



# *the* LORE LORE

*an Anthology Series*

*a Maeda SAN series*

*Written by  
Neigeme Glasgow-Maeda*





## *La Diabliesse*

**Title:** La Diabliesse: Dark Vengeance

**Genre:** Biopunk Action Horror / **Setting:** Modern-Day Urban Trinidad

**Tone/Style:** A mix of gritty realism and supernatural horror. The mood is tense, shadowy, and often reflective, punctuated by fast-paced, brutal action scenes.

## La Diabliesse: Dark Vengeance

In modern-day Trinidad, shadows spill like ink across the polished floors of a luxury bar, dimly lit yet full of whispered secrets and the stench of corruption. Patrons swathed in silk and gold sprawl like indolent royalty, their laughter razoring through the humid stillness, but their eyes—oh, their eyes!—dance with the weight of hidden sins. In the corner, Ms. Ladja Blès sits alone, a figure of magnetic allure. The wide-brimmed hat obscures her face, but her presence is a beacon, drawing every gaze as she lifts her wine glass, a wicked smile curling on her lips like the edge of a dagger.

Across the room, Miguel Santiago eyes her. He's a man of blood and brutality—a drug lord, a trafficker, a businessman cloaked in shadows. The room hums with his arrogance as he nudges his bodyguard, his voice thick with bravado. "Watch this ... tonight, dis woman goin' to be mine." He struts over, confidence radiating from him like heat from a flame.

"Yuh waiting for someone, sweet one?" He leans close, charm dripping like honey.

"Perhaps ..." Her voice coils around him, a low purr. "Or perhaps he has already arrived." Danger flickers in her eyes, but Miguel remains oblivious, captivated by her allure as she glides to his table, leaving a shiver of uncertainty in her wake.

Later, Miguel's luxury car rolls up to his mansion, a fortress guarding its secrets against the Trinidadian night. He steps out, the air heavy with anticipation, and offers his hand to Ms. Ladja Blès, her black dress swirling around her like the midnight sky. The guards fall silent, their eyes glued to her, entranced by her beauty, unable to break free.

Inside, opulence reigns—glistening chandeliers reflect the emptiness of wealth. Miguel pours rum into two glasses, handing one to her while he drains his in a gulp, as if trying to drown his own demons. "Yuh a quiet one, eh?" he observes, attempting to pull her closer, his fingers brushing against her shoulder. But she drifts to the window, steady and unreadable.

"Playing hard to get? That doesn't work with me, babes," he laughs, but she only lets out a low, dangerous laugh that echoes through the room.

"Yuh think yuh *own everything* ... don't yuh, Miguel?"

For a flicker of a moment, a shadow of doubt darkens his eyes, but he shakes it off, inching closer until his hands find her waist. Then she spins and the world tilts; her eyes glow with an unnatural light, a fearsome blaze that sends ice through his veins.

"Why don't you ... sit?" she commands, her voice smooth as aged Martinique rum yet laced with steel. He feels the weight of her words, a tide pulling him under as he obeys, his body heavy and clouded.

"Tell me, Miguel ... how much yuh think your life worth?" she whispers, her breath hot against his skin.

With a lazy smile, he boasts, "More than yuh can imagine."

Her smile deepens and she leans in. "Let's find out."

In the dim confines of Miguel's bedroom, tension stretches out like a rubber band ready to snap. Drunk with self-importance, he shoves her onto the bed, aggression seeping from him like sweat.

But she doesn't resist; instead, she leans close, voice sultry and dripping with temptation. "Yuh going to give me everything you have tonight, Miguel?"

For a heartbeat, doubt crosses his mind, but then his ego flares, and *bam*, he strikes her—a brutal slap. The crack echoes, but she simply turns back, a wicked smile twisting her lips.

"But ... what de—"

Before he can finish, Her eyes ignite with liquid fire, her skin leaching to corpse-white, fingers closing like rusted vises. Her voice drips with mockery, "So yuh like it rough? Alright, baby ... Ah go rough yuh up then."

With a strength not of this world, she hurls him off the bed. He slams into the dresser, gasping as her stare impales him—a specimen pinned for display in a collector's case. She advances, each step measured, drinking in the panic dilating his pupils and oozing from his pores.

When she reaches him, she grips his collar, lifting him with effortless ease, slamming him against the wall. Her hands caress his face for just a moment before she unleashes a storm of blows—each punch calculated, each kick a symphony of brutality. Bones splinter under her blows, her taunts dripping corrosive spite. "Dis what yuh like, ent?"

With one final shove, she drives him to the floor, leaving him a broken mess, his screams strangled by fear. Her eyes flick to a drawer beside the bed, and she opens it to reveal a large black *spiky dildo*. A cruel smile spreads across her face. "Ah see what yuh really like now."

Without hesitation, she uses it on him, the sound of his muffled screams filling the room, twisting into a nightmare as her presence dominates him entirely. Trembling, he lies helpless as she wipes the blood from his face, her hands gentle, mocking.

"Now, Miguel," she whispers, "yuh goin' to transfer everything to me, yes?" She pulls a keypad from her purse, guiding his shaking hand to unlock his assets. A retinal scan seals his fate, a soft beep confirming her complete takeover. His head droops, consciousness fading, willpower beaten out of him.

"That wasn't so hard, was it?" She plants a final, mocking kiss on his bloodied lips before her hands close around his throat, tightening with deliberate slowness savouring his desperate gasps until the gasps fade to silence.

Standing over him, Ms. Ladja Blès smiles, a glimmer of satisfaction lighting her eyes. "I love it when they want to play rough."

With a graceful stride, Ms. Ladja Blès glides down the grand hallway of Miguel's mansion, the rhythm of her heels clicking against the marble echoing the finality of death left behind. The scent of blood pervades. As she nears the front door, two guards materialise, eyes wild, weapons drawn. Without a word, she becomes a tempest, a storm of lethal grace.

Her body twists and turns like a dancer's, each strike a note in her deadly melody. A sickening crack fills the space as one guard's neck snaps, while another is hurled through a glass window, shards raining like confetti in a morbid celebration. More guards swarm, desperate and determined, but to her, they're but dried leaves caught in a whirlwind.

Ms. Ladja Blès is a force of nature, unstoppable. She tears through them with ease, each movement calculated, her strength defying the human form. Bodies crumple around her—some shattered,

some writhing—under the intoxicating spell that clings to her like perfume. In moments, the hallway lies ravaged, blood blooming across the floor in grotesque petals. While she remains untouched, an unblemished angel of vengeance.

As she strides toward the exit, a faint sound captures her attention—a whimper, muffled yet pleading. She pauses, head tilting like a curious cat, and slowly turns toward a nearby closet. With gentle reverence, she pulls it open to reveal a young Venezuelan girl, bruised and bloodied, hanging by her wrists. Esmeralda—barely into her teens—stares back with wide, frightened eyes, struggling to meet her gaze. The sight pierces through Ladja, a memory resurfacing sharp and unyielding: her own wrists bound, the bite of cold metal, the sting of whips cutting deep into her flesh.

“No more chains,” she whispers, her voice trembling with a promise to herself. With delicate care, she cuts Esmeralda down, cradling her fragile body as if it were a precious bird. The girl barely stirs, but a flicker of life glimmers behind her battered façade. Ms. Ladja Blès gazes down at her, a rare softness thawing her hardened features.

