. "Peppeniello, there is something you need to know. Something that only you can understand."

I remembered his smile as he took me to the Naples market. 'Never choose the biggest bread,' he would tell me. 'Choose the one that smells the best.' His tone was always calm, but firm, as if every piece of advice hid a bigger secret. I was just a child, but those words had left a mark. Now, with his letter in my hand, I understood that there was much more he had never told me.

There wasn't much else, but enough was enough. My grandfather had died ten years earlier, bequeathing me a passion for cooking and a deep connection to Naples, our city. Yet, that letter had shown me a side of him that I did not know, a side that hid secrets. Secrets that, somehow, I felt the need to discover.

Naples had remained the same, with its alleys, chaos, and beauty, but I was no longer the same. The time spent far away, in the papal court, had changed me. It had distanced me from simplicity, from the land on which I had grown up.

Every banquet, every elaborate recipe I had prepared, now seemed to me devoid of the warmth I had known here. At the papal court, I had learned the art of perfection, but I had lost something: the essence of street food, of authentic flavors that spoke of life and struggle. Perhaps, returning to Naples meant rediscovering the part of myself I had left behind.

I walked along the cobbled streets, each step an echo of the past. My eyes fell on a group of young boys chasing a rag ball, their squeaky voices intertwined with the laughter of a woman hanging laundry from a window. An old woman, sitting in front of a doorway, was weaving a basket in silence.

The simple life of Naples embraced me, like a worn but familiar cloak. I realized that I had returned not just because of my grandfather's letter, but to find something of myself, something I had left behind in these alleys.

"Peppeniello! Can it really be you?"

The ringing voice forced me to stop. I turned and recognized the full, cheerful face of Gennarino, the store boy in my father's store. The same cunning eyes, but with a few extra pounds around his waist.

"Gennarino!" I said, surprised at how pleased I was to see him. "Still the same, huh?"

"And you, lord of the court!" he laughed, shaking his head. "What are you doing here? Are you lost among mortals?"

"Perhaps I have forgotten what it means to be one of them," I replied. The words left a weight on my chest, deeper than I had anticipated.

Our exchange was interrupted by the tolling of the cathedral bells. I looked up, following the sound as it spread through the cool evening air. I realized that my steps had led me there, as if guided by an invisible force.

It was as if that ancient sound was calling to me, awakening a memory I did not know I had. My grandfather's letter was still in the inside pocket of my jacket, its weight a constant presence against my chest. It was not just a piece of paper: it was a key, and the Duomo seemed to be the door I needed to open.

"Ah, the old Duomo," I murmured, almost to myself.

Gennarino raised an eyebrow. "Could it be that you came to pray, Peppeniello?"

"Perhaps to look for something," I replied enigmatically.

And, without waiting for an answer, I started toward the grand staircase.

The cool evening air enveloped me like a cloak, pushing me toward the dark portal of the Duomo. The alleys of Naples had now emptied out, allowing silence to envelop the city like an old sheet hung out to dry. Only the sound of my footsteps on the worn stones accompanied me, a dull, cadenced sound that seemed like the very pulse of that place steeped in history.

I stopped in front of the imposing door, decorated with time-worn reliefs. The ancient wood creaked slightly under my push, and the interior of the cathedral opened up before me, a dark, silent underbelly barely lit by scattered candles. I seemed to breathe in dust and incense, a thick mixture that was almost heady.

One step at a time, I moved forward, watching the marble columns rising like praying giants. The aisles were empty, and candlelight drew dancing shadows on the floor mosaics. The solemnity of the place struck me, making me slow my pace, as if I feared disturbing some unseen presence that still resided there.

My gaze landed on a headstone set in stone. Simple, anonymous, but with an aura that called to me. I bent down, brushing the rough surface with my fingers. The inscription had been carved by an expert hand, but time had worn away its contours:

"For those with eyes to see and hearts to remember."

The words were faded with time, but their meaning vibrated inside me like a tightrope. I knelt down to take a closer look at the symbols that decorated the lower part of the tombstone. Intertwined circles, lines that snake-like unfurled, and a central figure that looked like a flame. I had never seen anything like it, but something inside me knew it was important.

"Looking for something, young man?"

The voice made me jerk, rough and slow like stone crawling on stone. I turned sharply, finding an elderly priest in front of me. He was thin, with a white beard that fell across his chest and deep eyes that seemed to see right through me.

"I..." The words died in my throat. I didn't want to reveal too much. "I was observing this tombstone. It intrigued me."

The man approached slowly, leaning on a polished wooden stick. His footsteps echoed in the echo of the cathedral, as if accompanied by invisible presences. He stopped beside me and stared at the tombstone with a gaze that seemed charged with ancient knowledge.

"Not everyone notices you," he said after a long silence. "But you seem like someone who is looking for something. Are you sure you're ready to find it?" I did not know how to respond. I just looked at him, hoping he would not catch the confusion in my eyes.

He smiled, a smile that was neither kind nor threatening, but simply enigmatic.

"The past hides more answers than we can imagine, boy. But you have to know how to read the signs. Not everything is written in ink."

He left me there, disappearing into the darkness of the cathedral like a fading shadow. I went back to staring at the tombstone, trying to decipher those mysterious symbols. My fingers itched to touch it, as if the stone could transmit its secret to me through contact.

"Peppeniello?"

The ringing voice made me wince again. I turned around and saw Gennarino emerge from the shadows with his awkward gait and usual mischievous smile.

"What are you doing kneeling like a saint?" he laughed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"It's none of your business," I replied dryly, standing up and brushing off my pants.

"Oh, come on! I followed you all the way here to see if you got lost," he said with a chuckle. "But apparently you found something interesting."

I glowered at him, but I could not completely hide my curiosity. I knew Gennarino was a talker, but he had a knowledge of the alleys and secrets of Naples that could be useful to me.

"Have you ever heard of this tombstone?" I asked him, trying to mask my interest with a casual tone.

Gennarino scratched his head, looking at the stone with a confused expression. "I don't think so. But you know, Naples is full of strange stories. Some say there are secret passages under the cathedral. Ancient tunnels full of treasures-or trouble."

His words affected me more than I wanted to admit. I turned back to the tombstone, and a thought began to form in my mind. The symbols and the phrase seemed to point to something hidden, waiting to be found.

"Gennarino," I said, staring at him with intensity. "Have you ever heard of an oven? An ancient oven, hidden somewhere under the city?"

He opened his eyes wide, surprised by my question. "An oven? No, not that I know of. But..." He paused, looking around as if to make sure no one was listening.

"There is a legend. The old people say that the first pizza oven, the 'real' pizza oven, was hidden to protect its secret. But those are just stories, Peppeniello. You don't want to start looking for ghosts, do you?"

I did not answer. My heart was beating too fast, and my mind had already raced ahead, imagining obscure passages, hidden clues, and the weight of a legacy I felt I had to claim.

I bent over the tombstone again, letting my fingertips barely touch the cold stone. The surface seemed to vibrate when I touched it, as if conveying a silent message.

The cathedral seemed to hold its breath, shrouded in a silence so deep it seemed unreal. The lantern light cast long shadows on the empty aisles, dancing on the stone pillars like restless spirits. Beside me, Gennarino clutched his cap in his hands, his wide-open eyes seeming to scan every dark corner.

"Peppeniello, I say we'd better go home," he whispered, his voice trembling like a leaf. "I don't like all this silence-it's like someone is watching us."

I bent over the tombstone again. I could still feel that strange vibration under my fingers, a silent call urging me to dig deeper, not to stop. But Gennarino was right: the Cathedral, at that hour, seemed to belong to another world.

It was then that we heard footsteps echoing down the aisle. The echo spread slowly, punctuating each movement like a drum. Gennarino stiffened, clutching me.

"Who goes there?" I shouted, raising the lantern.

Out of the shadows emerged a figure I knew all too well: Silverio, with his rumpled coat and the air of someone who had just run harder than he should have. His breathing heavy, and as soon as he saw me, he stopped, leaning against a pillar to catch his breath.

"Peppeniello!" he blurted out. "What are you up to? Everyone is looking for you, you know? Sofia sent me to see you. She says you're always chasing after some crazy idea!"

Silverio had that unique ability to combine reproach and concern in the same sentence. Gennarino, still pale, barely relaxed.

"And how did you know I was here?" I asked, getting up and wiping my hands on my jacket.

"The oven, no?" replied Silverio, annoyed. "One guy told me he'd seen you slip in here with the kid. And as always, it's my turn to come and bail you out!"

The idea of returning to the bakery suddenly struck me. My grandfather used to say that that bakery had an ancient history, older than him, older than our own family. If there was a connection to this tombstone, to these symbols, then the bakery was the right place to look.

"I have to go back to the bakery," I said, more to myself than to them.

Silverio looked at me as if I had gone crazy. "In the oven? But why? I just found you, and now you want to drive us around?"

"There is something I need to check," I replied, grabbing Gennarino by the arm.

"And you two are coming with me."

"Ah, no!" protested Silverio, raising his hands. "I just had to find you and bring you back. I certainly don't want to go ghost hunting with you!"

"You're coming," I replied firmly. "If Sofia sent you to see me, it means that she understood that something is wrong."

Silverio muttered under his breath, but eventually gave in, as I knew he would. No matter how much he complained, the loyalty that bound us together was stronger than any fear.

Walking up the steps of the cathedral, I felt the weight of a secret about to emerge from the depths of the earth. The alley outside was bathed in the dim light of evening, with shadows reaching out like fingers ready to grab us. We walked hurriedly, with Silverio still grumbling and Gennarino hopping behind me to keep up.

Grandfather's workshop had always been there, wedged like a precious stone between the old houses of a forgotten alley. It was a small wood-burning oven with a wooden door that squeaked every time you pushed it. The store, since Grandpa was gone, had been passed down to us: me, Sofia and Silverio.

Sofia was the mastermind of the bakery. She was the one keeping track, deciding when to knead and how. Silverio was the practical one, always behind getting the fire going, bringing in the flour, complaining about everything. And me, I was the one who couldn't sit still, the one with ideas too big for one store.

When we reached the door, we found it ajar. A dim light filtered through the small crack. I entered first, my heart pounding in my chest.

"Sofia?" I called.

There she was, standing by the oven, with her arms folded and a stern expression on her face. The lantern illuminated only half of her face, while the other half remained hidden in the shadows.

"It took you long enough," she said, without flinching. "Where have you been?"
"At the Cathedral," I replied, placing the lantern on the counter. "And we found something. A tombstone, with ancient symbols."

Sofia raised an eyebrow. "And you came back here because...?"

"Because I think there is a connection," I said, staring into her eyes. "My grandfather said this oven is older than anything around here. And if there's a secret underground, it could start right here."

Sofia studied me for a long moment. Then she nodded slowly. "Show me."

Silverio huffed, dropping onto a stool. "I told you, they'll bring us all to the grave."

"Then bring a shovel," I replied with a smile.

And so, with the lantern shining like a beacon in the half-light, we approached the back of the furnace. The stone wall, blackened by time and soot, looked even older in the flickering light. I observed it carefully, running my hands over the cracks and uneven contours.

"Here," I said, pointing to a spot where the stone seemed to clash with the rest.

"There's something not right. Just like at the Cathedral."

Sofia knelt beside me, watching closely. "You're right. This stone is different."

Silverio looked at us, his face pale. "Don't tell me you want to move it now."

"That's right," Sofia replied. "And you will help us."

Silverio sighed again, but stood up, taking an iron lever from the tool bench.

And with that gesture, with the light of the lantern enveloping us, we began to dig into the past, searching for a secret buried for too long.

Silverio inserted the iron lever between the stones, and they finally gave way and opened a tunnel to the city dungeon, we organized and entered the tunnel.

The discovery of the fragmentary map

In the dungeon, the heavy air mingled with the rhythmic drip of water, breaking an oppressive silence. A flashlight flickered in my hands, casting uneven shadows on the rough stone walls. The silence was almost palpable, broken only by the rhythmic drip of water seeping through the cracks above us.

Silverio, whom I had persuaded to follow me, advanced a few steps ahead of me, his face contracted into a grimace of uncertainty. He was hardly an explorer, but he had a curiosity that drove him to ignore fear. Behind us, Sofia followed, walking with the air of someone expecting to find a rare manuscript around every corner.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" whispered Silverio, without turning around.

"No," I replied, dryly. "But it's the only one we have."

The truth was that even I did not know what to expect. The plaque in the cathedral had led us this far, thanks to a series of symbols that Sofia had interpreted with almost eerie precision. However, each step seemed to take us further from the known world and closer to a mystery I had not yet dared to face.

"Stop," Sofia said, raising a hand.

Her tone left no room for objection. I approached as she bent down to examine a section of the wall, where the bricks looked darker and more worn. She lit a small oil lamp and brought it closer to the surface, bringing out subtle etchings that I could have easily mistaken for scratches.

"It's here," he murmured.

I leaned down beside her, scrutinizing the marks. They looked like irregular, almost random lines, but Sofia traced the outlines with a finger as if she were reading an invisible text. Silverio watched us from a distance, his nervous hands fiddling with the hem of his apron.

"They are coordinated," Sofia finally said. Her voice, usually emotionless, betrayed slight excitement. "Or at least, fragments of a map. Someone etched these lines as a guide, but it is incomplete."

Silverio approached, peering over my shoulder. "And where do they lead?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"I'm not sure," Peppeniello replied, looking at the lines etched on the wall. "But maybe it's a road to something important."

Silverio chuckled nervously, but his voice trembled. "Important? I don't know, Peppeniello. It's not like ... all these stories are really my bread and butter."

"It's not for me either," Peppeniello retorted. "Yet here you are."

Silverio moved his cap from one hand to the other, avoiding her gaze. "I never had your courage. Or Sofia's. I just do my job, bring flour, light the oven. But when Sofia told me about this quest, I couldn't say no. Maybe ... maybe I wanted to prove something, even to myself."

Peppeniello leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. "Prove what?"

Silverio hesitated, then spoke in a low voice. "That I am not like my father. He was a great craftsman, a master. Everyone respected him. But me? I'm just the one who carries the tools, the one who makes the deliveries. I want to find out if I have something more inside me. And if this quest can help me find out-then maybe it's worth it."

Peppeniello looked at him, seeing for the first time the vulnerability behind his apparent awkwardness. He patted him on the shoulder. "Silverio, none of us know what lies ahead. But if you are here, it is because you have already taken the first step. And believe me, that is no small thing."

"That we have yet to find out," Sofia replied, standing up.

We decided to continue on, following the signs etched on the wall. Each stretch seemed to lead us deeper into the meanders of the underground, and with each step the feeling of walking on forbidden ground grew.

"Doesn't it seem to be getting ... warmer?" asked Silverio, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

He was right. The air had gotten warmer, and there was a subtle but lingering smell of burning coal. I paused for a moment, looking at the low ceiling and the walls that were getting tighter and tighter around us.

"We are close," I said, not knowing exactly to what.

Sofia nodded, keeping her gaze directed ahead of us. "These marks are not random. They were left by someone who wanted the path to be followed, but only by those who had the knowledge to understand them."