Without a word, she carries Esmeralda to Miguel’s luxury car, laying her gently in the backseat before slipping into the driver’s seat. The cries and distant echoes of violence fade into the night as she drives into darkness, her expression impassive, eyes locked on the road ahead. The streetlights cast fleeting glows across her features, softening her usual mask of indifference. Tonight, there’s a quiet satisfaction in her heart—not just for the vengeance delivered but for the life reclaimed.

The safe-house is old, secluded, nestled deep in the city’s outskirts. Candlelight dances across the cracked walls, filling the air with the earthy scent of herbs and dampness. It’s sparse, yet whispers of faded elegance linger—a place of temporary refuge. Ms. Ladja Blès sits beside a small bed at the centre of the room, tending to Esmeralda’s wounds with methodical precision. Her movements are almost motherly, yet her face remains distant, untouched by emotion.

As she works, the candlelight plays tricks in the cracked mirror across the room, distorting her reflection into haunting shapes. Old memories crash through her mind, dragging her back to the beginning of her own dark journey. Each glimmer of light is a reminder of chains broken, of pain endured, and of a vengeance long sought. In that moment, the past and present intertwine, a tapestry woven with threads of survival, strength, and the relentless pursuit of freedom.

In the heavy silence of memory, chains clink and jangle, a haunting echo in the dense, humid air of the past. Young Ladja, skin still fresh and unscarred by time, stumbles through a dense jungle. Her wrists, raw and bound, bear the marks of cruel hands—those of the colonisers, those who thought they could break her spirit, but the fire inside her remains stubbornly alive. The whip cracks, the sound slicing through the night, a reminder that she is prey to their monstrous whims. She falls, a mere child in a world of pain, face pressed into the mud, breath shallow, spirit bruised. Above her, the overseers loom, their laughter slicing the air, cold and cutting like the moonlight that casts their shadows long and twisted against the trees.

One desperate night, when darkness clings like a shroud, she whispers a name that lingers on her lips like a forbidden fruit: “*Le Diable*.” It escapes her like a prayer, a plea woven with desperation for vengeance, for freedom. The wind picks up, rustling the leaves as if answering her call, and from the shadows, a figure emerges—draped in darkness, cloaked in menace.

“Yuh want freedom, child?” he rumbles, his voice a low growl that vibrates through the earth.

With defiance igniting her soul, she meets his gaze, a spark of rebellion in the depths of her eyes. “I’ll do anything. Just ... free me.”

A wicked grin breaks across his face, sharp and full of malice, as a contract materialises, inked in crimson. Trembling, she takes the proffered quill, a sharp pain as she slices her palm, blood mingling with the ink, her name scrawled in desperation. The earth trembles beneath her feet, and in that moment of choice, her chains shatter, beauty and power surging through her veins. But with that power comes a dark price—her humanity slipping away, consumed by an insatiable force.

In the present, Ms. Ladja Blès blinks, the memory still clinging to her as she hesitates, fingers hovering over Esmeralda's bandaged wounds. The girl stirs, a soft moan escaping her lips as her eyes flutter open, revealing confusion and fear. The unfamiliar surroundings press against her, her breath quickening, panic rising.

With a smooth grace, Ms. Ladja Blès stands, her movements as swift as the breeze that rustles the trees outside. "You're safe now," she soothes, her voice like the soft caress of rain. "There's nothing to fear."

Esmeralda, fragile as a bird just out of its nest, pulls herself upright, voice a whisper in the twilight. "Where ... where am I? Who are you?"

Ms. Ladja Blès kneels beside her, brushing a stray lock of hair from Esmeralda's forehead with delicate fingers. "I found you last night at Miguel's place," she murmurs, each word a balm for the girl's fractured spirit. "You were hurt ... badly. I couldn't leave you there. You're safe now. Miguel won't harm you again."

A shadow flickers across her gaze, a fleeting glimpse of the justice she exacted, a brief reminder of the girl she once was. But she pushes it aside, focusing instead on the girl.

"Why ... why did you help me?" Esmeralda asks, voice trembling, uncertainty pooling in her wide eyes.

For a moment, Ms. Ladja Blès glances at the moonlight spilling through the cracked window, the orb above waxing with each passing night. Soon, her true nature will demand its due. But tonight, she still holds the reins. She turns back to Esmeralda with a faint smile that barely touches her lips, almost human, almost real. "Because you looked like you needed my help."

Beneath those words lies a deeper truth, heavier than it seems—a mirror reflecting her own past, a girl desperate for rescue. Maybe saving Esmeralda is a way to mend the wounds of her own heart, still raw and aching.

She rises and strides to a small dresser, pulling out a clean set of clothes, folding them with meticulous care before handing them to Esmeralda. "Here," she says softly. "You can take a shower. It'll help you feel better. The bathroom's just through that door."

Esmeralda clutches the clothes to her chest, a tentative trust in her eyes. She glances back, uncertain, before slipping toward the bathroom, the door closing softly behind her like the final note of a fading melody.

Ms. Ladja Blès watches her go, an unreadable expression settling over her features.

Deep within Esmeralda's delicate skin, a tiny tracker hums quietly, sending out silent signals into the night, warning those who hunt her. Unaware of the danger lurking just beyond the walls, Ms. Ladja Blès turns away, casting one last glance at the bright moon before fading into the shadows, her presence dissolving like the mist that lingers after dawn.

Under the cascade of warm water, Esmeralda stands, letting droplets wash over her bruised skin. For the first time in an eternity, she allows herself to breathe, to let the steam wrap around her like a warm embrace, washing away dirt and blood, if not the memories that cling. She closes her eyes, breathing in the warmth, letting it fill her emptiness, the silence a soothing balm. For a fleeting moment, a sliver of hope pierces the fog—perhaps, she muses, this is her second chance.

Her fingers brush against her wrist. There, beneath the skin, she feels it—a hard lump, foreign and unnerving. Her heart races, breath hitching. She presses against it, fear rising as the truth dawns on her—she knows what it means. She’s seen tracking chips before.

In the kitchen, Ms. Ladja Blès moves with the precision of a dancer, slicing vegetables with a rhythm that sings. Candlelight flickers against cracked walls, casting her shadow into strange, broken shapes. Her thoughts drift unbidden back to the fateful night of her pact, when desperation had driven her to trade her soul for power, for beauty, for the promise of freedom. But now, as she stands amidst the simplicity of the moment, she questions the price she paid. The memory of her bloody signature hovers at the edges of her mind. She tightens her grip on the knife as old ghosts swirl around her.

Her gaze shifts to the bathroom door, where Esmeralda emerges, wrapped in a towel, her face pale and eyes wide with fear. Ms. Ladja Blès offers a gentle smile, placing the knife down with deliberate care. “Come. Eat something. You need your strength.”

Esmeralda approaches the table slowly, hunger warring with hesitation. She pauses before sitting, fingers still tracing the bump beneath her wrist, her expression taut. “They’ll find me, won’t they?” she asks in a fragile whisper.

The smile on Ms. Ladja Blès’ lips falters and she moves closer, dark eyes glinting with fierce resolve. “They won’t,” she promises, voice low and steady. “Not while I’m here. Miguel ... will never hurt you again. I swear it.”