Peppeniello watched Sofia as she traced the outlines of the symbols with her fingers. Her movements were precise, almost reverential. There was a light in her eyes that he had never noticed before, a concentration that bordered obsession.

"You know a lot about these things," he said, trying to break the silence.

Sofia stopped, her hands still on the tombstone. She did not look up, but the tension in her face became evident. "It's not just knowing, Peppeniello. It is feeling. These symbols-I don't just understand them with my head. I feel them here." He touched his chest, over his heart.

Peppeniello leaned over, intrigued. "Why? What's so special about them?"

Sofia turned toward him, and for a moment his usual mask of coldness cracked.

"When I was a child, my father worked in a store near the harbor. He had a small oven, nothing special. But every time he lit the fire, the house was filled with a warmth that seemed to embrace everything. He used to tell me that the oven was the heart of the family. Then ... when he left, I could no longer feel that warmth. Looking for it became ... a kind of obsession."

His voice lowered, almost dying out. "Maybe that's why I'm here. It's not just to help you. It's for myself. I want to find that warmth again."

Peppeniello said nothing, but he felt a weight in his chest. For the first time, he saw Sofia not as a mere traveling companion, but as someone who, like him, was trying to fill a void.

Silverio stirred, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Or maybe from someone who wanted to lure someone into a trap," he muttered.

Finally, we reached a larger room, the entrance to which was half-covered with debris. Sofia bent down to examine the threshold, while I raised my flashlight to illuminate the interior. The light revealed walls decorated with strange reliefs and a floor covered with dust and stone fragments. In the center of the room, a low, square altar stood like an island in the sea of shadows.

"There," Sofia said, pointing to the altar.

I approached slowly, feeling my heart beating hard. Above the altar, covered by a layer of dust, was something that looked like a piece of parchment. I picked it up carefully, blowing away the dust to reveal an incomplete map, its edges torn and hand-drawn marks.

Silverio leaned over my shoulder, staring at the parchment with wide eyes. "Is this it? Is this what we've been looking for?"

"Not yet," Sofia replied, in a tone that seemed to cut through Silverio's enthusiasm.

"It's not the key, but without it, the door won't open."

I turned toward her, holding the map gently. "What now? How do we figure out where it takes us?"

Sofia took the map from my hands, watching it carefully. "It takes us to the next clue," she said, her tone full of icy determination.

Before we could discuss further, a sudden noise made us gasp. It came from the entrance of the room, a low, rhythmic sound, like footsteps approaching.

"Who goes there?" I shouted, raising my flashlight to illuminate the threshold.

There was no response. I turned toward Sofia and Silverio, who were looking at me with expressions of pure tension. The sound grew closer, and finally, in the darkness, a hooded figure appeared.

"Who are you?" asked a deep voice full of authority.

The figure advanced, revealing a face half hidden by a shadow. Its eyes shone in the flickering light, and the fraternity symbol stood out on the chest of its dark robe.

My heart pounded in my chest. "We are scouts," I replied, trying to keep calm.

"This place is not for explorers," said the man, his voice similar to a bell tolling.

"Who sent you?"

I exchanged a glance with Sofia, searching for a response that might placate the threatening figure. "We are here to seek answers," I finally said. "Answers that concern our history, our culture."

The man was silent for a moment, watching us with piercing eyes. Then he pointed to the map we held in our hands.

"What you seek will lead you to a truth that not everyone is ready to face," he said.

"Are you sure you want to continue?"

Chapter 3

The meeting with the historian

The day after exploring the dungeons, the sun rose over the Bay of Naples with the same majestically serene indifference as always. The city was already buzzing with life, filled with the merchants' chatter, the metallic clangor of fishermen's boats, and the heady scent of freshly baked bread. But my mind was elsewhere, immersed in the engraved symbols and the fragmentary map we had found. Every little detail nagged at me like a riddle that needed to be solved.

Sitting on a wooden bench in the courtyard of the convent where we had gone on the advice of the old man and seek Brother Paul for other information and perhaps answers, I watched Silverio fiddle with a bunch of rusty keys, his young face furrowed with an expression of perpetual insecurity. Sofia, ever cold and unflappable, was flipping through a dusty book, indifferent to everything going on around us.

"I don't understand why we're wasting our time here," muttered Silverio, casting a nervous glance toward the closed door in front of us. "Who's to say this old man actually has anything useful to tell us?"

"Because old people know more than they let on," I replied, trying to mask my own impatience.

And just then, the door opened with a long, plaintive creak. An old man, bent like an olive branch under the weight of years, greeted us with an inquiring look. He wore a threadbare tunic, and his hands, gnarled like roots, were stained with ink. "Come in," he said in a low but firm voice.

The room was dark, lit only by the flickering light of an oil lamp that hung from the ceiling. Shelves filled with books, scrolls, and strange objects covered the walls, relics of a distant and mysterious past. The air smelled of old paper and burnt wax.

The man sat behind a table cluttered with papers and writing instruments. He motioned us to take our seats across from him, and his piercing gray eyes rested first on me, then on Silverio, and finally on Sofia.

"My name is Brother Paul," he said slowly, intertwining his fingers in front of him. "And you are people in search of answers. But know that every answer brings with it new questions."

Silverio fidgeted in his chair, giving me uncertain look. Sofia, on the other hand, did not seem the least bit upset.

"We found a map," I began, choosing my words carefully. "Or rather, a fragment of a map. We believe it may lead us to something of great importance. But we don't yet know to what."

Brother Paul nodded slowly, as if my words confirmed a long-held suspicion. Then he leaned forward, his face half hidden by shadow.

"Talk about the lost oven," he said, and his words dropped into the room like a stone in a pond.

Brother Paul nodded slowly, as if Peppeniello's words confirmed a suspicion he had been hatching for some time. Then he leaned forward, his face half hidden by shadow.

"Talk about the lost oven," he said, and his words dropped into the room like a stone in a pond.

The sentence affected Peppeniello more than he wanted to admit. Those words awakened a buried memory, which resurfaced with the force of a forgotten scent. He was in his grandfather's old store, sitting by the oven that glowed with a warm, golden light. Peppe was bending over a large earthenware bowl, kneading with strong, sure hands, his face focused and serene.

"Take a good look, Peppeniello," she had told him. "The secret is not in the flour, nor in the water. It is in the hands. Every movement, every touch must have a purpose. You must listen to the dough feel it alive under your fingers."

Little Peppeniello had watched with wide eyes, mesmerized by the slow, methodical dance of his grandfather's hands. The smell of baking bread filled air, mingling with the smoke from the wood.

"And what happens if I'm wrong, Grandpa?" she had asked, her voice uncertain. Peppe had paused for a moment, looking at him with those eyes that seemed to contain all the wisdom in the world. "You will be wrong, my boy. And getting it wrong is all right. But you must always remember one thing: the oven does not forgive haste or superficiality. It is like life. If you don't put your heart into it, you will never get the result you desire."

The memory faded, leaving Peppeniello with a strange melancholy in his chest. He looked at Fra Paolo, who was watching him with inquiring eyes.

"The oven is not just a place," the old monk continued, breaking the silence. "It is a lesson. Anyone who tries to find it without understanding essence is doomed to fail."

Silverio opened his eyes wide, and Sofia straightened slightly, as if she had just sensed a change in the air. I remained silent, waiting for Brother Paul to continue.

"There is a legend," the man continued, his voice lowering to a whisper that seemed to come from the depths of the earth. "A legend about the first pizza, a culinary creation intended not for physical sustenance, but for spiritual nourishment. It is said that this oven was concealed to protect its secret, a secret deemed too precious to be revealed to the world."

"And do you believe it?" asked Sofia, her voice as sharp as a blade.

Brother Paul lifted his gaze to her, and for a moment the silence in the room became unbearable. Then he smiled, a tired but sincere smile.

"It doesn't matter what I believe," he replied. "What matters is what you are willing to believe."

Brother Paul slowly opened the manuscript, skimming the pages with trembling hands. An illustration of an ancient oven, surrounded by intricate symbols, emerged from the time-worn pages.

"This story has roots that are lost in Naples' past," he began, his voice low and full of mystery. "It is said that the oven was not only a physical place, but a gift from the gods. The early inhabitants of this land revered it as a source of life, capable of transforming the little into much. According to legend, the oven was created by a craftsman named Martius, a man of extraordinary skill who dedicated his life to perfecting the art of baking. Martius believed that the kiln was a bridge between heaven and earth, a symbol of the balance between the elements."

Brother Paul paused, observing their faces. Peppeniello was completely rapt, while Silverio seemed to be fighting against his natural inclination to doubt.

"But not everyone saw the oven as a gift. Some saw it as a threat. The power to transform simple food into a sublime art attracted the greed of merchants and nobles, who wanted to control its secrets to enrich themselves. Fearing that the oven would be corrupted, Martius decided to hide it. He is said to have dug a labyrinth under the city, filling it with riddles and traps to protect his secret. And before he disappeared, he left a message: the oven would reveal itself only to those who were worthy, those who sought not for themselves but for the community."

Peppeniello leaned forward. "What about the message? Did anyone ever find it?"

Brother Paul shrugged his head slowly. "The message is fragmentary, like this map. Some believe it is hidden in the folds of history, in symbols scattered around the city. Others think it is carved directly into the kiln itself. But no one knows for sure. Legend says the oven not only reveals its secret: it tests the soul of those who seek it."

Sofia spoke for the first time, her tone cold but intrigued. "So, it's not just a matter of finding the oven. It's a matter of deserving it."

Brother Paul nodded slowly. "Exactly. Whoever seeks it must be ready to sacrifice something important. The oven will not settle for less."

He pulled an old leather-bound manuscript out of a drawer. He opened it gently, as if afraid that the pages might crumble at the slightest touch. His eyes stopped on a faded illustration: a depiction of an ancient oven, surrounded by symbols similar to those engraved on the tombstone.

"This manuscript is about the oven," he explained. "But it's not just any oven. It is a symbol, a metaphor. It represents the very essence of Naples: the ability to turn little into much, to create wonders with what you have at your disposal."

Silverio leaned forward, his eyes full of curiosity. "Then why hide it? Why not share that secret with the world?"

Brother Paul closed the manuscript with a firm gesture. "Because some secrets are not meant to be shared. They are meant to be kept, to inspire, not to be consumed."

His words affected me more than I wanted to admit. I felt that there was something true in what he was saying, something that went beyond stories and legends. But I also felt that I could not stop there.

"What can we do with this information?" I asked, trying to hide my impatience. Brother Paul stared at me for a long time, as if assessing my determination. Then he pointed to the map we had brought with us.

"Continue on your way," he said. "But remember: each step will bring you closer to the oven and farther from what you know. You will be tested, not only in your abilities, but also in your heart."

We left the room with a mixture of emotions: excitement, fear and a growing awareness of the weight of what we had undertaken. Silverio walked beside me, his face pale but his eyes alight.

"Peppeniello," he said, breaking the silence. "Do you believe it? All of it?"

I looked at him, searching for the right words. "I don't know if I believe that," I replied. "But I know I have to find out."

Sofia, who was walking ahead of us, barely turned around. "Legends are truer than we think," she said, her tone devoid of emotion. "Not because they are real, but because they show us what we want to see."

I did not answer. The sun was setting, and shadows were stretching around us like skeletal fingers. I felt that our journey had just begun, and that each step would bring us closer to a truth we may not have been ready to face.

The legend of the lost oven

The wind whistled through the narrow streets of Naples, kicking up dust and spreading the pungent smell of the sea to the deepest alleys. The city appeared to be enveloped in an atmosphere of anticipation, a quiet promise lingering above the incessant activity of its inhabitants. I found myself seated at a rickety table, in the shade of a small porch, as the sun slowly set behind Vesuvius. In front of me, a glass of untouched red wine, and next to it, an elderly historian who seemed carved in stone.

"Peppeniello Cortesano," he said in a voice as rough as sandpaper, his gaze lost in the advancing twilight. "I have heard that you are searching for answers to an ancient mystery. I hope you are ready to listen, for the story you are about to hear is not for the faint of heart."

The man, known as Don Michele, was a well-respected figure in the slums. He knew the stories of Naples better than anyone and his face, marked by time and deep wrinkles, resembled a map with many forgotten secrets.

"Tell me about the lost oven," I said, trying to maintain a respectful but firm tone. Don Michele took a long sip from his glass, staring at me with eyes that glowed like chunks of coal. "Ah, the oven," he murmured, letting the words roll out of his mouth with deliberate slowness. "You know many people look for it, but few understand what it really means."

I leaned forward, fascinated by Don Michele's enigmatic tone. "What does it mean, then?"

He smiled, a smile that had nothing reassuring about it. "The lost oven is not just a place, Peppeniello. It is a symbol. It is the story of Naples itself, its soul encased in fire and flour."

Don Michele paused, lighting a cigar which he pulled slowly, filling air with thick smoke. Then he began to speak.

"Many years ago, when Naples was still a patchwork of misery and splendor, there was a baker. No one knew his name, but everyone knew his art. It was said that he was able to transform nothing into something extraordinary. He did not need any refined ingredients: a little flour, a handful of salt, and he could create a pizza that was not just food, but an experience, a miracle."

His words seemed to envelop the place like a thin fog. Silverio, who had stood beside me with an expression somewhere between skepticism and terror, and I listened in silence.

"But the baker," Don Michele continued, "was not interested in wealth or fame. He just wanted his art to remain pure. And so, when he realized that others were trying to steal his secret, he decided to hide the oven."

"And where did he hide it?" intervened Silverio, his tone higher than he intended. Don Michele glowered at him, then turned back to me. "It is said that he dug a labyrinth beneath the city. A place protected by riddles and traps, a place that only the worthy could have reached. But the truth, Peppeniello, is that no one knows if it really exists. Legend is all we have."

I ran a hand through my hair, torn between the fascination of the story and the weight of its implications. "What about these riddles? What do they really protect? Just an oven, or something more?"

Don Michele chuckled, a dry sound that sounded like a broken piece of wood. "That's the right question, boy. But don't expect me to have all the answers. The oven is not just an object. It is a testament, a legacy left to those who can see beyond the surface of things."

The conversation continued in fits and starts, like a river occasionally getting lost among the rocks. Don Michele recounted tales of those who had sought the oven, disappearing without a trace. He spoke of symbols hidden in the alleys, secret brotherhoods guarding the labyrinth, and a now-lost manuscript containing the recipe for the original pizza.

Each word fueled a fire within me, an overwhelming desire to discover the truth. But I also felt a shadow growing, a sense of danger that sent chills down my spine.

By the time we left Don Michele, night had fallen on the town. Silverio walked beside me, his hands tucked into his apron pockets and his gaze turned to the pavement.

"And you believe it, Peppeniello?" he finally asked, breaking the silence.

I did not answer right away. The alleys around us were deserted, and the sound of our footsteps seemed to bounce off the walls of houses like a distant echo.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I can't ignore what I've heard. If there is even a chance that the oven exists, I have to find it."

Silverio nodded slowly, but his face betrayed a growing anxiety. "We're not made for these things," he murmured. "I'm just a baker, you're a cook. We're not heroes." I stopped and looked into his eyes. "Sometimes, we don't choose the stories we are part of. They choose us."