But even as she speaks, a soft ping echoes from the device nestled beneath Esmeralda’s skin—a sound so faint that only the sharpest ear might catch it. Ms. Ladja Blès stills, gaze dropping to Esmeralda’s wrist, her face tightening. “What’s that?” she murmurs, almost to herself. Esmeralda, taken off guard, glances down, fingers brushing against her skin.

In Miguel’s sprawling mansion, Sophia Santiago stands over her brother’s lifeless body, the air acrid with the metallic scent of blood. She surveys the room, once pristine, now a landscape of war. Her face is a mask of cold precision, shoulders taut with barely contained fury—an unsettling contrast to her almost childlike frame. Though small in stature, every inch of her radiates control. Yet tonight, behind her usual calm, something has shattered.

In her hand, an iPad reveals grainy CCTV footage, the image glitching as she rewinds, captivated by the bloody ballet playing out on-screen. Ms. Ladja Blès moves with an ethereal grace, cutting through Miguel’s men like a dark angel of vengeance, each step measured, every death a calculated strike.

“Who are you ...?” Sophia murmurs, voice laced with curiosity and rage, unable to tear her gaze from the shadowy figure on the screen. This is no ordinary assassin, she thinks; something deeper and more dangerous lies beneath.



The soft clearing of a throat draws Sophia's attention and a tattooed henchman steps forward, uneasy. "This ... this must be The Eliases," he stammers, voice shaking. "No one else would *dare* pull a hit like this."

Sophia's eyes narrow, fixated on the screen. "No," she says, her voice a lethal whisper. "This is something else."

Vera, her assistant, is the quintessential "Trini Red Woman," born to a dougla (Afro-Indian) mother and a Chinese father—a heritage that bestows her with luminous, almost hazel eyes, a vision of poised elegance wrapped in sharp tailoring. She leans in close, her voice a warm caress against Sophia's ear. "You need to act quickly," she insists, urgency threading through her words. "The other gangs... they'll think you're weak. They'll come for us if you don't send a message."

A cruel smile dances across Sophia's lips, revealing a predatory hunger lurking behind her polished exterior. Miguel's death would invite chaos, and if she didn't assert power and strength now, everything she'd fought for risks being torn apart. Ok she murmurs.

With a sharp breath, Sophia looked over at another henchman standing near the door. "Tell me about the girl."

The man fidgeted, his eyes darting nervously between Sophia and Vera. "Her name is... Esmeralda. She... she was a gift from The Elias'. Miguel was planning to sell her off soon. She was... she was meant for the high-end brothels."

Sophia's expression hardened. "Was she chipped?"

The henchman nodded. "Yes, standard procedure."

A slow, chilling smile crept over Sophia's face. She saw the pieces now, saw how they fit. Perhaps this girl, Esmeralda, had somehow conspired with Ms. Ladja Blès, orchestrated Miguel's fall. Perhaps this was The Elias' way of striking at her family, sending in a weapon they wouldn't see coming.

"Track her," Sophia ordered, her voice like steel. "Now. Bring them both back. Dead or alive—but preferably dead."

The man nodded quickly, hurrying out of the room, eager to escape her gaze. Sophia lingered, staring down at her brother's mutilated body, feeling the anger boil over. Vera, standing close, leaned in again, her voice soft and insistent. "You need to show them you're in control. You need revenge."

Sophia closed her eyes, her fingers grazing the edge of the table as her fury crystallised into determination. She would have her revenge, would tear this woman apart for daring to defy her. She would show everyone that Miguel's death changed nothing—that she, Sophia Santiago, was still in command.

As the henchman shifts, uncertainty flooding his features, Sophia's voice turns cold, commanding. "Call in the Pack. It's time to send a message to The Elias's. They'll learn the price of fucking with me. Make it bloody. Make it loud."

Vera gave a pleased smile and stepped back. A ripple of excitement courses through the room as the henchman nods, scurrying to obey. The stakes have risen, and with Miguel's blood still fresh on her hands, Sophia Santiago prepares to wage a war that promises to engulf them all.



In the dim safe-house, a single bulb casts a feeble light over Esmeralda and Ms. Ladjà Blès. Ladjà's gaze is fixed on the strange bump under Esmeralda's wrist, her face set with cold precision. Esmeralda watches her, eyes wide with unease.

"This is going to hurt. Just a little," Ladjà murmurs, reaching for a gleaming knife. Esmeralda's voice catches, but Ladjà doesn't wait. She makes a quick, shallow cut, and Esmeralda gasps, feeling a rush of pain as a thin trickle of blood appears. With one practiced motion, Ladjà presses around the cut until something metallic surfaces. With a deft twist of the knife, she pries out a tiny, blinking device.

"Shit," Ladjà hisses, dropping the tracker on the table, her face darkening with the realisation.

Esmeralda stares at the tiny device, panic flooding her voice. "A tracker? Does that mean...?"

"Yes." Ladjà's tone leaves no room for doubt. "We have to leave. Now."

Before Esmeralda can process what she's heard, the safe-house shudders violently. *BOOM*—a blast outside rattles the walls, and the windows shatter, sending shards of glass raining across the room. Gunfire erupts, the harsh glow of tactical lights flashing through the shattered windows. Esmeralda screams, diving to the floor. But Ladjà reacts faster, throwing Esmeralda down with a strength that surprises her, saving her from the hail of bullets now shredding through the room.

Then come the footsteps—heavy, determined, and closing in. Sophia's men, elite assassins dressed in black tactical gear and equipped with night-vision goggles, storm the safe-house, sweeping through the entryway with deadly precision. Ladjà's face, however, remains calm, almost amused.

"They never learn..." she whispers to herself.

With a deafening *CRACK*, the door splinters open, and the first assassin charges, gun raised. But before he can pull the trigger, Ladjà is upon him. She twists, dodging with unnatural speed, then grips his throat. One swift snap, and the man collapses to the ground.

Another assassin lunges, but she disarms him with brutal efficiency, an elbow smashing into his face, leaving him momentarily dazed. She follows up with a sharp blow, and he, too, falls. More men rush in, but they're no match for her. She's a blur of motion—moving faster than they can track. Bones snap, throats collapse, bodies drop. Ladjà tears through them, an unstoppable force inhuman in her speed and strength.

Esmeralda, huddled in the corner, watches with wide, fearful eyes. She can't look away, even as her heart pounds. "What... what is she?" she whispers to herself.

Meanwhile, back at her base, Sophia Santiago watches the massacre unfold on her surveillance monitors. She leans forward, entranced by the carnage playing out on-screen. Her shock gives way to something deeper, something fierce and hungry. She stares at Ladjà's every movement, at the raw power and grace that seem almost otherworldly.

"What the hell...?" Sophia murmurs, her voice laced with fascination. "What are you?"

In the safe-house, Ladjà stands alone among the fallen assassins, her face impassive, barely breathing harder than before. The room is eerily silent now, except for the faint sound of Esmeralda's trembling breath. Ladjà looks back at her with a steely calm.

“Get up. We’re leaving.”

Esmeralda stares, still dazed, struggling to her feet. “But—”

“Now,” Ladjá snarls, already moving.

Just as they reach the door, Ladjá pauses, her head tilting slightly, as though hearing something no one else can. Her gaze shifts to a shadowed corner of the room.

“They’re watching...” she murmurs to herself. She grabs Esmeralda’s arm and guides her to the back of the room, where she presses her hand against an unassuming panel in the wall. With a quiet hum, a hidden passageway opens, revealing a narrow escape route.