The rest of the way was silent. But inside, the noise was deafening: the legend of the oven, the symbols on the map, the promise of something extraordinary hidden beneath the streets of Naples. I felt each step bring me closer to a secret that would change everything.

Yet, I also knew that I was entering unknown territory, where history and legend were intertwined in a way I could not yet comprehend.

Peppeniello's decision

Evening had fallen over Naples, and its cloak of stars stretched over me, reflecting an apparent calm that hid the turmoil inside my chest. I walked alone, with my hands stuffed in my pockets and my hat pulled down over my eyes, along the narrow, winding alleys that seemed to grow tighter and tighter, almost suffocating me. Every step I took echoed through the walls of the houses like a distant drum. I had heard the legend of the lost oven. I had seen the fragmentary map and engraved symbols. Now, before me loomed a decision that would change everything: follow that ancient call or let it fade away like the smoke of a freshly extinguished candle.

My feet unconsciously carried me toward the harbor, a place I had always associated with freedom, with the idea of a larger world stretching beyond the dark waters of the gulf. Boats swayed to the rhythm of the sea, their skeleton-black masts pointing skyward.

I stopped in front of a rundown tavern, the wood of the door peeling and the sound of raucous voices and laughter coming from ajar windows. I entered without much thought, driven more by the need to distract myself than by the desire for company. The smell of sour wine and tobacco smoke filled my nostrils as I sat at a table in the corner. I ordered a glass and surveyed the crowd: sailors exchanging unlikely stories, merchants trying to forget a day of bargaining, and a group of musicians tuning worn-out instruments.

Silverio arrived shortly after, like a shadow I could not shake off. He sat across from me, his face pulled tight and his hands wringing his handkerchief.

"Have you decided?" he asked, without preamble.

I looked into his eyes, trying to read past his insecurity. "It's not that simple, Silverio."

"What is there to decide? This story about the oven-it's just a legend. It won't do you any good, Peppeniello."

I sighed, taking a sip of the wine that tasted more like vinegar than grapes. "What if it's not just a legend? What if it's real? I can't ignore what I saw, what I feel. It's like something is calling me."

Silverio fidgeted in his chair, looking around as if afraid someone was listening. "I wouldn't do it," he finally said, with an edge to his voice. "It's not worth the risk."

His words affected me more than I wanted to admit. I knew he was right, in part. Seeking the oven meant leaving behind everything I knew, venturing into a world of uncertainty and danger. But there was something, a fire inside me that I could not ignore, a flame that burned brighter than any reason.

I stood up abruptly, dropping some coins on the table. "I can't wait, Silverio. Not anymore."

He looked at me with wide eyes, as if I were about to throw myself off a cliff.

"Then go," he murmured. "But don't expect me to follow you."

I did not answer. I walked out of the tavern and found myself back in the alleys, my breath short and my mind full of conflicting thoughts.

I walked until dawn, following a path that seemed marked out not by my feet but by an unseen force. The streets became narrower, the houses taller, and the noise of the city gradually faded, leaving only the sound of my footsteps.

The Duomo stood out against the morning sky, an ancient sentinel that seemed to guard all the secrets of Naples. I stopped on the steps, my breath labored and my heart heavy, as if I already knew I would never be the same again.

I entered. The fresh air enveloped me, the silence interrupted only by the faint crackling of candles. I walked toward the tombstone, feeling each step like an echo of my own heart. I knelt down, letting the calm of the place envelop me. Now I knew what I had to do. The engraved symbols seemed to glow in the flickering light, and I felt a strange calmness invade me.

"You have decided," said a voice behind me.

I turned sharply, finding myself facing the elderly priest I had first met. His face was half hidden shadow, but his eyes shone with a light I could not decipher.

"Yes," I replied, without hesitation. "I can no longer ignore this call."

He nodded slowly, as if he had already anticipated my answer. "The path you are about to take is not an easy one, Peppeniello. It will test you, challenge you in ways you cannot yet imagine. Are you ready?"

I did not answer right away. I stood up, staring into his eyes. "I don't know if I'm ready," I finally said. "But I know I have to."

The priest smiled, a sad and meaningful smile. "Then go. But remember: the oven is not just a place. It is a test. And only the worthy can find it."

Leaving the Cathedral, the sun was beginning to rise, tinging the sky a red that looked like fire. I paused for a moment on the steps, watching the city slowly wake up. I felt that day would be the beginning of something extraordinary, something that would change not only me, but everything I knew.

And with that thought, I began my journey.

Chapter 4

The descent into the dungeon

The morning air was crisp, a breath of life trying in vain to dispel the darkness I felt inside. Naples was slowly waking up, the sound of voices rising from the streets like a chaotic and familiar symphony. But there was no room for the everyday, not for me. Today I would cross a threshold that few had crossed before. I stopped in front of entrance to the cathedral, my heart beating to the rhythm of a distant march. Behind me, Silverio and Sofia stood motionless, like figures carved in stone. Silverio's face was pale, his nervous hands tormenting the edge of his apron, while Sofia seemed almost heedless, her blue eyes fixed on the ancient portal as if trying to unlock its secrets.

"Are you sure?" I asked, without turning around.

Silverio took a step forward, swallowing noisily. "I've never been less in my life," he murmured.

Sofia raised an eyebrow, her tone devoid of emotion. "Questions are for the doubtful, Peppeniello. Let's not waste time."

Our entry into the dungeon was accompanied by the creak of the heavy iron door closing behind us. The sunlight faded, leaving us shrouded in darkness broken only by the flickering of flashlights.

We descended a steep, narrow staircase, our footsteps echoing off the walls like a distant call. The air thickened, heavy with moisture and the metallic smell of aged stone. Each step seemed to bring us closer to a different world, a place where history and mystery were intertwined in ways I could not yet understand.

"This place..." began Silverio, but his voice faded into a whisper.

"Don't talk," Sofia interrupted him, her tone sharp. "Silence is the first requirement for listening."

I turned to her, confused. "Listen to what?"

Sofia barely smiled, a cold smile that did not reach her eyes. "The past. It is written in every stone, if you know how to decipher it."

The dungeon finally opened into a large hall. The ceiling was high, supported by carved columns that seemed to belong to a bygone era, and the floor was a mosaic

of worn stones. In the center of the room, a time-blackened iron door stood out like a silent guardian.

I approached cautiously, lifting my flashlight to examine the symbols engraved on the surface of the door. They were intricate, lines weaving into patterns that seemed to dance in the flickering light.

"This is an enigma," said Sofia, standing next to me. Her fingers brushed over the symbols, tracing their outlines as if they were letters in a language that only she could understand.

"An enigma?" asked Silverio, with an edge to his voice.

Sofia nodded, her tone devoid of patience. "A way to keep intruders out, but also an invitation, for those who can solve it."

I squatted down beside her, watching the symbols carefully. "What about you? Can you solve it?"

Sofia did not answer right away. She took a piece of parchment from her bag and compared it with the marks on the door. "I can try," she finally said. "But it may take time."

While Sofia worked, Silverio and I explored the hall. Our flashlights revealed details that were not initially apparent: intricate carvings along the columns, pottery fragments dispersed on the floor, and an ancient altar appearing to have been hastily abandoned.

"Peppeniello," whispered Silverio, moving closer to one of the columns. "Look at this."

I approached, observing what it indicated. One carving, deeper than the others, depicted a stylized oven, surrounded by flames that seemed to dance.

"That's it," I said, my breath short. "It's the oven."

Silverio nodded, but his face was pale. "What if it's a trap? What if someone wanted to protect it at all costs?"

"Maybe they do," I replied. "But we're not here to stop."

The sudden click of the door made us turn around. Sofia stood up, her expression satisfied. "Done," she announced.

The iron door slowly opened, revealing a passageway that descended even deeper. The darkness beyond was total, like an abyss beckoning.

"There is no way to know what lies ahead," Sofia said, staring at us one by one. "If you are afraid, it's time to turn back."

Silverio swallowed but said nothing. I nodded, clutching the flashlight tightly, "Let's go."

The passage wound like a snake, narrow and oppressive. The walls were rough, etched with symbols that seemed to follow an unknown order. The air grew hotter and hotter, laden with a smell I could not identify.

"There is something here," Silverio said, his voice trembling.

"There's nothing there," I reassured him, although I wasn't sure I believed it.

Suddenly, the passageway opened into another hall. This one was smaller but decorated with mosaics depicting scenes of ancient life: peasants harvesting grain, bakers working with fire, and a central figure who seemed to guide everything, a man with a solemn expression and a crown of flames.

"The oven master," Sofia murmured, staring at the figure.

Silverio approached, the flashlight trembling in his hands. "What does that mean?"

Sofia did not answer. Her gaze was fixed another door, smaller but apparently sturdier. "The next test," she said.

The tension was palpable as we prepared to face what awaited us beyond that door. Every step, every breath, seemed to bring me closer to a truth that I could not yet comprehend, but that I could already feel weighing on my heart.

And so, with one last look at my companions, I crossed the threshold.

The first enigma

The sound of the door closing behind us echoed in the depths of the passage, taking away the light and comfort of the room we had just left. Now we were alone, immersed in a silence so absolute that even our breathing seemed intrusive. The flashlight in my hand flickered slightly, but I didn't know if it was from my uncertainty or from the slight wind blowing in from the hallway.

Silverio, wide-eyed and face as pale as a sheet, huddled against the damp wall, seeking comfort in the contact with the cold stone. Sofia, on the other hand, strode forward, her flashlight high and her chin raised as if nothing could scratch her. I stood in the middle, between Silverio's fear and Sofia's icy confidence, searching for a balance I could not find.

"Where does this road lead us?" whispered Silverio, his voice a thread trembling.

"We'll know soon enough," I replied, injecting as much courage into my words as I could muster.

Sofia turned toward us, her flashlight casting long shadows on the dark walls. "It's not a road," she said, in that calm, analytical tone that irritated and fascinated me at

the same time. "It is a path. Every step is designed to test anyone who dares to venture here."

Silverio swallowed, the noise clearly audible. "What if we fail the test?"

"Then we will never go out," Sofia replied without blinking.

We continued in silence, the corridor winding before us like the body of a snake, until it opened into a larger room. My flashlight revealed walls adorned with inscriptions in languages I did not recognize, and a floor decorated with intricate mosaics. In the center of the room was a low altar, above which rested a circular object, resembling an ancient scale.

Sofia approached immediately, her blue eyes scanning every detail. Silverio stayed behind, his gaze turned toward the exit as if he wanted to escape at any moment.

"It's here," Sofia said, her tone charged with a strange excitement. "The first enigma."

I approached, observing the altar carefully. The scale had two plates, one empty and the other with a small block of stone. Next to the altar was a pile of objects: a pitcher water, a bunch of dried wheat, and a small loaf of bread.

"What should we do?" I asked, my heart pounding.

Sofia pointed to an inscription engraved on the base of the altar. Her fingers traced the letters as she read aloud.

"Weigh the life, not the weight. Find the balance, or you will lose the essence."

There was a long silence. The phrase echoed in my mind, complicated and at the same time simple. Weigh life, not weight. What did it mean?

Silverio approached, looking at the objects with a confused expression. "There must be a trick," he said. "Maybe we need to use these objects to balance the scales."

"It's not that simple," Sofia replied. "This is not a puzzle of strength or logic. It is an enigma of understanding."

"And what does that mean?" I asked, trying to keep calm.

Sofia sighed, as if annoyed by our ignorance. "Life is not measured in weight, Peppeniello. It is measured in meaning. We have to figure out which of these objects represents the essence of life and use it to balance the scales."

Silverio stared at the pile of items, his face contracted into a grimace of concentration. "The bread," he said, after a long moment. "It has to be the bread. It's the food of life, isn't it?"

Sofia looked at him with a mixture of pity and impatience. "Bread is the result, Silverio. But it is not the essence. Without the grain, there would be no bread. Without water, there would be no wheat."

His words struck me. I bent down, picking up the bunch of dried wheat. It was light, almost insignificant, but there was something eternal about those tiny golden grains, something that spoke of cycles and rebirth.

I approached the scale, placing the bunch of grain on the empty plate. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the scale moved, finding a perfect balance.

Silverio held his breath as Sofia watched with a barely-there smile.

"You chose well," he said.

But before I could respond, a sudden noise filled the room. The walls seemed to vibrate, and a section of the floor opened, revealing a staircase descending further down.

"Are we ready?" I asked, looking at my companions.

Silverio looked like he was about to vomit, but he nodded. Sofia merely nodded firmly, already ready to continue.

We wandered down the staircase, leaving the room of the first enigma behind us. Each step took us farther from the world we knew, closer to a secret that seemed to pulsate in the bowels of the earth.

Yet with each step, I felt growing within me not only the fascination of mystery, but also the weight of responsibility. For the lost oven was not just a legend. It was a test. A proof that would change us forever.

The flame room

The staircase wound downward like an endless spiral, the time-worn stones seeming to groan under the weight of our footsteps. The sound of our shoes against the stone amplified in the echo of the hallway, an eerie rhythm that intertwined with Silverio's labored breathing. The air grew hotter and hotter, laden with an acrid smell that tingled the nose and throat.

"I feel -- I feel hot," Silverio murmured, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

"We are close to the heart of this place," Sofia replied, without slowing down. Her flashlight flickered in front of us, casting dancing shadows on the tunnel walls.

I did not speak. I could feel my heart hammering in my chest, but not from exertion. It was a mixture of excitement and fear, a growing awareness that we were about to enter a place that did not belong upstairs.

When we reached the end of the staircase, the tunnel opened into a vast circular room, so large that the light from the flashlights could only illuminate part of the

walls. In the center of the room, a brazier burned with living flames that danced like wild beings. Concentric circles decorated the floor, the carvings pulsing like a breath. I approached cautiously, reading the engraved words in a low voice: "Only those who feed the fire will find the way. But beware: fire consumes everything."

"The flame room," Sofia said, slowly advancing toward the brazier. Her eyes sparkled in the firelight as she scanned the symbols carefully.

I stood back, looking at the walls of the room. They were covered with frescoes, faded by time but still visible: scenes of ovens, hands kneading, and flames enveloping everything. One figure stood out above them all, a man wrapped in an aura of fire, with a stern, solemn expression.

"That must be the kiln master," I said, pointing to the fresco.

Sofia nodded, without taking her eyes off the brazier. "And this is her proof," she said.

We approached the innermost circle, the one that enclosed the brazier. In the center, carved in stone, was an inscription:

"Only those who feed the fire will find the way. But beware: fire devours everything."

Silverio stepped back a step, his face tense in a grimace of fear. "What do you mean? Do we have to put something in the fire?"

Sofia looked at him with a mixed expression of pity and impatience. "Fire represents transformation," she said. "But also, destruction. We must choose what to sacrifice in order to continue."

"Sacrifice?" stammered Silverio. "I have nothing to sacrifice!"

I watched the brazier, feeling the intense heat that seemed to penetrate my skin. The flame was alive, almost pulsing, as if waiting for something.

"There is always something to sacrifice," I finally said, my tone more assertive than I expected.

Sofia nodded, almost imperceptibly. She knelt beside the brazier, pulling out from her bag a small object wrapped in a silk cloth. She unrolled it, revealing an old iron key, worn by rust but still intact.

"This key belonged to my grandfather," he said, his voice suddenly softer. "It was all he had left when he lost everything. It is a symbol of his strength and resilience. But it is also a memory that holds me back."

Before we could respond, he threw the key into the fire. The flames crackled, becoming higher and more intense for a moment, before dancing back with the same wild calm.

"Now it's your turn," he said, staring at me with eyes that seemed to see beyond my soul.

Silverio stirred, his labored breathing filling the silence of the room. "I-I have nothing!" he said, his voice broken with anxiety. "I can't do it!"

I put my hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down. "It's not a matter of having something," I told him. "It's a matter of choosing what to let go of."

Silverio looked at me, his eyes full of fear and despair. Then, with a trembling gesture, he pulled a small object out of his apron: a silver medallion with the image of a woman.

"It was my mother's," he said, almost crying. "I don't know if I can do that."

"You have to choose, Silverio," Sofia said, her tone cold but not without understanding.

Silverio closed his eyes, breathing deeply. Then, with a quick gesture, he threw the medallion into the fire. The flames enveloped it, glowing for a moment before becoming calm again.

Now it was my turn. I knelt in front of the brazier, feeling the heat that seemed to penetrate to my bones. I had nothing with me, no object I could offer. But I felt that the sacrifice did not have to be material.

I closed my eyes, focusing on what was holding me back, what was binding me to the past. And then I realized. I had to let go of the guilt, the weight of my family legacy, the fear of not living up to it.

I opened my eyes and whispered to the fire, "I offer my doubt. I offer my past."

The flames rose suddenly, shining with such a bright light that I had to look away. Then they subsided, and the brazier went out, leaving us in half-light.

A sound emerged from the silence, a low, rhythmic noise, like a mechanism being set in motion. A section of the floor slowly opened, revealing a hidden passageway that led even deeper.

"We passed the test," Sofia said, standing up and looking at me with a new light in her eyes.

Silverio stood, trembling but still steadfast. "What now?" he asked, his voice a mixture of fear and determination.

I stood up, clutching the flashlight more tightly. "Now let's move on."

And with those words, we went forward into the passage, leaving behind the flame room and all that we had sacrificed.

Chapter 5

The hidden labyrinth

The passageway wound before us like an open wound in living stone, narrow and suffocating. The walls were rough, marked with deep scratches that looked like the work of ancient claws. The flashlight in my hand cast flickering shadows, warping the contours of the tunnel into silhouettes that seemed alive.

Silverio walked behind me, his heavy, irregular breathing filling the oppressive silence. From time to time, I could hear him murmuring a soft prayer, as if he were trying to banish darker thoughts. Sofia, on the other hand, was advancing ahead of us with a determined stride, her flashlight high and her face impassive like a mask carved in marble.

"How long do you think this descent will last?" asked Silverio, his voice a strained whisper.

"Until the labyrinth decides to let us out," Sofia replied without turning around.

I didn't answer. Every fiber of my being was focused on our surroundings, looking for signs, clues, anything that might help us understand where we were going. The air grew thicker, laden with an indefinable smell, a mixture of wet stone and something sweetish that I could not identify.

After what seemed like an eternity, the tunnel suddenly opened into a vast hall. The ceiling was so high that the light from the flashlights could not reach it, leaving it shrouded in darkness. The walls were decorated with intricate reliefs, scenes of banquets and ovens, hands kneading and mouths laughing. But there was something eerie about those images, something I could not explain.

"Look there," Sofia said, pointing to the center of the room.

In the center was a circular structure, waist-high stone wall enclosing another opening. I approached cautiously, raising my flashlight to illuminate the interior. It was a well, but not like any I had seen before. The walls were smooth, and the bottom was invisible, swallowed by darkness.

"The heart of the labyrinth," Sofia murmured, with a note of reverence in her voice.

Silverio clutched at me, his wide eyes staring at the well. "I don't like it," he said, shaking his head. "I don't like it at all."

"No one asked you to love him," Sofia replied sharply.

I knelt beside the edge of the well, trying to see through the darkness. "There must be a passage," I said, more to myself than to others.

Sofia approached, watching the edge carefully. "It's not just a well," she said. "Look at the symbols."

I bent down further, noticing for the first time a series of incisions along the edge. They were thin, almost imperceptible lines that formed a complex pattern. They looked like waves crashing against rocks, or perhaps flames rising toward the sky. "It's a conundrum," I said, feeling the adrenaline rising.

Sofia nodded, "And a test. We have to decipher these symbols to continue. But be careful: any mistake could cost us dearly."

Silverio stepped back, shaking his head vigorously. "No. I won't. I don't want to end up in there."

"Then stay here," Sofia replied, without even looking at him. "Peppeniello and I will take care of it."

We examined the symbols together, our flashlights illuminating the intricate details. Each line seemed to tell a story, a fragment of a larger narrative that I could not fully comprehend.

"This symbol," I said, pointing to a wave that seemed to protrude from the rest. "It could represent water. And the one next to it -- could it be grain?"

Sofia nodded, "Perhaps. But it's not just the individual meanings that matter. It's how they combine."

We continued to examine the symbols, looking for connections, patterns, anything that might give us a clue. But every time we thought we had found an answer, another detail confused us.

Silverio, meanwhile, hovered nervously around the room, his gaze constantly shifting from the well to the walls, as if searching for an exit that was not there.

"We can't waste too much time," Sofia said, raising her voice. "The labyrinth will not wait."

"What if we make a mistake?" I asked, staring at her.

Sofia looked at me with an icy stare. "Then the labyrinth will catch us."

After another long moment, an idea came to me. "Maybe we shouldn't try to solve it by ourselves," I said.

Sofia raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

I stood up, staring at the well. "Maybe the well will give us the answer. Maybe we need to ... listen to it."

Sofia hesitated, but then nodded, "It's worth a try."

I knelt down again beside the well, closing my eyes and concentrating on the sound. Initially, I heard only silence, an emptiness so profound that it seemed to cover all other noise. Gradually, a sound emerged: a faint gurgling, resembling flowing water.

"There is something over there," I said, opening my eyes.

"What?" asked Silverio, approaching cautiously.

"I don't know," I replied. "But I think we should trust it."

I picked up a small fragment of stone from the floor and dropped it into the well. The sound of the stone hitting the bottom resonated like a distant echo, followed by the sound of moving mechanisms.

Suddenly, a section of the wall opened, revealing a narrow passageway that extended into the darkness.

"We did it," said Sofia, with a satisfied smile.

Silverio hesitated, but finally nodded. "Let's go," he said, even though his voice was trembling.

We wandered into the passage, leaving the pit behind. Each step brought us closer to the heart of the labyrinth, where the secret of the lost oven lay hidden.

But as we moved forward, I could not help but wonder: how many more trials lay ahead? Would we be strong enough to pass them all?

The guardian of the labyrinth

The passage narrowed around us like a stone trap, forcing us to proceed in single file. The flickering light of the flashlights revealed only a few steps ahead of us, while the rest of the tunnel remained shrouded in darkness. The air was filled with tension, and our footsteps echoed loudly, as if the labyrinth amplified every sound to remind us that we were intruders.

Silverio, trailing behind me, was breathing heavily, his anxiety growing with each step. Sofia walked ahead of us, unflappable as ever, her flashlight raised high and her eyes scanning every detail with intense concentration.

"I don't like this silence," Silverio murmured, disrupting the tense atmosphere.

"You don't have to like it," Sofia replied without turning around. "It just has to keep you alive."

My flashlight illuminated another opening ahead of us, a solid wooden door set in stone, decorated with symbols that intertwined like the roots of an ancient tree. I paused, observing it carefully. Each symbol seemed to pulsate under the light, as if it had a life of its own.

"We have reached another test," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

Sofia nodded, advancing toward the door. Her slender fingers brushed over the carvings, tracing the outlines of the symbols as if she were reading them. "These marks speak of a guardian," she said. "A presence that protects what lies beyond." Silverio stepped back a step, his eyes wide. "A guardian? What kind of guardian?" Sofia did not answer immediately. She pushed open the door with both hands, and it slowly opened, revealing a large, dimly lit room. In the center, a figure stood motionless, shrouded in shadow.

I advanced cautiously, clutching the flashlight tightly. The figure became clearer with each step: it was a man, or so it seemed, wearing ancient armor that glittered slightly under the flickering light. His head was covered by a helmet decorated with symbols similar to those on the door, and in his hands he clutched a long, rusty sword.

"He doesn't look ... alive," Silverio whispered, but his voice conveyed hope rather than certainty.

Sofia ignored him, moving even closer. The figure remained motionless, like a statue. But there was something about it, a feeling I could not ignore, as if the very air around him vibrated with an invisible energy.

"He is the guardian," Sofia said. "And he won't let us pass without proof."

His words had not yet stopped resonating when the figure moved. The sword creaked slightly as he rose, and the metallic sound of his step broke the silence of the room.

"Who dares disturb the sacred labyrinth?" asked a deep voice, like distant thunder. Silverio stammered something but could not form comprehensible words. I stepped forward, trying to hide the tremor in my voice. "We are here to look for the lost oven," I said. "We mean no disrespect, but we have to proceed."

The watchman tilted his head slightly, his helmet gleaming in the light. "The oven does not belong to you," he said. "Only those who prove themselves worthy may continue."

Sofia lifted her chin, staring at him with determination. "And what do we have to do to prove it?"

The guard lifted a hand, pointing to the floor. I noticed only then that part of the room was decorated with an intricate mosaic of symbols, each one different from the next.

"Choose the symbol that represents truth," said the guardian. "Only the right choice will open the way for you. But beware: a mistake will lead you to ruin."

We approached the mosaic, the flashlights illuminating the colorful symbols. There were dozens, each with a different meaning: a shining sun, a drop water, a tree with deep roots, a flame that seemed to burn even in stone.

Silverio stirred, his accelerated breathing filling the room. "We can't know what the answer is!" he exclaimed, the panic evident in his voice.

"We can," Sofia replied, her tone cold. "We just have to use our heads."

I knelt beside the mosaic, looking at each symbol carefully. Every detail seemed important, but I could not find a connection, a clue that would guide me to the right answer.

"Maybe it's the flame," I said, pointing to the fire symbol. "It represents the oven, doesn't it?"

Sofia shook her head. "The oven is not just fire. It is transformation. It is balance. We don't have to choose what the oven represents. We have to choose what represents truth."

His words gave me pause. The truth. What did it mean? My mind wandered through memories and lessons from our journey. The oven was a symbol, yes, but it was also something more. It embodied the process of creation and the renewal of life through sacrifice and transformation.

My attention focused on the symbol of the tree, with its deep roots and branches extending toward the sky. "The tree," I said with more certainty. "It represents the cycle of life, connecting what is above with what is below."

Sofia nodded thoughtfully. "That's one possibility. But are you certain?"

I paused, heart racing, then nodded, "Yes. That's it."

I touched the symbol with my hand, and for a moment everything stood still. Then, the mosaic lit up, and a low, deep sound filled the room. The guardian lowered his sword, tilting his head slightly.

"You have chosen wisely," he said. "You may proceed."

A section of the wall opened, revealing a narrow, dark passageway. I stood up, my breath coming out in jerks as I tried to calm myself. Silverio seemed on the verge of fainting, but Sofia was already ready to go on.

"Let's go," he said, without hesitation.

As we made our way through the passage, I couldn't help but wonder if the labyrinth was becoming increasingly difficult, or if we were the ones feeling the brunt of the trials. But one thing was clear: the lost oven was more than a place. It was a journey, a challenge that would change us forever.

And with that knowledge, I kept walking, the flashlight illuminating the path ahead.

The traps of the labyrinth

The passage was tight and dark, the rough stone walls seemed to narrow in on us with each step. The light from the flashlight I was holding illuminated only a small portion of the path ahead of us, leaving the rest shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The silence was interrupted solely by the sound of our footsteps and Silverio's labored breathing as he followed close behind me.

"This place is killing me," Silverio murmured, his voice a trembling whisper. "I don't know how much longer I can last."

Sofia, who was advancing ahead of me, barely turned around, her face sculpted into the usual expression of cold determination. "You have to hold on," she said, without a shadow of emotion. "We're not even close to the end."

Silverio shook his head, sweat pouring down his temples. "You don't understand, Sofia. This place is not normal. I feel -- I feel like it's watching us."

I did not respond, but inside I could feel his words resonating with an unsettling truth. The labyrinth was not just a place. It was alive, and it was watching us, judging our every step.

After what seemed like eternity, the passage opened into a new hall. It was smaller than the others, but no less oppressive. The floor was covered with an intricate mosaic, similar to the one we had seen before, but this time the tiles were blackened, as if they had been burned.

In the center of the room was a stone mechanism: a large wheel with grooves along the edge, as if it had been designed to accommodate something. Around the wheel, carved into the stone, were symbols representing the elements: fire, water, earth and air.

"One more try," Sofia said, approaching the wheel cautiously.

Silverio stood back, his gaze fixed on the wheel as if it were a monster ready to jump. "I don't like it," he said. "I don't like it at all."

Sofia ignored his comment, focusing on the symbols. "This time we must choose the right element," she said. "Only the correct balance will allow us to advance."

I knelt beside her, watching the wheel and symbols carefully. There were four recesses, one for each element, and on either side of the room were four stone

containers, each containing a representative object: a lighted flashlight for fire, a pitcher of water, a handful of earth, and a light feather.

"What if we make a mistake?" asked Silverio, his voice a thread trembling.

Sofia looked at him, her gaze as icy as marble. "If we make a mistake, the labyrinth will make us pay the price."

There was no need for further explanation. We all knew what it meant.

I stood up, looking at the symbols and containers, trying to find a connection, a clue that could guide us. "It weighs life, not weight," I said in a low voice, remembering the conundrum of scales. "Maybe the principle is the same."

"And what does that mean?" asked Silverio, his tone almost desperate.

"It means we have to understand which element is essential for life," I replied. "It's not just about choosing. It's about understanding."

Sofia nodded, pointing to the symbols. "Fire and water are opposites. Earth and air the same. But their balance is what keeps everything alive."

"Then do we have to use them all?" I asked.

Sofia hesitated, "Maybe. But we have to do it in the right order."

We began to examine the containers. I took the lit flashlight, the heat of the fire slightly burning my fingers, and placed it in the first recess of the wheel. Nothing happened.

"Try water," Sofia said.

I took the pitcher and poured a small amount water into the second recess. This time, a slight noise filled the room, like the sound of a gear moving.

"It's working," Silverio said, his tone betraying uncertain hope.

We added the earth in the third recess and the feather in the last. The wheel began to turn slowly, a low, deep sound filling the room.

But then, suddenly, it stopped. A dull noise rang out, and the floor beneath us shook. I looked at Sofia, my heart pounding.

"We did something wrong," he said, in a tone that left no room for interpretation.

Before we could react, the mosaic beneath our feet began to heat up, the blackened tiles glowing a deep red. A noise of moving mechanisms filled the room, and suddenly the floor tilted slightly, as if it wanted to throw us toward the center.