Esmeralda stares, stunned. “How did you...?”

Ladjá cuts her off with a sharp look. “Move.”

They vanish into the passageway just as more gunfire rattles through the safe-house, bullets tearing through the empty space.

Outside the old house, the night stretches long and dark, a heavy cloak smothering a world gone wrong. The promise of violence lingers like a restless spirit. Sophia’s men swarm, muscles taut, eyes scanning the shadows, but they find naught but emptiness. One of the lead assassins, a hulking figure with a scowl carved deep into his brow, bends low to the ground, fingers brushing against something small and blinking—their only lead, the tracker, its light pulsating like a heartbeat of frustration.

Back at the base, perched high in the St Joseph hills overlooking Curepe, the live feed crackles, losing its grip on the moment Ladjá and Esmeralda slip away, ghosts in the static. Sophia reclines in her chair, a smile unfurling. “This just got interesting,” she murmurs, her fingers tapping a rhythm on the armrest, a heartbeat of plotting and scheming. Her mind whirls with possibilities, plans unfurling like sails in a fresh wind—she isn’t merely hunting now; she’s on the trail of something extraordinary, a force of nature that threatens to pull her under. Sophia’s pulse thrums, a predator’s rhythm syncing with the hunt.

The screen goes dark but in the theatre of her mind, Ladjá stands fierce and unyielding amidst the carnage, a queen of shadows. Calmness radiates from her face as if she knows the chaos around her is but a fleeting illusion. “You saved her,” Sophia whispers, the words tinged with an almost reverent curiosity. “Why? Who is this girl?”

The flames of revenge lick at her veins, but there’s a deeper hunger stirring—a relentless obsession that blurs the lines of rage and desire. The night yawns wide, full of untold stories, and Sophia knows it’s far from over.

In the wreckage of the safe-house, a heavy stillness settles, the kind that breathes with the ghosts of violence past. Furniture lies overturned, a testimony to the fury that unleashed itself here, blood smeared across the floor like a lover’s last caress. The air is heavy, as though the violence has seeped into the bones of the house, and shards of glass crunch beneath Sophia’s Doc Martens—a symphony of destruction.

She strides over a darkening pool of blood, her expression an icy mask, but her eyes betray her, glimmering with a simmering storm. Each corner of the room is a canvas painted with Ladjá’s fury, the aftermath of her relentless vengeance. Behind her, Vera, a quiet presence, picks through the

debris, eyes flitting from the wreckage to Sophia's taut form, measuring the atmosphere, sensing the tension thickening like molasses.

Sophia stops at the kitchen counter, her fingers trailing along its edge until they discover a small knife, its blade still stained with remnants of what was. Nearby, a tracker lies abandoned, a shell of its former purpose. Disdain curls her lips as she lifts it. "She knew," she mutters, voice tight like a bowstring. "She knew we were coming."

With a flick of her wrist, she drops the tracker back onto the counter. Her gaze roams the room again, seeking any hint, any clue that might lead her to this mysterious figure that eludes her—a phantom slipping through her fingers like sand.

Vera steps up beside her holding a small, worn scroll, its edges singed as if kissed by fire. Strange symbols are etched across it, some faded, mere whispers of their former glory. Vera speaks softly. "Found this under a floorboard."

Sophia takes the scroll, furrowing her brow as she examines the markings. They twist and writhe, stirring a vague recognition, a memory just beyond her grasp. "What the hell is this?" she mutters, frustration colouring her tone.

Vera delves deeper, rummaging through drawers, her hands unearthing bundles of herbs, glass vials filled with dark liquids, and strange ointments, each artefact a note in a forgotten song. A ritualistic air envelops the collection, suggesting a purpose far beyond mere gang intimidation. "It's like something from an old folklore book," Vera muses, doubt creeping in.

Sophia's scepticism sharpens her features, a brittle laugh escaping her. "Folklore? Come on, Vera. Just some gang trying to play tricks, trying to scare us." But even as the words tumble out, doubt stirs in her gut, whispering of shadows that move on their own, of a woman who dances through the night with supernatural grace, leaving death in her wake.

Vera picks up a small wooden idol from the debris, its form depicting a woman with twisted horns, eyes of twin rubies that seem to burn bright even in the dimmest light. She studies it, fingers tracing its contours thoughtfully. "And what about this?" she asks quietly. "People don't just leave things like this lying around for no reason."

Sophia's jaw tightens, irritation prickling beneath her skin. "So what? You think some old folktale spirit is out here, taking down my men?" Her voice is edged with frustration, but Vera meets her gaze with calm conviction. "We've seen stranger things, Sophia. Maybe it's time to consider there's more to this than just gangs and drugs."

Sophia turns away, anger bubbling beneath her cool exterior, yet unable to dismiss the gnawing unease in her gut. This elusive ninja has shattered every expectation, every ounce of logic she clings to, and that infuriates her.

A buzz from her phone interrupts her thoughts and she pulls it out, barely glancing at the message as Vera continues to collect remnants. Vera's voice cuts through the tension, soft yet insistent. "We need an expert, Sophia. Someone who knows this ... folklore. Myths. Rituals."

Sophia's head snaps up, her expression hardening. She scoffs at the absurdity, but she's thorough, always. If there's even a whisper of truth, if this Obeah woman possesses some ancient power, she will uncover it. "Fine," she states, cold resolve lacing her voice. "Find me someone who knows about this."

Vera nods, fingers flying over her phone, scrolling through contacts with purpose. “There’s a professor. Dr. Baksh. Eccentric, but he’s been studying Caribbean myths and folklore for decades. He might know something. He may be able to shed some light on whatever ‘this’ is.”

Sophia takes the phone, scanning the information, her expression unyielding, but a spark ignites in her eyes. *This is madness*, she tells herself, but the gnawing feeling tells her she’s overlooking something critical about this assassin. “A folklorist ...” she murmurs, handing the phone back to Vera.

Vera watches her carefully, cautious yet steady. “Shall I set up a meeting?” she asks, while typing an introduction email to the good doctor, the photos already attached before pressing Send.

“Yes. I want to know everything he knows. Every legend, every superstition. If there’s truth in this ... we’ll find it.”

Vera slips her phone away, nodding, while Sophia’s gaze drifts over the strange symbols and shattered artefacts littering the safehouse, doubt tugging at her mind, but something stronger—a relentless obsession to capture this woman, to unmask the power hiding behind her calm exterior—drowns it out.

As Sophia turns to leave, her voice a low murmur, a promise to the empty walls, “I’ll find you, yuh obeah assassin. And when I do ...” Her words hang in the air, a dark glint in her eyes revealing the depths of her intent.

With a final glance at the ruin surrounding her, she strides out of the safehouse, heels clicking like a metronome, her mind racing with plots and plans. This hunt has morphed into something personal, a vendetta that’s already begun to unravel, that can easily spiral into obsession, igniting the dark corners of her soul.

The university lecture hall feels like a forgotten cavern, an echo of knowledge lost to time. Rows of empty chairs stretch toward the front, where a handful of indifferent students file out as Dr. Baksh, weary and eccentric, dismisses them with a wave that lacks enthusiasm. The lecture drips with disinterest, his shoulders sagging as he crams papers into a worn-out bag, resigned to the shadows of academia.