"Run!" I shouted, grabbing Silverio by the arm and dragging him back toward the entrance.

Sofia moved to the side, looking for a stable spot as the floor continued to shake.

"We cannot leave this room without solving the riddle!" she shouted.

I stopped, my breath short, and looked at the wheel. We had to find the balance, but how? Then it hit me: fire and water, earth and air, were not just symbols. They were phases, cycles that alternated.

"We must reverse the order!" I shouted, running toward the containers.

Sofia hurried to join me, and together we removed the objects from the wheel, placing them in a new order: earth, air, water, fire.

This time, the wheel turned without interruption, the sound of the gears getting louder and louder until it stopped with a final click. The floor stopped, the heat vanished, and the mosaic returned to its original state.

A door opened in front of us, revealing another passage.

Silverio slumped against the wall, his face pale and his breathing labored. "I don't know if I can continue," he said, his voice broken.

I knelt beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You have to make it, Silverio,"

I said, trying to infuse him with strength. "We are close. I can feel it."

Sofia stood up, already ready to continue. "We can't stop now," she said, her tone firm.

I looked Silverio in the eyes, and he nodded weakly. I stood up, grabbing the flashlight. "Let's go," I said.

And with that step, we went even deeper into the heart of the labyrinth.

Chapter 6

Meeting with the Silent Brotherhood.

The passageway slowly widened, leading us into a room larger than any we had passed through up to that point. The flickering light of my flashlight revealed carved columns rising toward a ceiling shrouded in shadow. The stone seemed alive, covered with intricate carvings that barely glowed, as if an invisible energy pulsed through them.

The air was different here, thicker, laden with an ancient smell that smelled of incense and worn wax. The silence, so deep that I could hear my own heartbeat, was not natural. It was a silence that spoke, that warned, that judged.

"We got somewhere," Sofia said, breaking the tension with her measured tone.

Silverio, beside me, did not speak. His face was pale, and his eyes moved nervously, scanning the shadows as if waiting for something to emerge from them.

I did not say anything. I just walked, trying to ignore the weight of an invisible gaze that seemed to follow my every movement.

In the center of the room was a circular platform, carved with patterns that resembled flames and spirals. It was empty, but its presence dominated the space, as if it were the beating heart of the place. We approached cautiously, our footsteps resounding like drums in the immensity of the hall.

"What is this place?" asked Silverio, his voice a strained whisper.

Sofia did not respond. She was already kneeling beside the platform, examining the carvings with her usual analytical gaze. But before she could say anything, a sudden sound filled the room.

It was a chant. A low, rhythmic murmur that seemed to emerge from the walls themselves, gradually growing until it filled every corner of the room. I turned sharply, raising my flashlight to get a better look, and that's when I saw them.

Hooded figures emerged from the shadows of the columns, dressed in black robes that seemed to absorb the light. Their faces were hidden, but their movements were fluid, silent, as if they were not walking but gliding across the floor. They arranged themselves around us, forming a perfect circle.

Silverio took a step back, his labored breathing breaking the rhythm of the singing.

"Who-who am I?" he stammered.

"The Brotherhood," Sofia said, her tone lower but fearless.

I clutched the flashlight more tightly, trying to control the frantic beating of my heart. "What do they want?" I asked, although the answer was already clear in my mind.

One of the figures advanced, standing out from the others. She was taller, and the edge of her robe was embroidered with golden symbols that sparkled in the light.

When she spoke, her voice was deep and authoritative, like distant thunder.

"Who are you who dare to enter the heart of the labyrinth?"

I stepped forward, ignoring the terror that gripped me. "We are here to find the lost oven," I said. "We mean no disrespect, but we need to know the truth."

The figure stood still for a moment, then tilted his head slightly. "The truth is not for everyone," he said. "Only the worthy can receive it. Are you ready to prove your worth?"

Silverio stepped back, shaking his head vigorously. "I don't-I can't do this. This is too much."

The Brotherhood leader stared at him, or so it seemed. Although I could not see his face, I felt the weight of his gaze. "Fear is a poison," he said. "Only those who are willing to overcome it can go on."

Sofia stood up, staring at the figure with her usual impassive gaze. "What is the proof?" she asked, her tone direct.

The figure raised a hand, and the singing suddenly stopped. The silence that followed was even more oppressive than the sound, an emptiness that seemed to suck everything in.

"The test is simple," he said. "You must prove that you understand the meaning of the oven. Not with words, but with actions."

In front of us, on the platform, a flame appeared. There was no wood or oil, but the fire was burning, alive and pulsating. Three objects materialized around it: a piece of stale bread, a handful of flour and a jug of water.

"The oven is not just fire," the figure said. "It is creation. It is transformation. Show that you understand it, and you will be allowed to continue."

I slowly approached the platform, feeling the heat of the flame on my skin. I looked at the objects, trying to figure out what we should do.

"It's a symbol," said Sofia, standing next to me. "We have to use these elements to create something. Something to show our value."

Silverio watched us from a safe distance, his face pale and his breathing still erratic. "What if we make a mistake?" he asked.

"We will not fail," I said, trying to instill more confidence than I really felt.

I took the flour, letting it crumble between my fingers. I mixed it with water, forming a rough, coarse dough. Then I laid it on the platform, near the fire, letting the heat slowly transform it.

As I worked, I felt the weight of the Brotherhood's stares on me. They did not speak, but their presence was oppressive, as if my every movement was being judged.

Sofia was helping, her hands precise and sure. Silverio, despite his fear, came closer, contributing small gestures, as if he wanted to prove to himself that he could be useful.

When the dough turned into a small piece of bread, I placed it on the platform and turned to the Brotherhood leader. "This is what we can offer," I said, my voice steady despite the tremor I felt inside.

The figure approached, watching the bread carefully. Then, he lifted his gaze toward me. "You have shown understanding," he said. "The oven is not just fire. It is the balance between the elements, the ability to create something out of nothing. You are worthy of continuing."

The flame went out, and a new door opened in front of us, revealing another passageway leading into the darkness.

The Brotherhood stood motionless, watching us as we approached the door. When I turned for one last look, the Brotherhood leader nodded slightly.

"May your path be enlightened," he said.

And with those words, we went even deeper into the heart of the labyrinth.

Evidence of silence

The passage opening before us was different from previous ones. The darkness seemed denser, almost tangible, and the silence that enveloped it was total, as if the world itself had held its breath. The flashlight I was holding illuminated only a few steps ahead of me, and even that faint glow seemed like an intrusion into a place that did not want to be seen.

"There's something strange here," Silverio murmured, his breathing erratic. "I don't even hear the sound of my own footsteps."

He was right. Our movements, which until then had echoed against the stone walls, were now muffled, as if absorbed by an unseen presence. I said nothing, but every fiber in my body was tense, ready to react to the slightest sign of danger.

Sofia advanced ahead of us, her flashlight high and face as impassive as ever. Her apparent calm was almost irritating, but at that moment it was also reassuring. If she showed no fear, I could convince myself, at least for a while, that there was nothing to fear.

The hall we reached was immense, yet suffocating. The ceiling was too high to be seen, shrouded in impenetrable darkness, and the walls were smooth and unadorned except for a single carving above the archway we had entered.

"Silence is the true guardian of knowledge."

Silverio read aloud, his voice breaking that oppressive silence like shattered glass. Before I could answer him, a vibration traveled through the air, and the floor beneath us trembled slightly.

"No talking," Sofia said, her tone sharper than usual. "This place does not forgive those who do not abide by its rules."

Silverio closed his mouth tightly, his already pale face becoming almost transparent.

In the center of the room was another altar, but this time it was bare, with no objects or symbols to guide us. Surrounding the altar in a circle were four low

columns, each decorated with a single symbol carved in stone: an eye, an ear, a mouth, and a hand.

I approached, looking at the symbols carefully. "Another riddle," I murmured, but stopped short, remembering Sofia's words.

She knelt beside the altar, examining the columns with a concentrated gaze. After a moment, she stood up and turned toward us, pointing to the mouth symbol. She brought a finger to her lips, a clear signal of silence.

Silverio nodded nervously, his gaze shifting from me to Sofia as if seeking confirmation. I simply followed suit, standing still and trying to maintain control over my breathing.

As soon as we settled quietly, the floor beneath us began to move. Slowly, the room was transformed: the walls shifted, and new openings appeared, revealing corridors extending in all directions.

"A labyrinth," I thought, but restrained myself from speaking.

Sofia pointed to one of the passages, moving with the confidence of someone who had seen a similar conundrum before. I followed her, with Silverio trailing behind, his hands clasped around the edge of his apron as if it were a lifeline.

Every step we took was accompanied by a silence so deep that even the beating of our hearts seemed too loud. There was no wind, no sound of flashlights, just that oppressive emptiness that seemed to envelop us like a cloak.

The first corridor we entered ended in a dead end. On the wall in front of us was an inscription, but this time it was different.

"He who talks, gets lost."

I turned to Sofia, who was watching the inscription intently. She did not speak, of course, but her gaze became more focused. With a wave of her hand, she guided us to another passage, moving with a grace that did not seem human.

Silverio, however, was breaking down. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier, and his face was marked with a tension that seemed about to explode. I put a hand on his shoulder, trying to wordlessly reassure him.

He nodded weakly, but his gaze betrayed a fear that grew with every step.

The second corridor led us to a smaller hall, this time decorated with reliefs representing mouths open in silent screams. In the center another column, on which was carved a single symbol: a mouth closed by a chain.

Sofia stopped, pointing to the column. She motioned us to come closer, and we followed her, our hearts pounding.

When we were close, Sofia took out a piece of parchment from her bag and placed it on the column. Then she took a piece of charcoal and drew a symbol on top of the parchment: a circle enclosing a broken line.

The column vibrated slightly, and the sound of a moving mechanism filled the room. A door opened in front of us, revealing another passageway.

We continued on, but this time something was different. The silence was no longer total. I could hear a faint murmur, like the sound of a distant voice. I turned toward Silverio, who seemed to have heard it too.

He shook his head, as if trying to get rid of the sound. But the murmuring grew louder, more insistent, until I could no longer ignore it.

"Are you ... hearing something?" whispered Silverio, finally breaking the silence. The floor beneath us shook, and a deafening noise filled the room. The walls seemed to close in around us, and a series of stones broke loose from the ceiling, falling a few steps from where we stood.

"Don't talk!" I shouted, but it was too late.

Sofia pushed us toward another passage, her face betraying for the first time a shadow of concern. "Run!" she said, her voice sharp.

We rushed down the corridor, the walls shaking and the sound of collapse chasing us. When we finally reached a new hall, I stopped, my breath short and my heart beating like a drum.

Silverio slumped to the ground, his face covered by his hands. "I'm sorry," he murmured, almost crying. "I couldn't cope. I couldn't stand that silence."

Sofia fixed him with a cold stare but said nothing. Then she turned back to me.

"We have to be more careful," she said. "The labyrinth does not forgive mistakes."

When we set out again, the silence had returned. But this time, it was not just oppressive. It was personal. Every step we took seemed charged with a meaning I could not yet understand.

And as we advanced into the darkness, I felt that the labyrinth was watching us, waiting for our next mistake.

The suspension bridge

The air suddenly changed as we left the corridor behind. It was not only colder, but carried with it an eerie feeling of vastness, as if we had crossed the threshold of an

abyss. The flickering light of my flashlight revealed an immense hall before us, so large that its boundaries were lost in the darkness.

In the center, suspended over a seemingly endless void, was a bridge of wood and ropes, a structure so old and precarious that it seemed ready to crumble at the first step.

"I don't believe it," Silverio murmured, his voice barely a whisper. "We can't cross it. It's-it's crazy."

I approached the edge, staring at the deck swaying slightly, moved by a wind I could not feel on my skin. I looked down, but saw nothing but darkness, a darkness so deep it was dizzying.

Sofia stopped beside me, her face impassive. "We have no choice," she said, her tone devoid of emotion.

Silverio shook his head, his eyes wide with fear. "I don't. You won't let me set foot on that thing."

"Then stay here," Sofia replied, without even looking at him. "But don't expect the maze to let you go."

His words were cold, but true. There was no turning back. The labyrinth granted no second chances.

"I will go first," I said, trying to mask the tremor in my voice. "If it holds, you will follow."

Sofia nodded slightly as Silverio looked at me with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude.

I placed one foot on the deck, and the wood creaked under my weight. I stopped, holding my breath, and then took another step. The bridge swayed slightly, but it held.

I advanced slowly, each step accompanied by the eerie sound of wood that seemed about to break. I looked ahead, trying to ignore the abyss below me, but the awareness of that emptiness was a constant presence, a weight crushing my chest. When I reached the middle of the bridge, I turned toward the others. "It holds!" I said, my breath short. "You can come!"

Sofia moved first, her step as calm and confident as ever. She showed no sign of fear, which gave me a modicum of comfort.

Silverio, on the other hand, was motionless. His hands clutched the ropes of the bridge, and his face was a mask of pure terror.

"Silverio, move!" I shouted, the sound of my voice fading into the immensity of the room.

"I can't," he murmured, shaking his head. "I can't do it."

Sofia stopped halfway, turning toward him. "If you don't cross, you will die here," she said, her tone sharp. "The labyrinth will not wait."

Silverio looked first at me, then at Sofia, and finally at the bridge. His eyes were filled with tears, but finally he took a step. The wood creaked under his weight, and he froze again.

"Keep going!" I urged him, trying to infuse him with strength.

One step after another, Silverio advanced, his body trembling and his breathing labored. Each of his movements seemed like an eternity, but finally he reached the center of the bridge, where Sofia and I waited for him.

"See, you did it," I said, laying a hand on his shoulder.

Silverio nodded weakly, his face still pale. But before I could say anything else, a sudden noise made us turn around.

The bridge vibrated, and the wind I had not felt before grew stronger, making it sway violently. A low, deep sound filled air, like the roar of an unseen creature.

"What is happening?" cried Silverio, his voice full of panic.

Sofia looked across the bridge to where we needed to get to. "The labyrinth is testing our resolve," she said, her tone calm despite the situation. "We must not stop."

We advanced rapidly, but each step was more difficult than the last. The bridge swayed like a boat in a storm, and the wind seemed to be trying to push us off balance.

When we finally reached the other side, I turned to see the bridge. The light from the flashlight revealed that the wood was crumbling, the ropes slowly loosening. Silverio slumped to the ground, his breathing heavy. "I-I don't want to do this anymore," he said, almost crying. "I can't go on."

I knelt beside him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You did it," I said, trying to infuse him with strength. "You made it across the bridge. You can make it through the rest, too."

Sofia did not stop. She was already examining the new room we were in. It was smaller than the previous one, but just as eerie. The walls were decorated with symbols that seemed to move in the flickering light, and in the center another platform, similar to the one we had seen before.

"We don't have time to stop," Sofia said, without turning around.

Silverio looked up at me, his eyes full of fear and despair. "Peppeniello-I am not like you. I am not strong."

"You don't have to be," I replied. "You just have to keep moving."

When we got up again, the wind suddenly ceased, and the hall was enveloped in an oppressive silence. I knew that we had not passed the last test, but at least we had taken another step.

And in that moment, I realized that the labyrinth wasn't just testing us physically. It was judging us, measuring our inner strength, our ability to endure.

And I wasn't sure how much longer we could hold out.

Chapter 7

The room of hidden truths

The new hall was unlike any we had passed through up to that point. There were no intricate symbols or mysterious decorations on the walls. It was bare, minimalist, almost banal in its simplicity. Only a single, massive iron door stood before us, its austere appearance seeming to promise more than it revealed.

"I don't like it," Silverio murmured, his tone charged with nervousness.

"Nothing here pleases," Sofia replied, her gaze fixed on the door. "But that's not why we came."

I approached, flashlight high to better illuminate the engraving above the door. The letters were worn by time, but I could still read them:

"Only those who know themselves will be able to cross over."

Those words affected me more than I wanted to admit. It wasn't just a conundrum. It was a personal challenge.

"What does it mean?" asked Silverio, staring at the engraving as if hoping it might answer him.

Sofia moved beside me, her flashlight illuminating the surface of the door. "It means we can't hide," she said. "This room will confront us with ourselves. We must be ready to face it."

Silverio took a step back, shaking his head. "I don't want to do that. I can't."

I turned toward him, trying to hide my own hesitation. "We have no choice," I said.

"We haven't come this far to stop."

He looked at me, his eyes full of fear. "What if-what if what I find I don't like?"

I didn't know what to answer him. It was a question I had asked myself as well, but I had not yet found an answer.

The door opened with a long, ragged creak, revealing a room bathed in dim, eerie light. In the center, three tall, thin mirrors stood like silent guardians. Their surface

reflected nothing, not even the light from our flashlights, as if they were made of darkness instead of glass.

Sofia advanced first, her movements measured. "These are no ordinary mirrors," she said, watching them carefully.

"What else could they be?" asked Silverio, his voice a thread trembling.

Sofia did not answer right away. She paused in front of one of the mirrors, her reflection not appearing. "They are mirrors of the soul," she finally said. "They will show us what we don't want to see."

I approached one of the mirrors, my heart pounding. The surface was smooth and cool to the touch, but when I looked inside, I did not see my face. I saw something different.

Images began to form slowly, like condensing smoke. I saw myself as a child, running through the streets of Naples with my father. It was a happy scene, but my heart clenched. That was the past, a past I had tried to forget.

Then the image changed. I saw myself older, my eyes filled with anger and frustration. These were moments I had buried, decisions I had made and was ashamed of. I turned away from the mirror, my breath short.

"I don't want to see this," I murmured.

"You can't avoid it," Sofia said, fixing me with her piercing gaze. "This is the price you have to pay."

Silverio approached one of the mirrors but stopped before looking in it. "I don't want to do that," he said, shaking his head.

"If you don't, you won't be able to continue," Sofia replied.

He hesitated, then, with a shuddering breath, looked up at the mirror. His reaction was immediate: he pulled back, his hands covering his face. "No," he said, almost shouting. "This can't be true."

I approached him, putting a hand on his shoulder. "What did you see?" I asked, my voice gentle.

He shook his head, his eyes filled with tears. "I can't say it," he murmured. "I don't want to say it."

Sofia, on the other hand, stood in front of her mirror, motionless. She showed no emotion, but I could see the tension in her eyes. When she finally turned toward us, her face was colder than ever.

"We have seen what we needed to see," he said. "Now we can move on."

But I was not so sure. The mirrors were not just a test. They were a revelation, a reminder of who we really were.

The room suddenly lit up, and the three mirrors vanished, leaving us facing another door. This one was different: simple, without carvings or symbols. It was a door that seemed to invite, but also to warn.

Silverio looked at me, his face still marked with fear. "What's on the other side?" he asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "But we have to find out."

Sofia moved toward the door, her flashlight casting long shadows on the walls.

"There is no more time for doubt," she said. "Let's go."

And with those words, we crossed the threshold, leaving behind the room of hidden truths and all that we had seen.

The keeper of the flames

The door closed behind us with a dull clang, leaving us plunged into total darkness for a long moment. The air was heavy, charged with a warmth that did not belong in that underground place. The silence was absolute, broken only by the sound of our breaths.

I lit the flashlight with trembling hands, and the light revealed a new hall. It was different from all the others: there were no columns or intricate symbols, only a huge brazier in the center, its living fire dancing and crackling as if it had a soul of its own.

Around the brazier were concentric circles of inscriptions carved into the stone floor, lines that seemed to flow toward the fire, converging into it like rivers pouring into a sea of flames. The whole space pulsed, as if it were alive.

"This ... is different," Silverio murmured, his gaze fixed on the fire.

"Not different," Sofia replied, advancing toward the brazier. "It is the heart of the labyrinth."

As we approached, the heat became almost unbearable, an invisible pressure that seemed to press against our chests. When we were close enough, the fire suddenly rose, exploding in a wave of light and heat that forced us back.

A figure emerged from the center of the brazier; a black shadow silhouetted against the glaring light. He looked like a man, but there was something unnatural about him. His arms were long and lean, his fingers like claws, and his eyes, two dots of red light, peered at us with a coldness that made my blood run cold.

"You have come this far," said the figure, his voice as deep as a bell tolling. "But you will go no further without facing the janitor."

Silverio clung to my arm, his breath short. "Peppeniello-who is this? What is this?" I did not answer. I didn't know, and at that moment fear was stronger than my desire to understand. Instead, Sofia took a step forward, her gaze steady.

"What should we do?" he asked, his tone devoid of hesitation.

The figure stared at us for a long moment, then pointed to the fire with a slow gesture. "You must prove yourselves worthy," he said. "The lost oven is not just a place. It is a symbol, a legacy. To receive it, you must face the flames of truth."

"Flames of truth?" repeated Silverio, his voice trembling.

The figure did not respond, but the fire seemed to move, the flames rising and falling as if they were breathing.

Sofia turned toward us and fixed her eyes on me. "There is no time to argue," she said. "We have to do this. One of us has to go into the fire."

His words hit me like a fist. I looked at the brazier, the fire dancing like a living being, and felt the sweat run down my back. To enter the fire? It was impossible. It was madness.

"We can't do that," Silverio said, shaking his head vigorously. "We can't-we're going to die!"

Sofia did not answer, but her look told me everything. I knew she was right. There was no other choice.

I took a step forward, my breath short. I felt the heat envelop me, almost pushing me back. Every fiber in my body screamed to stop, but I kept walking, one step at a time, until I was in front of the brazier.

The figure watched me, motionless. "It's not about sacrifice," he said. "It's about understanding. Only those who know the true meaning of fire can go through it."

"And what is this meaning?" I asked, my voice almost a whisper.

The figure did not respond, but his words echoed in my mind. Fire was not just destruction. It was transformation. It was life.

I closed my eyes, feeling the warmth. I reflected on everything we had experienced: the challenges, the riddles, and the fears we had faced. The lost oven was not just a place. It was a metaphor. It was the very heart of our being.

When I opened my eyes again, I took a step forward. And then another. I expected pain, but there was none. The fire surrounded me, but it did not burn me. It was warm, yes, but also enveloping, almost comforting.

I looked around and saw the world changing before me. The flames were no longer flames, but images. I saw my father, teaching me how to cook. I saw my first oven, a simple block of stone that I had built with my own hands. I saw the people who had eaten my bread, their faces full of joy.

Fire was life. It was the connection between people, between past and present.

When I stepped out of the brazier, my companions stared at me with wide eyes. Silverio looked like he was about to faint, while Sofia had an expression I had never seen before: respect.

"You did it," he said, his tone almost incredulous.

I nodded, my breath still labored. "It wasn't just fire," I said. "It was ... everything we are. Everything we want to be."

The figure approached, his red eyes shining. "You have understood," he said. "You have proven yourself worthy. The lost oven awaits you."

The door behind the brazier slowly opened, revealing a new passage. But this time there was no fear in my heart. Only determination.

And with my companions at my side, I went forward into the darkness, ready to discover the ultimate truth.

The Secret of the Lost Oven

The passageway that opened before us was narrow and low, so that we had to move forward curved, with our flashlights raised to prevent the flames from lapping the stone walls. The air was warmer and thicker, laden with a smell that mixed iron and ash, as if the heart of the labyrinth pulsed before us.

"We are close," Sofia said, her voice an almost inaudible whisper.

Silverio, however, did not speak. His face was a mask of tension, and his eyes kept scanning the shadows as if waiting for something to emerge from them.

Occasionally, I would hear him murmur a prayer, but it was such a faint sound that it was lost in the silence.

I walked in the lead, guided by a force I could not explain, a call that seemed to come not from outside, but from within me.

The corridor suddenly opened into a room so vast that the light from our flashlights could not fully illuminate it. The floor was paved with black stones, shining like mirrors, and in the center of the room stood the furnace.

It was imposing, a dark stone monolith with intricate arches and decorations that seemed to pulsate with a light of its own. The fire inside it burned with a blue flame, silent and hypnotic, as if it were alive.

Slowly, the flashlight illuminated an immense circular chamber. The walls were of ancient stone, blackened by time and soot, but intricate decorations still danced there. Every inch was covered with carvings: ears of grain, lines intertwining like praying hands, and stylized figures of men and women offering loaves to a central fire.

In the center of the room, the furnace stood like a silent giant. Its mouth, a dark slit, was surrounded by black and red bricks that seemed to pulsate with heat. Around the oven, concentric circles of symbols radiated outward, like an ancient star that held a secret. Above it, carved in stone, an inscription caught my eye:

"He who lights the fire, lights the life."

I approached slowly, feeling the heat increase with each step. My fingers brushed against the bricks, and for a moment it felt as if they were vibrating under my touch, as if they were alive. My heart was pounding. This was not just an oven. It was a monument, a testament.

"It's ... magnificent," Sofia whispered, her usual cold tone broken by incredulous wonder.

Silverio approached cautiously, his trembling hands clutching the flashlight. "He almost seems to be watching us," he said, his voice cracked with fear.

I did not respond. My mind was flooded with thoughts, images of my grandfather, his kneading hands, his tired but full of life smile. I felt a knot tighten in my throat. This bakery was not just a place. It was a legacy, a promise left to those who were willing to understand it.

Sofia bent down in front of the kiln, looking at the symbols engraved on the bricks. "Look here," she said, pointing to a small cavity. There was something inside: an object wrapped in a thick layer of wax. He carefully pulled it out, and when he released it, it revealed a small wooden tablet. Engraved on it were symbols similar to those we had seen on the tombstone.

"It's the recipe," Sofia said, her voice full of astonishment.

"The recipe?" asked Silverio, looking at her with wide eyes.

Sofia nodded, "Not a common recipe. It's a guide. It tells how to turn on the oven, but ... it also talks about something more."

I approached, reading the words carved on the tablet:

"Fire is not enough. The grain is not enough. Only the heart can give life to what matters."

The words struck me like lightning. It was not just a technical instruction. It was a lesson, a truth that my grandfather had been trying to teach me all my life.

"Peppeniello," said Silverio, interrupting my thoughts. "What do we do now?"

I turned toward him, feeling a wave of determination go through me. "Let's light the fire," I said. "And we do it together."

"It's him," I said, feeling my breath stop for a moment. "The lost oven."
Sofia nodded slowly, approaching cautiously. "It's more than I imagined," she said, her tone almost reverent.
Silverio stayed back, his body rigid. "We shouldn't be here," he murmured. "This place ... is not meant for us."

We approached the kiln, the flashlights illuminating the details of its decorations. The carvings told a story, fragments of a past that seemed as old as time itself. Men and women around a fire, hands kneading, mouths laughing and eating together. And above it all, a recurring symbol: a flame surrounded by a wreath of wheat. "It is a symbol of community," Sofia said, her gaze focused on the carvings. "It's not just an oven. It's a place where people gathered, where they shared not only food, but also their humanity."
"But why hide it?" I asked, the words escaping me before I could hold them back. "Why leave it here, forgotten?"
Sofia turned to me, her eyes shining in the light of the blue flame. "Perhaps because the world was not ready to understand it," she replied.

Chapter 8

The return to the light

We exited the passageway with unsteady steps, the flashlights illuminating a corridor that was narrower and less oppressive than those we had passed through so far. The air was different: less dense, less hot. Each breath seemed to bring with it a new awareness, a sense of lightness that contrasted with the weight of the trials we had faced.

"Is it over?" asked Silverio, his voice full of hope and fear.

I did not answer right away. Ahead of us, a soft, golden light glimpsed in the distance, a promise of freedom that seemed too good to be true. Sofia walked ahead, her stride always firm, but she too paused for a moment, watching the light as if uncertain of what to expect.

"Not yet," he finally said. "But we are close."

The corridor opened into a natural cave, a huge cavern with walls of living stone that glowed in the light of a central flame. It was not the oven, but a simple brazier, lit as if someone was waiting for us.

I approached, watching the flames dancing lightly, almost invitingly. It was a warm, familiar light, but there was something different. On the walls of the cave, faded paintings told stories that seemed as old as time itself: figures working together, hands kneading, fires lit to bake bread.

"We have arrived where it all began," Sofia said, her gaze running through the images on the walls.

Silverio stopped beside her, his breathing still labored. "And what does it mean?" he asked. "Why all this? Why was the oven hidden?"

I crouched beside the brazier, watching the fire. "Maybe because he wasn't ready for the world," I said. "Or maybe because the world was not ready for him."

Sofia nodded slowly. "The oven is not just a place," she said. "It is a symbol. It represents connection, community. But the moment it was used for something else ... it would lose its meaning."

Silverio shook his head, his face a mask of confusion. "I don't understand. Why protect it? Why hide it instead of sharing it with everyone?"

His question gave me pause. I stood up, staring into the flames. "Because not everyone would understand," I finally answered. "Because there are things that cannot be explained. They have to be experienced."

The silence that followed was broken by a sudden noise. A figure emerged from the shadows, wrapped in a dark cloak. It was not the same janitor we had met in front of the oven, but there was something similar about him: an aura of authority and mystery.

"You have found the oven," he said, his voice deep and calm. "But the real challenge is not finding it. It's figuring out what to do with it now."

I turned to face him, my heart beating faster. "We don't want to destroy him," I said. "We want to protect him. But we can't do it alone."

The figure nodded, his eyes shining in the light of the brazier. "You are not alone," he said. "You will never be. The oven is more than a physical place. It is an idea. And ideas never die."

I approached the brazier, letting his words settle in my mind. The idea of protecting the oven, of keeping its meaning intact, was bigger than me, bigger than all of us. But it was also a responsibility we could not ignore.

Silverio, however, still seemed conflicted. "What if we fail?" he asked, his voice a whisper.

The figure stared at him, its gaze seeming to see beyond. "It's not about success or failure," he said. "It's about doing what's right. About keeping the flame alive."

As he spoke, the light in the cave grew brighter, almost dazzling. I could feel the heat on my skin, but it was not uncomfortable. It was comforting, like a hug. The figure turned toward us, pointing to another passage opening in the opposite wall. "Now it is time to return," he said. "But remember: the furnace lives through you. Don't forget that."