The last student slips away, and in that moment, Sophia Santiago and Vera enter the room, their sharp presence slicing through the lethargy. Sophia’s gaze, cold and intense, pierces the sleepy atmosphere. Dr. Baksh barely raises his eyes, too caught up in the monotony of routine.

“Dr. Baksh?” Sophia’s voice is smooth, firm, a wave lapping against the shore.

He glances up, a flicker of disinterest passing over his face. “Yes, yes. What is it?” he mutters, still shuffling papers with a weary hand.

Sophia offers a faint, humourless smile, a predator revealing her teeth. “Sophia Santiago. I’m a collector,” she states, her tone composed yet carrying the weight of something darker, “with a keen interest in the occult and Trinidadian folklore.”

Dr. Baksh scoffs, shaking his head, the sarcasm dripping like rainwater. “Of course, you are. Young people these days are enamoured with the past, always glued to their phones, obsessed with nonsense.”

Without waiting for an invitation, he shoulders his bag, clearly ready to leave. But Sophia steps forward, her determination a shield against his dismissal. “Actually, that’s exactly why I’m here,” she counters. “I’ve come across some objects—ones I can’t quite place. And I was told you’re the expert.”

Dr. Baksh freezes, giving her a sidelong glance that holds scepticism and irritation. “Is this some kind of prank? That fool Ramcharan put you up to this, didn’t he?”

His annoyance is palpable, but Sophia meets his gaze, calm and steady, signalling to Vera to hold back. “No joke, Professor. We’re serious,” she asserts, letting urgency slip into her tone. “These objects ... they’re beyond my understanding. That’s why I came to you.”

With a long sigh, Dr. Baksh seems to consider, his patience wearing thin. “I don’t have time for thrill-seekers. If you’re wasting my time, I’ll have no choice but to report you to the—”

Before he can finish, Sophia motions to Vera, who steps forward with a bundle in hand. Carefully, she unwraps it, revealing a small idol and a singed scroll marked with strange symbols. Dr. Baksh goes still, his eyes widening, the colour draining from his face as if the life has fled his veins. A shallow breath escapes him and his hands twitch nervously at his sides, torn between fear and an irresistible urge.

“Where ...” His voice is barely a whisper, the words hanging in the air like smoke. “Where did you find these?”

Sophia holds the items just out of reach, her expression unyielding. For the first time, the façade of scepticism crumbles, replaced by raw fear and fascination.

“Do these mean something to you, Professor?” Sophia’s voice drips with calm, almost taunting him.

He swallows hard, eyes darting between the artefacts and Sophia’s penetrating gaze. Nervous beads of sweat form on his brow, his fingers hovering over the idol, trembling with a mixture of awe and dread. “These symbols ... this is—this isn’t possible.” His words spill out, reverent and anxious. “These are real ...”

Before he can touch them, Sophia pulls back, her grip firm. His gaze snaps up, desperate now, and she knows she has him right where she wants him.

“Now you understand why I came to you.” Her voice, low and controlled, reveals nothing of her intentions.

Dr. Baksh’s hostility melts like ice in the sun, a weak smile breaking through as curiosity overtakes him. “Yes ... yes, please, follow me,” he murmurs, voice trembling. In a flurry, he whirls away, fear of losing the artefacts pushing him forward. Sophia and Vera exchange a knowing glance—their plan has taken root—and follow his hurried steps down the dim corridor, ready to unearth the truths hidden beneath layers of folklore and shadow.

Dr. Baksh’s office is a cramped shrine, a treasure chest bursting with dusty tomes and relics from a thousand yesterdays, a haphazard labyrinth where the past calls out from every corner. The air is laden with the musk of ancient paper, memories curling like smoke from forgotten stories. Sunlight breaks through the narrow windows in frail beams, casting a mystical glow on floating dust motes.

He shoves aside a stack of books that clatter like old bones, clearing just enough space on his chaotic desk for Sophia and Vera to lay the precious items. His fingers tremble as they hover over



the artefacts, drawn by an unseen force. The items are ghosts from a time when the world was woven with the threads of magic and myth. Reverently, he traces the worn edges of the scroll, his touch gentle, like caressing the spirit of a long-lost friend. The idol, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, seems to pulse beneath his fingertips.

“These ... they’re relics from a time long forgotten,” he breathes, a fragile whisper almost lost in the shadowy corners of the room. “Stories, legends—nobody believes in them anymore. La Diablesse, the Soucouyant, the lagahoo ...” His gaze snaps to Sophia’s, and in the depths of his eyes, she catches a flicker of fear.

“How you come by these?” he asks, voice trembling with a mix of awe and dread. “You ... you have no idea what you hold in your hands.”

Sophia leans in, her tone soft. “Oh, I have some idea. But I need to know more. I need to know everything.”

With a jolt, the professor straightens, the gears in his mind whirring, animated by urgency. “Listen well!” he proclaims, a fire igniting in his voice. He launches into a torrent of knowledge, unravelling the symbols etched on the artefacts, recounting the rituals whispered through generations. But even as he speaks, caution creeps into his words, a shadowy undercurrent that makes the hairs on Sophia’s arms stand on end.

“Be careful,” he warns, his hand hovering over the idol, caught between reverence and fear. “These are not mere stories. There’s power in these legends ... power you don’t want to provoke.”

Sophia holds his gaze, her expression unyielding as she weighs his words, the pulse of doubt thrumming beneath her skin. She is a woman made of steel, unshaken by the spectres of superstition, yet the urgency in Baksh’s voice feels palpable. “Tell me everything, Professor.”

Baksh withdraws slightly, glancing from the idol to the scroll, the gravity of his discovery settling heavily. “You’re dealing with something ancient. Something far older—and far deadlier—than you can imagine.”

A cold smile creeps across Sophia’s lips as visions of the truth about La Diablesse unfurl before her like the petals of a wicked flower. *I’m closer than ever*, she thinks, resolve igniting a fire in her belly.

Vera, the quiet storm at her side, pulls an iPad from her bag and hands it to Sophia, who steps closer to the professor with an inscrutable expression, holding the screen toward him. “We have something to show you,” she says, her voice a gentle wave lapping at the shore, hiding the dark undertow beneath.

Dr. Baksh leans in, his irritation dissolving as he focuses on the screen. The video blooms to life, grainy footage of chaos spilling forth, violent echoes of the recent turmoil at Miguel’s mansion followed by haunting glimpses of the disaster at the house in the woods. The figure in the footage—she moves with a seductive, eerie grace, a spectre from the old folklore he has long studied. Baksh’s eyes widen, disbelief cracking like thin ice underfoot, giving way to a sharper fear that pierces the air.

“H-how ... how did you get this?” he gasps, voice shaking with a mix of shock and horror, as he is drawn like a moth to the flame of a dreadful truth. The haunting imagery captivates him, and a strange, unsettling smile breaks across his face. “No ... no, it can’t be,” he murmurs, shaking his head in disbelief, but his eyes remain glued to the screen. “But it is. This is ... La Diablesse. A real

La Diablesse. She's real!" His voice rises, spiralling from a whisper of fear into manic joy. "I knew it! I knew I wasn't mad! They all thought I was crazy, but now—now they'll see! I'll show them all!"

His hands fly to the scattered papers, an avalanche of old notes tumbling as he frantically searches for something—anything—to validate his theory, consumed by the proof laid bare before him. "I need to publish this! This is the evidence I've been waiting for," he rants, excitement coiling around him. "They'll have to respect me now. I'll be vindicated. Finally!"