Sofia moved first, her step firm and determined. Silverio looked at me, his eyes still full of questions, but he finally nodded and followed me.

The passage led us into the light. As we emerged from the cave, the sun welcomed us, bright and warm, a stark contrast to the darkness of the labyrinth. We were outside, free at last, but with a new weight on our shoulders.

Sofia paused, observing the landscape in front of us. "This is not the end," she said, more to herself than to us. "It's just the beginning."

Silverio sat on a nearby rock, his face a mixture of relief and weariness. "I don't know what to do now," he said.

I knelt beside him, laying a hand on his shoulder. "We will do what we must," I said. "We will protect the oven. It doesn't matter how, but we will."

And as the sun set on the horizon, I knew that our journey was not over. It had only changed. For the lost furnace was no longer just a secret hidden in the heart of the earth. It was a flame that lived within us, a flame that could not be extinguished.

Naples revelation

The city stretched out before us like a motionless sea, its winding streets climbing the hills and fading toward the harbor. Naples welcomed us with its familiar hustle and bustle: the incessant chatter of the piazzas, the clanking of stores opening and closing, and the smell of fresh bread mingling with that of the sea.

We were back, but nothing seemed the same. Each step on those streets I knew so well was laden with a new weight, as if a secret was burning under my skin and trying to come to light.

Silverio walked beside me, his face tense and his hands tormenting his apron.

"What now?" he asked, breaking the silence.

Sofia, as always, already had an answer ready. "Now we begin," she said, without slowing her pace.

We stopped in front of our old workshop. The wooden door was splintered, its hinges squeaking slightly as I opened it. The inside was dark and cold, but the smell of flour and yeast was still there, familiar as a hug.

I turned on a lamp, and the light revealed the shelves full of utensils that seemed to be waiting for us. The oven in the center of the room was silent, but its presence dominated the room, like a heart that had stopped beating but not existing.

"It's not enough to turn it on," Sofia said, eyeing the oven with a critical gaze. "We have to bring back something bigger. We have to bring back what it represents."

Silverio sat on a stool, his face pale. "And how do we do that?" he asked, his voice full of doubt.

I sat down next to him, searching for the right words. "I don't know yet," I said.

"But we have seen what the oven can do. We have seen what it represents. It is a symbol of community, of life. We have to find a way to bring it back to life, not just here, but throughout Naples."

Sofia approached, her hands on her hips. "The lost oven was never just an oven," she said. "It has always been an idea. And an idea lives through people."

We spent the next few days putting the workshop back together. Silverio worked quietly, but his movements were methodical, as if every stroke of the hammer or every brushstroke of paint was a prayer. Sofia, on the other hand, directed everything with her usual precision, dividing the tasks and making sure that nothing was left to chance.

I took care of the oven. I cleaned it every morning, removing years of dust and soot, and every evening I sat beside it, letting my thoughts wander to what we had seen in the labyrinth.

One evening, as I was sorting out the final details, Silverio approached with a bottle of wine and two glasses. "I thought we could toast," he said, his tone shy but sincere.

He poured the wine into glasses and handed me one. "What shall we toast to?" I asked, lifting the glass.

Silverio thought about it for a moment, then smiled faintly. "To the fact that we are still alive," he said.

I laughed, a sound I did not expect. "To this," I said, tapping my glass against his.

On opening day, the store was ready. The walls had been repainted, the shelves rearranged, and the oven gleamed like a restored relic. We had spread the word around the alleys, inviting anyone who wanted to join us.

When the first people arrived, my heart beat faster. They were not just customers. They were friends, neighbors, strangers who had heard about the return of the workshop and wanted to see what we were doing.

Sofia moved confidently among them, talking to anyone with questions, while Silverio tended to the oven, his hands moving with a precision I had never seen in him before.

I stood by the entrance observing everything, letting the scene seep into my mind.

When it was time to light the oven, the room fell silent. Everyone gathered around, their faces illuminated by the light of the lamps. I took a handful of flour and scattered it on the countertop, as I had seen them do hundreds of times before. Silverio lit the fire, and the oven glowed with a warm, familiar light. The smell of bread baking filled the room, and for a moment I felt as if I had returned to that first oven I had built with my father, so many years ago.

When the first bread came out of the oven, I broke it and offered a piece to Sofia and Silverio. Then we passed it among the people, letting each person take a piece. "This is just the beginning," I said, looking at the people eating, their faces lit up with smiles. "The bakery does not belong to us. It belongs to everyone."

As the evening continued, and laughter filled the room, I felt a strange peace within me. This was not the end of our journey, but it was a new beginning, a flame that could not be extinguished.

And as I looked at the oven, I knew that we had done what we had to do. We had brought its meaning back into the light.

The promise of fire

Night had fallen over Naples, bringing an unreal calm to the city. The bustling activity of the alleys had subsided, giving way to a silence interrupted only by the hurried footsteps of a few passersby and the distant barking of a dog. Our store was still lit up, a warm orange light filtering through the windows and onto the pavement.

Inside, the oven continued to burn, the fire dancing like a living creature. The bread baked during the day was almost finished, distributed to the people who had come, attracted by the novelty and the promise of something different. But the evening was not yet over.

Silverio sat on a stool next to the oven, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. He was exhausted, but a light shone in his eyes that I had not seen in a long time. "I still can't believe it," he said, his voice a mixture of disbelief and satisfaction. "We did it, Peppeniello. We brought it all back."

I crouched beside the oven, watching the flames. Each crackle seemed to tell a story, each spark a fragment of the journey that had brought us there. "It's not just us," I said. "It's the oven. It has always been here, waiting for the right moment to come alive again."

Sofia entered through the back door, carrying a crate full of flour. Despite her fatigue, she moved with her usual efficiency, as if nothing could stop her. She placed the crate on the counter and looked at it. "This is just the beginning," she said. "It's not enough to bring it back to light. We have to make sure it stays lit." Silverio raised an eyebrow, his expression doubtful. "And how do we do that?" he asked. "We can't control what happens outside these walls."

Sofia approached the oven, her gaze fixed on the flames. "We can't control everything," she admitted. "But we can inspire. The oven must not just be ours. It must become everyone's."

His words hung in the air, heavy and full of meaning. I said nothing, but inside I knew he was right. The oven was not just a symbol for us. It was something bigger, something that could unite people in ways we did not yet fully understand.

"And where do we start?" I finally asked, breaking the silence.

Sofia turned to me, her gaze firm and determined. "Let's start with Naples," she said. "This city lives on bread and fire. If we can bring the bakery back into people's hearts, the rest will follow."

We spent the next few hours discussing, planning. We decided to involve people in the neighborhood, to invite bakers, artisans, anyone with a connection to bread. We didn't just want to rebuild an old tradition. We wanted to create a new one, one that combined the past and the present into something unique.

Silverio, despite his fears, proved more determined than I expected. "I know a couple of bakers who might be interested," he said. "Old friends of my father's. If I explain to them what we saw ... maybe they will understand."

Sofia nodded. "It's not a matter of explaining," she said. "It's a matter of showing. We have to let the oven speak for us."

The next morning, the store was a buzz of activity. We had baked bread of all kinds: crispy loaves, soft loaves, rosemary-scented flatbreads. Each piece was a message, an invitation to share not only the food, but also the meaning behind it.

As people began to arrive, I felt a wave of excitement sweep over me. They were not just customers. They were families, friends, neighbors. Each face carried a story, each smile a fragment of hope.

Sofia moved among them with her usual confidence, explaining our project, talking about the bakery and its significance. Silverio, on the other hand, was beside me, handing out bread with a shyness that seemed to contradict his new determination.

An older woman approached the counter, her face marked by years. "This bread ... has something special about it," she said, tasting a piece.

I smiled, feeling the warmth of his words. "It's not just the bread," I said. "It's the oven. It's what it represents."

She nodded, her eyes shining with an understanding I had not anticipated. "Bread brings people together," she said. "Always. If this oven can do the same, then you have done something great."

When the day was over, we all sat around the oven, the flames still glowing brightly. There was a weariness in our bodies, but also a satisfaction we had never felt before.

"We took the first step," Sofia said, breaking the silence.

"And there are many more to come," Silverio added, his tone a mixture of weariness and hope.

I looked at the oven, letting its warmth envelop me. "The flame is lit," I said. "Now we have to make sure it never goes out."

That night, as Naples slept, I sat by the oven and let my thoughts wander. I thought about the journey that had brought us there, the trials we had faced, the fears we had overcome. I thought of my father, of what he had taught me, and I felt a strange peace within me.

The bakery was not just a place. It was a promise. A promise of connection, of community, of hope. And I knew we would do everything we could to keep it alive.

The morning began with crisp air and a clear Naples sky reflecting the first rays of the sun. The store was already buzzing and the oven was lit, its heat filling the room with a vibrant energy. The bread was baking, its scent mingling with the market sounds of vendors shouting their wares outside.

Silverio was bustling around the counter, arranging baskets full of golden loaves of bread, while Sofia watched everything with her usual measured calm. I stood by the oven, my hands smeared with flour, checking the next dough to be baked.

"There will be a lot of people today," Sofia said, breaking the silence. I looked at her, wiping my forehead with the back of my hand. "How can you be so sure?"

She raised an eyebrow, a hint of a smile on her face. "Bread has its own way of drawing people in," she said. "And our bakery is starting to be heard."

Silverio huffed, placing a basket on the counter with too much force. "I just hope they are people with money in their pockets," he said, his tone exasperated. "We can't live only on smiles and compliments."

Sofia ignored him, as she always did when he complained. But I understood her concern. Our project was ambitious, and every day was a struggle to keep the oven going.

"We'll just have to wait," I said, trying to ease the tension. "We'll see who's coming."

The first customer arrived shortly after opening: an elderly man wearing a worn hat and a shirt that had seen better days. He approached the counter with an uncertain stride, his hands clutching a coin.

"Good morning," he said, his voice hoarse. "I've heard about this bakery. They say your bread has something special about it."

Silverio hurried to serve it, while Sofia and I exchanged a glance. It wasn't just the bread that was special. It was what it represented.

The morning passed between regular customers and new faces, each with their own story. There were families, workers, and even children who stopped in front of the counter, their eyes full of curiosity.

The legacy of the oven

Once again, the first loaf of bread emerged from the oven shortly after sunset. It was golden and perfect, with its aroma permeating the air and blending with the murmurs of the assembled crowd. I placed it on a cutting board and proceeded to cut it with a knife.

"This isn't just bread," I declared. "It's part of us, part of Naples. No one can take it away."

I divided the bread into pieces and distributed it among the people. Every face I met was lit up with a smile and every hand that reached out was a gesture of solidarity.

The night was filled with laughter and singing, and for a moment we forgot our fear. The oven burned with an impossible force, as if it knew that this was its battle as much as ours.

Sofia came up to me, watching the crowd with a rare smile. "We did it," she said. "For now," I replied, but even I felt that we had achieved something important.

When the crowd dispersed and the store became quiet again, we sat down by the oven, letting its warmth envelop us. Silverio dropped onto a stool, an expression of pure weariness on his face.

"They will not stop us," he said, his voice a whisper.

"No," I replied. "They can't. This oven is more than a place. It is a legacy."

Peppeniello, Sofia and Silverio watch the oven in operation in the store. The local community gathers attracted by the aroma of bread. Peppeniello reflects on the significance of the oven, understanding that the real legacy is not the secret itself, but what can be shared with others. The scene closes with him offering bread to his neighbors, uttering a phrase that emphasizes a return to tradition and simplicity. Sofia nodded, her gaze fixed on the flames. "And we must protect him," she said. "Always."

The bakery was not just a place. It had never been one. It was a test, a symbol, a lesson for those who had the courage to look beyond the surface. It was not about finding a hidden secret, but about discovering what really mattered: the ability to turn the little into much, to feed the fire within us without letting it consume us.

As I stood in front of the oven, silently observing it, I realized that it was not just a family legacy or a puzzle to be solved. It was a reflection of who I was, what I had become, and the choice to accept simplicity as a source of strength.

Naples had called me to return, and I had answered. I had reconnected with my land, with the memory of my grandfather, and, most of all, with myself. Now, as the first light dawned tinged the sky above the city, I felt complete.

"Maybe, in the end, it really wasn't the oven that mattered," I said, more to myself than to others.

Silverio nodded, lighting a candle near the ancient brazier. "But what the oven taught us will remain with us forever."

The oven had come back to life, and with it also seemed to awaken a part of Naples that Peppeniello had never known existed. The golden light that filtered

from its flames illuminated the small store, and the aroma of the first dough baking wafted through the streets of the alley.

Peppeniello stood there, with Silverio and Sofia by his side, silently watching the bread take shape. It was not just food. It was a promise, a connection to the past that they had unearthed.

"Did you think it would come to this, Peppeniello?" asked Silverio, with a tired but sincere smile.

"I don't know," he replied, watching the dancing flames. "But I knew we had to try. It wasn't just for us. It was for everyone who came before us and for those who will come after."

Sofia nodded, her face lit by the fire. "This oven is not just a symbol. It is a gift, and like all gifts, it is only meaningful if it is shared."

As the first loaf of bread was pulled out of the oven, Peppeniello remembered his grandfather's words, "*Not everything that matters can be seen.*" And in that moment, he understood. The oven was not just a legacy. It was a teaching, a way to remind everyone that true wealth was not in secrets, but in sharing them.

Outside, the city was waking up. The first rays of sunlight tinged the rooftops a warm golden color, and a small group of neighbors had gathered in front of the store, drawn by the irresistible aroma.

Peppeniello turned toward them, lifting the still-warm bread. "This is for you," he said, his heart pounding in his chest. "This is for Naples."

As he distributed the bread, he felt a lightness he had not felt in years. The lost oven had been found, but the real discovery was what it meant: a return to community, to simplicity, to what made life worth living.

Naples awoke slowly, with its chaos and splendor, ready for a new day. The oven remained there, guarded like an eternal secret, but its message was clear.

Chapter 9

The First Pizza

The sun was setting over Naples, painting the sky with golden and orange hues as the city awoke from its afternoon rest. The scent of the sea mingled with the aroma of burning wood from the newly restored oven of Peppeniello, Sofia and Silverio. That oven, which had survived time and the elements, was now ready to tell a new story.

"We can't stop here," Sofia said, wiping her flour-dusted hands. "This oven needs something to make it unique. Something no one has ever seen before."
Peppiniello, with a sly smile, took a piece of soft, leavened dough that they had carefully prepared.

"What if we tried to make a different disc of bread than usual? Thin, but capable of encapsulating all the flavors of Naples."

"This is the heart of everything," he said, lifting the piece of dough to show it to Sofia and Silverio. "Without it, nothing we do will make sense."

Silverio observed the dough, his face puzzled. "It doesn't look like anything special," he muttered. "It's just flour and water."

Sofia gave him a sharp look. "It's not just flour and water, Silverio. It is the result of time, patience, and hands that know what to do."

Peppiniello smiled, setting the dough on the wooden counter, dusted with flour.

"Sofia is right. Every dough is alive. If you treat it with respect, it will give you its best. If you neglect it or force it, it becomes unusable."

He began to work the dough with confident movements, folding and stretching it, as if he were shaping something sacred. Each gesture was slow, methodical, almost hypnotic. The light aroma of the sourdough mixed with that of the wood burning in the oven, creating a familiar and comfortable atmosphere.

"When I was little," he said, breaking the silence, "I used to watch my grandfather do this same thing. He used to tell me that the dough needs to feel the warmth of your hands. It's the way you communicate with it."

Silverio chuckled but said without sarcasm, "You talk like it is a person."

Peppiniello looked at him seriously. "In a way it is. Every dough is different. You have to listen to it, understand it. Only then can you bring out the best."

Sofia approached with a small bowl of fresh cheese made from sheep's milk.

"Here," she said, cutting it into small pieces with a sharp knife. "This will be the finishing touch. It has just the right saltiness to balance everything out."

Peppiniello took a bunch of fresh herbs - oregano and a small amount of rosemary - and crumbled them over the dough with slow gestures. The aroma of the herbs filled the room, recalling a sense of home and ancient tradition.

"Here is the signature," Sofia said, as Silverio watched with curiosity. "We don't need anything else. Each ingredient speaks for itself."

Silverio nodded, taking oil bottle, which he carefully poured in a spiral over the dough. "Like this? Is that okay?"

Peppiniello looked at him approvingly. "Perfect. Now it's ready for the oven." with the solemnity of an artist presenting his or her masterpiece.

The oven, now hot and alive, welcomed that creation with a joyful crackle, Peppiniello with the shovel occasionally turning the pizza so that it cooked evenly

on all sides. The three friends sat a few steps away, watching the thin smoke billowing from the chimney and letting the inviting smell waft throughout the alley.

Peppeniello cautiously approached the oven, opening the door in a slow, respectful gesture. The pizza, lying on a time-worn wooden shovel, looked almost like a sacrificial offering destined for an ancient and benevolent entity. He placed it on the hot stone of the oven, and a sudden crackling broke the silence.

The sound filled the room like ancient music, accompanied by the intense smell of the dough mingling with the herbs and cheese that was beginning to melt. Sofia closed her eyes for a moment, inhaling deeply. "This is incredible," she murmured. "As if this oven is awakening something that has been dormant for centuries." Silverio approached, leaning in slightly to look inside. "It's strange," he said, with an uncertain smile. "I didn't think something so simple could seem so ... important."

Peppeniello looked at him, a complicit smile on his face. "It's not just the food, Silverio. It's what it represents. This oven has seen generations of hands kneading, baking, and offering something greater than just a dish: a piece of themselves."

The three sat a few steps away from the furnace, watching the dance of the flames and letting the smell waft throughout the alley. Each crackling sounded like distant applause, a tribute to their efforts.

When the time was right, Peppeniello stood up, taking the shovel with firm hands. "It is ready," he announced, his tone low but full of emotion.

With a confident gesture, he pulled the pizza out of the oven. The golden crust exuded an inviting warmth, and the sheep's cheese, now melted, glistened under the flickering light of the oven. The herbs had released their fragrance, creating a perfect harmony with the sweetness of the cooked must reduction.

Sofia and Silverio approached, looking at the pizza as if it were a precious object. "It's not just a pizza," Sofia said, her voice charged with reverence. "It is a symbol. It is proof that we are worthy of this oven."

Peppeniello lifted the knife and cut the pizza with a decisive gesture, the crispy sound of the crust crossing the room like a small celebration. Each movement was slow, almost ceremonial, as if he feared disrupting the magical atmosphere that had been created around that oven.

When the first wedge was placed on the plate, Silverio looked at it for a moment, hesitant. "I don't know why," he said with a nervous smile, "but it almost seems a shame to eat it."

Sofia giggled, breaking the tension. "If we don't eat it, all this work will have been for nothing."

Peppeniello nodded, lifting another wedge and handing it to Sofia. "It's not just food, Silverio," he said. "It is our journey, our commitment, everything we have discovered so far. But in the end, it is also a gift, and gifts must be accepted."

Silverio took his piece, staring at it as if trying to decipher its mystery. Then he closed his eyes and bit into the pizza. The silence that followed was broken only by his deep breathing and a slight smile that formed on his lips.

"I can't describe it," he finally said, his voice almost cracked with emotion. "It's not just good—it's like it tells a story. Every flavor seems to have something to say."

Sofia nodded, taking a bite of her piece. She too was silent for a moment, letting the flavors mingle and intertwine in her mind. "It is harmony," she finally said.

"Each ingredient finds its place. None overpowers the other, but together they create something extraordinary."

Peppeniello said nothing, calmly biting into his wedge. His eyes fixed on the oven, he seemed far away, deep in thought. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, almost a whisper. "This oven is not just a place. It is a witness. It has been there for generations, and it will continue to be there. We are just a chapter in its history."

Sofia placed her piece on the plate, her face serious. "And what will happen now? We have found the oven and passed the tests, but what does it really mean?"

Peppeniello leaned back in his chair, letting a slight smile light up his face. "It means we have a duty. This oven is a gift, but it is also a responsibility. It is up to us to decide how we use it, and to whom we pass on what we have learned."

Silverio nodded, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Whatever happens, I know I will never forget this moment – or this pizza."

Their laughter filled the room, mingling with the crackling of the fire. For a moment, everything seemed perfect: the oven, the pizza, and the three of them, united by a bond that was beyond words.

Silverio took a bite, closing his eyes as the flavor exploded on his palate. "I've never tasted anything like it," he said, his voice broken with emotion. "It's like I can feel everything—the effort, the history, and the bakery itself."

Peppeniello smiled, "That's what food is supposed to do. Not only fill the stomach, but also speak to the heart."

Peppeniello approached the oven at a slow pace, as if that moment demanded special respect. The flames danced inside, alive and shifting, casting flickering shadows on the time-blackened walls. Sofia and Silverio watched him in silence, feeling the intensity of that gesture, which went beyond simply preparing a pizza: it was as if they were awakening an ancient soul that had slept too long.

"It's not just fire," Peppeniello said, breaking the silence. "It is memory. It is the connection between us and those who ignited these flames before us."

Her words hung in the air, enveloped by the crackling of wood turning into embers. Sofia nodded slowly, her blue eyes reflecting the oven's warm light. "This oven has seen centuries of hands working, lives intertwined. And today, it is our turn to guard its secret."

Silverio shifted nervously, watching the sparks rising toward the chimney hood. "But it's just an oven, isn't it?" he asked, trying to hide his disquiet. "I mean, it's important, but ... I don't understand why it looks so ... alive."

Sofia turned to him, her gaze piercing. "Because it is, Silverio. It is not just stone and wood. It is made of all the stories that have passed through here. Every pizza, every bread, every laugh and every tear. This oven is the sum of the lives that have used it."

Peppeniello bent down, lifting a small handful of flour he held in his fist. "And every life has left something here. My grandfather always told me that the oven does not forget. It's like a wise old man: it observes us, tests us, and gives back only what we give it."

Spreading the flour on the hot stone, Peppeniello paused for a moment, closing his eyes and letting the heat of the oven caress his face. A distant memory struck him, that of his grandfather's hands, large and sure, kneading with a care that seemed almost sacred.

"This is for him," she murmured, pouring a small amount water next to the embers. A sudden hiss filled the room, and a cloud of steam rose upward, mixing with the smoke from the burned wood.

Sofia imitated him, pouring her portion of water, and added in a firm voice, "And this is for all those who will come after us."

Silverio looked at them both, hesitantly, but then bent down, following their example. His hand trembled as he dropped the drops water on the stone. "And ... this is for us," he finally said, his voice broken but sincere.

The oven seemed to respond to their gesture. The flames crackled louder, and a sudden glow lit up the room. Peppeniello, Sofia, and Silverio stood still, feeling that something intangible had just awakened.

Peppeniello stood up, his heart pounding in his chest. "Now it is ready," he said, with a confidence he did not know he possessed. "The oven has accepted us."

After a few minutes, Silverio pulled out their invention: the first disc of dough baked to perfection, crispy at the edges and soft in the center, with the melted cheese blending harmoniously with the herbs.

"What name shall we give him?" asked Sofia, biting off a piece with sparkling eyes.

Peppeniello looked up to the sky, where Vesuvius loomed imposingly. "Pizza," he said simply. "Simple, like us. Strong, like this city."

The three remained silent, savoring the result of their work, as the alley began to be populated with curious onlookers, attracted by the inviting aroma. Soon, the little invention of Peppiniello, Sofia and Silverio would become a legend, a symbol of Naples and its ability to transform simplicity into art.

And so, with a laugh and a bite of their pizza, the three friends celebrated their newfound oven and the beginning of a tradition that would span the centuries.

Peppiniello knelt before the oven, his hands still smeared with flour and a slight tremor running through his fingers. The heat of the flames had dwindled down to a few dim embers, but the energy of the place still seemed to pulsate around him, alive and powerful.

"All this..." he murmured, letting the words escape his lips. "It's not just an oven. It is a legacy. It is something that binds us to who we have been and who we can become."

Sofia approached, laying a hand on his shoulder. "And now you've brought him back to life," she said in a calm tone, but her eyes betrayed a spark of emotion.

"Not you just found a piece of history, Peppiniello. You've given new meaning to it all."

Silverio, standing by the counter, watched the scene in silence. For the first time, he seemed more aware of the role he, too, had played in that discovery. "I ... have never been good with words," he finally said, his tone uncertain. "But I think the oven would not have come back to life without you, Peppiniello. Without you." Peppiniello looked up at him, a tired but sincere smile on his face. "It wasn't all my doing. This bakery chose us. All three of us. Each of us brought something that made it possible."

Sofia nodded, watching the flickering shadows reflected on the walls. "What now? What are we going to do with all this?"

Peppiniello remained silent for a moment, letting the question echo through the room. Then he stood up slowly, looking at the oven with a new intensity. "We will share it," he said. "This is not a discovery to be kept hidden. This belongs to everyone. Naples needs to know."

Silverio swallowed, clearly nervous. "What if someone tries to steal it? Or ruin it? We've seen what happens when people get their hands on something this valuable."

Peppiniello shook his head. "We cannot live in fear, Silverio. This bakery is not just ours. It is part of the city, part of its soul. If we protect it together, no one can destroy it."

Sofia barely smiled, her usually serious face softening. "Then let's get started. Naples is waiting for us."

As they left the store, the sun was beginning to rise, tinting the sky a deep orange. Peppeniello paused for a moment at the threshold, watching the city wake up slowly. "This is the first pizza," he thought, smiling. "But not the last."

Naples awoke slowly, with its chaos and splendor, ready for a new day. The oven remained there, guarded as an eternal secret, but its message was clear: **it does not matter how big a fire you light, but what you choose to cook with it.**

As I stood outside in the alley, the bells of the Duomo rang in the distance, marking the end of one journey and the beginning of another. Naples, with its slow and deep breaths, let the curtain come down on this story.

A brief history of the word pizza and its ingredients:

The origin of the term "pizza" is the subject of several etymological theories, reflecting the complexity and richness of Italian linguistic history.

One popular hypothesis suggests that "pizza" comes from the Latin past participle "pinsa" of the verb "pinsere," meaning "to pound" or "to crush." This reference to preparation of crushed dough could explain the association with pizza.

Another theory proposes a derivation from the Germanic term "bizzo" or "pizzo," meaning "morsel" or "piece of bread." This term is said to have been introduced to Italy by the Lombards in the 6th century AD.

Some scholars also consider a possible origin from the Greek "pitta," meaning a flatbread or flat bread, suggesting a link to Mediterranean culinary traditions.

The first written attestation of the term "pizza" dates back to 997 AD in a Latin document from the city of Gaeta in southern Latium. In this text, a tenant committed to deliver to the bishop of Gaeta "twelve pizzas" every Christmas and another twelve every Easter, indicating that the term was already in use to describe a specific food preparation.

In summary, although the precise etymology of the term "pizza" remains uncertain, leading theories link its origin to Latin, Germanic or Greek terms, all referring to concepts of crushing, pieces of bread or flatbread, reflecting the historical and cultural evolution of this food.

Pizza, an undisputed hallmark of Italian cuisine, has undergone significant evolution over the centuries, adapting and transforming due to the influence of new ingredients introduced to the Old World. Notably, the importation of tomatoes and buffalo from America marked a pivotal moment in the history of this dish.

Pizza initially consisted of a basic dough made from flour and water, topped with ingredients like olive oil, garlic, and herbs. With the discovery of the Americas and the arrival of new agricultural products, such as tomatoes, in Europe, the form and flavor of pizza evolved. Originally regarded as an ornamental or potentially poisonous plant, the tomato gradually became a fundamental ingredient in Mediterranean cuisine, ultimately evolving into an essential topping for pizza.

At the same time, buffalo breeding, introduced to southern Italy in medieval times, provided an equally valuable resource: buffalo mozzarella. This special variety of cheese, prized for its soft texture and delicate flavor, became the ideal complement to tomatoes.

The combination of these two ingredients, along with fresh basil and olive oil, gave rise to the famous Pizza Margherita. Tradition has it that this specific combination was devised in 1889 by Neapolitan pizza maker Raffaele Esposito in honor of Queen Margherita of Savoy. The three colors of the ingredients—red from the tomato, white from the mozzarella, and green from the basil—intentionally correspond to the Italian flag. As a result, the Pizza Margherita has become both a culinary and a national symbol.

From then on, Pizza Margherita became a global icon, symbolizing the perfect blend of simplicity and flavor, tradition and innovation. Its success demonstrates how incorporating new ingredients can enhance a recipe and contribute to establishing a cultural symbol with global influence.

Writer's note:

As the great Eduardo De Filippo used to say, *"If you liked it, tell others. If you didn't like it, mind your own business."*

This is perhaps an imaginative story of the birth of Neapolitan pizza and its significance for us Neapolitans. It is a tale that I have kept in my drawer for years, repeatedly revising and correcting, where I have allowed myself some creative liberties.

I named the main character Peppiniello Cortesano, because I am convinced that an ancestor of mine participated in a similar adventure. I imagined him accompanied by my best friends: Sofia, with her strong spirit and irony, inspired me to create an unforgettable female character my Haitian friend Sofia B., who unfortunately left us too soon; and Silverio R., my best friend since childhood, has been for me not only a companion in life, but a source of strength and loyalty.

I hope this story has made you smile and, most importantly, conveyed some of the love and passion that pizza carries, an eternal symbol of our tradition and culture. Writing this story has been an exciting journey for me into the past and into fantasy. I hope that as you read it, you can feel some of the warmth and affection that Neapolitan pizza represents to us: the love of family, friends, and simple flavors that know how to fill the heart.

Pizza is not just food; it is a symbol of creativity, resilience and joy, a legacy that connects us to our ancestors and continues to unite us today, wherever we are in the world.

This story is also an invitation to be carried away by your imagination, to envision that behind every great tradition there are adventures, legends and extraordinary individuals.

Writing is the way I am able to shape my memories and emotions. It is a small miracle that allows me to connect with you, the readers. Thank you for sharing this adventure with me.