Sophia and Vera share uneasy glances as the professor's fervour spins into a wild frenzy, eyes gleaming with an intensity fuelled by years of dismissal and frustration.

"Professor," Sophia interjects, voice firm, her anchor in the storm, "are you alright?"

But Dr. Baksh barely hears her, too lost in the whirlwind of his own thoughts—proving himself, fighting for the respect long denied him. Suddenly, he stops, drawn by the sound of a soft, metallic click. His hands freeze, eyes locking onto the sleek handgun Sophia has placed on the desk, the thrill of discovery replaced by a chill of pure terror.

"W-what is this?" he stammers, the tremor in his voice echoing the shock on his face as he flicks his gaze between the gun and Sophia's unyielding expression.

"You don't understand, Professor." Her voice is a cool blade. "That woman murdered my brother."

The weight of her revelation slams into him, wiping away any remnants of excitement. His mouth goes dry as the truth sinks in. Her tone lowers to a lethal calm. "If you know her—if you know where to find her—you'll tell me. Right now."

His lips part but no sound escapes as the air thickens with the tension of their confrontation. Sweat beads on his forehead, his breath coming quicker. He struggles to find his voice. After a tense moment, he manages to stammer, "It ... it isn't a woman." His voice is a ghost of its former strength. "Not anymore."

Sophia narrows her eyes, suspicion flaring. "What do you mean?"

Dr. Baksh stumbles back, sinking into his chair, hands trembling as he recounts what he knows. "The La Diablesse ... she was once a woman, yes. But she's something else now. A demon." His voice quivers, disbelief creeping into his tone. "The stories ... they say she sold her soul for revenge, and now she roams the night, luring men to their deaths. It's not ... human anymore."

Sophia's face tightens, unflinching in the face of dread. She has heard whispers of such legends, but nothing that claws at the edges of reality like this.

Dr. Baksh rises with renewed purpose, sifting through his desk, hands shaking as he searches for something—a clue, a sign. He finds the footage on the iPad again, pausing it on two frames. "Look," he insists, his voice urgent as he points.

He zooms in on an image of the woman, half-lit in moonlight. In the first frame, she is ethereal, beauty shimmering like sunlight on water. But in the second, the light shifts, revealing something grotesque lurking beneath—her face twisting, hollow eyes glinting with predatory hunger, caught in the liminal space between worlds.

Sophia and Vera freeze, entangled in a web of fear and wonder. "That's ..." Sophia breathes, her voice trailing off, swallowed by the silence.

“Not human,” Vera affirms, her steady voice anchoring them both.

Dr. Baksh, sensing the gravity of the moment, steps across the room to his shelves, pulling out a weathered tome. He flips it open to a dog-eared page, trembling fingers pointing to an illustration—one that mirrors the artefacts Sophia and Vera have laid before him.

“Here,” he gasps, breathless with urgency. “These artefacts ... they’re mentioned in tales that stretch back centuries. They’re tied to her.” His gaze pierces into Sophia’s. “This woman—this creature—is no ordinary spirit.”

He gestures to the illustration, fingers brushing the yellowed page like a lover’s touch. Sophia’s eyes flick between the book and the iPad, threads of understanding weaving together.

He continues, his voice wavering. “She’s the embodiment of vengeance, of death. And if she’s after you ... there’s nothing you can do.”

Sophia stares at the book, heart racing, the professor’s words colliding with his resolve. Her face is a mask of determination, a glint of defiance igniting in her eyes. “There’s always something you can do,” she declares.

Vera’s hand drifts toward her weapon, all readiness as the tension thickens like fog. Her calm exterior belies the fierce loyalty and quick intellect beneath, ready to act the moment Sophia gives the word. Dr. Baksh watches, bug-eyed, regret sparking in his chest. He knows now—he’s tangled in a web too intricate to escape, a line crossed with no return. He exhales shakily, surrendering to the gravity of their shared fate.

Hands still trembling, he steadies himself, haunted gaze shifting to the shadows in the corners of his office. “I wasn’t always like this, you know,” he begins, his tone raw and bare. “Hunched over in this dusty tomb, half-forgotten. Once, I was young, ambitious. Full of fire.”

Sophia and Vera exchange a glance, but their silence beckons him to continue, as if the air itself urges him to unravel the tale that has haunted him for so long.

“I grow up in a small village just outside San Fernando, where the old stories weave through the air like the scent of cocoa tea and nutmeg. Papa Bois, soucouyants, lagahoos, La Diabliesse—those tales were our lullabies, sung soft by my grandmother, the guardian of memory. She tell meh, ‘Boy, listen well! These stories hold power—they keep you straight.’ But me? I just laugh, dismissing them as nothing more than fables, mere whispers born of restless nights.”

His voice drops low, like a soft breeze carrying the weight of unspoken fear, his gaze lost in the distance. “But then I meet her. I was twenty-four, a young man full of dreams, and there she was, the most beautiful creature to ever grace the edge of the forest, standing alone like a queen of the night. Late it was—too late for a woman like her to be wandering in the shadows.”

Dr. Baksh’s fingers clutch the arms of his chair, knuckles white with the grip of memory, shame washing over his face. “I should have known better, should have felt the air shift, but I was young and foolish, hungry for adventure. So I follow her, deeper into the bush, into the belly of the jungle.” He shudders. “Everything about her was wrong—the way she moved like a breeze through the leaves, her shadow dancing out of step. By the time I see her true form, it almost cost me everything. Somehow, though, I escape.”

Vera’s brow arches, scepticism lacing her tone like pepper sauce. “You escape a La Diabliesse? Seriously?”

A grim smile tugs at Dr. Baksh's lips, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Barely. I don't know if it was luck or something darker, but I survive. Not without a cost."

"Must have been the virgin thing," Vera mutters, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth, but her voice is low, half-choking on the joke.

Dr. Baksh doesn't flinch, though bitterness settles on his face like an unwanted guest. "After that night, she haunts my dreams. Every time I close my eyes, she's there—watching, waiting, like a vulture circling over a fresh kill. My life unravelled, you know. Family thought I went mad; friends drifted away. At first, the university humoured me, allowed me to study folklore, but when I insist these creatures are real, they label me a lunatic, an eccentric. They shut me out, ridicule me, isolate me." Anger rises in him, coloured by the humiliation of decades spent fighting shadows. "But I never stop. I devote my life to searching for proof ... trying to learn how to destroy them."

Sofia crosses her arms, unyielding. "And you think it's the same one?"

Dr. Baksh's eyes narrow, certainty in his voice. "It's her. The same *La Diabliesse*. She's behind everything—my ruined career, my isolation, my nightmares. She never stops haunting me, and now she's out there again, killing."

Sofia's face hardens like granite. "She murdered my brother. I don't care about your past. I want her dead. If you know how to find her, we do it now."

Dr. Baksh regards her, his gaze shifting between her and Vera, thoughts racing. After a long pause, he nods, the weight of their intentions settling heavy. "You want my help? Fine. You'll have it. Together, we rid this world of these vile, godless beings. Every *La Diabliesse*, every dark creature that plagues humanity. They all must die."

A fire ignites in him, and he rises, pacing the cramped office, a caged lion restless for the hunt. "They ain't immortal, you know. They can be killed, but they're cunning, hiding in plain sight, waiting for their moment. You need more than courage to face her."

Vera's eyebrow lifts, curiosity piquing like the sweet smell of ripe guava. "More than courage? What do we need?"

He stops, meeting their eyes with the solemnity of a priest at a funeral. "*La Diabliesse* feeds on human weakness—fear, desire, guilt. But she's bound by old magic, certain rules. There are ways to track her, to lure her out. But it's dangerous, like playing with fire in a barrel of rum. And if you fail —"

"We won't fail," Sofia interrupts.

A chuckle escapes Dr. Baksh, almost admiring, as he takes her measure. "Good. You'll need that resolve. But understand this—once you engage her, there's no going back. She'll come after you, hunt you down."

Sofia stands firm, unshaken, though Vera's tension seeps through. "Tell us how to find her," Sofia commands, a queen asserting her rule. "And how to kill her."

Dr. Baksh nods, expression grave as he gestures toward a pile of books. "I'll give you everything you need—rituals, artefacts. There's a chant, an incantation. Works only under the right conditions. You have to catch her under the moonlight, when her true form shows. That's when she's vulnerable."

He glances at the artefacts they brought, then back to Sofia. “Those things—they’re old, tied to her origins. Use them. They’ll weaken her. And when the moment comes, when she’s fully exposed, you strike.”

Sofia’s gaze sharpens, determination etched into her features. “How?”

Dr. Baksh’s expression darkens, shadows lurking in the corners of his eyes. “Fire. Burn her body to ash. Anything less, and she’ll return.”

A tense silence wraps around them as the implications of the task before them settles in. Sofia and Vera glance at each other, wordless but resolute, like two warriors preparing for battle.

“We’ll leave the footage with you,” Sofia says, voice edged with intensity. “But secrets. No games. You tell us everything.”

Dr. Baksh nods, the manic gleam in his eye softening, replaced by a solemn vow. “You have my word. This isn’t just about proving myself anymore. It’s about survival—for all of us.”

Sofia’s voice rises, a vow made. “Then let’s finish this.”

She turns to leave but Dr. Baksh calls after her, almost pleading. “Be careful,” he warns, like an old soldier recalling the cost of war. “The moment she knows you’re hunting her, she’ll come for you. And if you hesitate, even for a heartbeat, she’ll destroy you—just like she almost did to me.”

Sofia glances back, jaw set. “She won’t get the chance.”

With that, she and Vera stride out, leaving Dr. Baksh alone in his cluttered office, his mind racing with plans, preparations, and whispers of the past. The faint sound of his mutterings follows them into the shadowed hallway, his last warnings echoing long after they’re gone.

Outside, the jungle looms, a humid wall of tangled green, as Ladja Blès moves with elegance through the suffocating air, her steps a whisper against the earth. Behind her, Esmeralda staggers, breath ragged and shallow, stumbling over gnarled roots that claws at her feet like ghosts reaching from the depths of the forest. Sweat trickles down her brow, legs trembling under the weight of exhaustion, until she slumps to the ground, defeated.

“*Por favor ... No más*, I can’t...” Esmeralda’s voice is barely a whisper. “I need to stop. *Por favor ...*”

Ladja pauses, irritation flickering across her features as she takes in the sight of Esmeralda sprawled in the dirt. But after a moment, the hardness of her face softens, and she lets out a reluctant sigh, crossing back to kneel beside her. “We not far now,” she says, voice gentler, though the edge of impatience is sharp “Just a little more.”

Esmeralda shakes her head, eyes flooded with fear. “No, no, *chica!* I cyah go on!” Panic rises in her voice, almost a scream. “Just gimme a minute, eh, *por favor!*”

Ladja’s lips press thin, but she doesn’t argue, sinking down beside her. She watches Esmeralda’s trembling hands, the haunted look in her eyes, her own expression unreadable. “Are you alright?” she asks, almost reluctant to breach the silence.

Esmeralda lifts her head, confusion and horror battling in her features. “Alright?” Her voice threatens to shatter. “Alright? *¡Chica, qué dices!* What de hell was dat last night? De way you kill dem men ... What *are* you?”



Her wide eyes remained locked on Ladja, filled with terror, as if the fabric of her reality has just unravelled.

Her gaze falls, horror pooling in her gut as she catches sight of the strange shape beneath Ladja's pant leg—a hoof. She recoils sharply, a gasp escaping her lips. “¡Dios mío!” she whispers, her trembling hands moving frantically to make the sign of the cross. Her wide eyes remain locked on Ladja.

Ladja's jaw tightens. She shifts, the hoof briefly concealed, then bares it like a challenge.

Their eyes lock and the jungle seems to still, the air thick with unsaid truths. “I'm the one who save you,” she murmurs, voice steady, soothing like the lull of the sea. “Twice.”

Something in her words pauses the tide of Esmeralda's panic. She swallows hard, breath evening as she studies the woman beside her, wary yet beginning to listen.

“If I wanted you dead,” Ladja says quietly, leaning in close, “you'd be dead. Relax. I'm not here to hurt you.”

Esmeralda's breathing slows, uncertainty clinging like the humidity, and she nods, almost against her will.

Ladja allows a faint smile, more like a smirk born from mischief. “I've been known by many names,” she says, eyes glinting with an otherworldly light. “But you can call me Ladja. Here, in Trinidad, most people call me La Diablesse.”

At the mention of that name, Esmeralda's fear sparks anew. She has heard the tales, whispered stories of the she-devil that roamed the night, luring men to their doom. But those are just folktales ... aren't they?

Esmeralda opens her mouth, but Ladja halts her with a hand on her shoulder. “I'll explain everything when we reach the house. We'll be at ease there, not to mention safer.” A sly grin crosses her lips. “But while we're being honest—why don't you tell me about yourself? How you end up beaten and dangling in that closet?”

Esmeralda hesitates, but the intensity in Ladja's gaze begins to unravel her defences like thread pulled from a seam. Slowly, she begins to speak, her words tinged with shame.

“I from a lil village jes' outside Caracas, *sabes*. Life dere, it hard, real hard, eh? Meh friends an' me, we always lookin' fuh a way out, someting better, *como si fuera un espejismo en el Desierto ... like it's a mirage in de desert*. Den I meet dis man—he say he a 'agent'. Tell me I could be model, real big in Trinidad. Say I would be in demand, like fresh fish on market day.” A bitter laughter escapes her lips, the sweetness turned sour as she recalls the lies. “I am young an' foolish, *chica*. So I believe him.

“Meh family, we needed de money bad. He give dem five hundred US—*en sus manos*—enough to keep dem fed fuh months. At first, it feel like a blessin', like we reach de promised land.”

Her voice drops to a whisper, pain lacing every word. “Six weeks ago, I come here, tinkin' it was meh big chance, new beginning.”

Ladja listens, her dark eyes absorbing each word like rain on parched earth.

“But when I get here, dey take meh passport. Lock me in a nasty hotel room wit’ seven odda girls. All ah we, waitin’ fuh someting—anything. Den de men come ....” Esmeralda’s voice fractures. Tears gather, unshed like dew, as the memory claws free.

“Dey rape me,” she breathes, her face twisting with shame and rage. “Over an’ over again. Different man every night. Dat’s when I know—I wasn’t no model. *Estaban traficando* (*I was being trafficked*) ... like a piece ah meat.”

Ladja’s expression hardens, anger sparking in her eyes. She reaches out, steadying Esmeralda as the weight of her truth threatens to crush her.

“Dey beat me. An’ when I try escape, dey lock me in dark room for days. And den, just few days ago, they bring me to Miguel mansion, tell me I belong him.” The name falls from her lips, bitter as poison, and Ladja’s jaw tightens.

Esmeralda’s voice turns into a shaky whisper. “He shoot something in meh wrist. I tink was some kind ‘o vaccine, *yo no sabes*. But when I try fight, he ....” Her voice cracked, and she shivered at the memory. “He beat me, then hang me in dat closet. Say he ‘finish me later’.” She looks at Ladja, her eyes wide with fear and pleading. “Den you come. You tek me.”

They move through the jungle, silence draping over them, Esmeralda’s story lingering in the air. Just as she is about to ask Ladja more, they break through the dense brush into a clearing.

A grand old colonial house stands before them, whitewashed walls tinged with age and wear, surrounded by the wild embrace of the jungle. It is a beauty woven with eeriness, its windows dark and full of secrets.

Ladja gestures. “Here we are.”

Esmeralda’s breath catches in her throat, awe replacing exhaustion. “You ... dis you house? You live here?”

“Off and on,” Ladja replies, her tone casual, yet tinged with an unspoken history.

They climb the creaking steps, entering through a groaning wooden door. Inside, the house glimmers with an unexpected elegance—furniture polished to a warm glow, soft lighting wrapping around them like a gentle embrace. Esmeralda’s eyes dance in disbelief, her earlier fears momentarily eased.

“Dis is... *increíble*,” she breathes, wonder painting her words.

Ladja merely nods toward the staircase. “Upstairs, there’s a bedroom. Pick out some clothes. If you want a bath, bathroom down the hall.”

Esmeralda looks up, gratitude shining in her eyes. “*Gracias*.”

“Help yourself to food, too. Kitchen’s over there.” Ladja’s voice softens, almost maternal. “You look like you need it.”

As Esmeralda ventures upstairs, Ladja pauses, her eyes thoughtful, the armour of her expression softening into something resembling empathy. She moves toward a door across the hall, slipping inside, locking it with a soft click that echoes in the stillness.

Upstairs, Esmeralda enters a warm, inviting bedroom, the air scented with comfort. She gazes into the mirror, meeting her own tired reflection. The horrors of the past cling to her like shadows, but here, in the sanctuary of this strange place, a flicker of hope ignites within her.

Meanwhile, behind the locked door, Ladja leans against the wall, her face turned toward the wild jungle, her expression inscrutable.

The jungle whispers secrets, unyielding in its life, as the two women settle, each alone in her silence, preparing for whatever lay ahead.

A soft breeze caresses the leaves as the sun dips low, casting golden rays through the shadows. Esmeralda sits on the terrace, savouring the last bites of freshly made arepas, the warm, familiar flavours wrapping around her like a long-lost embrace. For the first time in days, she allows herself to taste the fleeting peace.

Just then, Ladja Blès emerges, a striking silhouette against the deepening dusk. Clad in an elegant, three-quarter-length pantsuit, her presence radiates unapologetic strength. The hoof peeking from beneath the tailored fabric was not a flaw; it was a part of her, an echo of her spirit, like the bottle of wine and two glasses she carries.

“You cook as well as you fight for your life,” Ladja quips, a teasing note in her voice as she popped the cork. “Care for some wine?”

Esmeralda looks up, momentarily taken aback but charmed by the spark of humour. She nods, and Ladja pours two glasses, handing one to her. A rush of admiration fills Esmeralda as she appraises Ladja, a dazzling figure cloaked in mystery. “You look *ammazzing*.”

With a playful glint in her eyes, Ladja spins lightly, showcasing her outfit and the hoof that serves as a testament to her strength. Esmeralda feels a mixture of endearment and awe as Ladja radiates enigmatic energy.

They sit at the small terrace table, the jungle alive with the symphony of crickets and distant birds, wrapping them in a cocoon of serenity. Esmeralda lets the silence stretch, but she can feel Ladja’s gaze, intent and waiting.

“Dis ... it feels strange,” Esmeralda finally murmurs, glancing up. “Peaceful. After everything.”

Ladja nods, her expression softening for a moment. “Peace don’t last long in our world,” she replies, a hint of sadness threading through her voice. “But take it when you can.”

They linger in the quiet, each lost in her thoughts, but Esmeralda feels the pull of curiosity. “You say me you tell me about you,” she says, her voice gentle yet firm. “Who and what you are really.”

Ladja’s gaze drifts to the darkening jungle as if she is peering into a past that whispered its secrets too softly. She takes a sip of wine, her voice dropping, weighty with unspoken truths. “My story, it ain’t simple. I wasn’t always ... this.” She gestures to her hoofed leg, a symbol of the curse she bore. “Once, I was human, long ago, in a time when dis land was filled with plantations and sorrow. But life—or death—had other plans for me.”

Esmeralda leans forward, captivated by the sudden vulnerability that colours Ladja’s voice, her heart racing at this glimpse into the soul of the woman before her.

“Actually,” Ladja continues, a bitter smile creeping to her lips, “my tale isn’t so different from yours, except I wasn’t asked to come. I was betrayed. In death, I was given a choice, and I chose this—this life between worlds, the path dat lead me to become La Diabliesse.”

A dark chuckle escapes her. “Evil, dey call me—of course, I’m a woman, after all. Nobody fears Papa Bois, yet he roams these woods half-man, half-deer, wid his *bits* swinging free in the wind. *Steups*.”

She begins to recite her tale. “In another life, I was called Bari’tari’a.” She says the name softly, tasting the memory on her tongue like something both sweet and bitter. “Back then, I was just a girl—daughter of a Carib–African woman and a French indentured labourer. We had no standing, no wealth, but from the day I drew breath, people used to whisper how my beauty could charm the very Devil heself if I so wished. Little did they know how true their words would turn out to be.” She chuckles softly to herself as if retelling an old joke.

“When Mama and Papa passed—a fever or maybe just hardship—I was left alone, caught in the grip of the master, a man with greed etched across his soul. He looked at my face and saw profit, calling me a ‘servant’ but treating me like property to rent out and use. The men who could pay, paid; those who couldn’t simply forced themselves on me anyway, day or night, in public or in private. No matter how hard I cried or fought nobody ever seemed to care or help. My pleas fell on deaf ears. My tears fell on indifferent soil.

“I tried to run more than once, let me tell yuh. Each time, they hunt me down, they beat me to try and break my spirit. One day, when it became clear I would never stay willingly, out of sheer spite, my master decided to chop off my foot to keep me from escaping. As if that wasn’t bad enough, he had a cow hoof made into a prosthetic—just to mock me, so everyone would hear me coming—a reminder that I was nothing more than a beast of burden.

“That hoof never crushed my spirit, though. I still had dreams of freedom burning inside me. Oh, I admit there were days and months I thought about giving up, days the pain weighed on my body and soul like an anvil. Especially because my own sisters—enslaved or free—mocked me too, their eyes full of scorn. Black, mixed or white, it didn’t matter; they didn’t spare me a kind word either. They resented me because of my tan complexion and beauty, and only saw how men lusted after me, and they hated me for it. They whispered that I was in league with dark spirits, because how else could I stay so stubborn?

“Then came the worst night of all. Tired of my defiance, Monsieur Aristo, my ‘owner’, offered me up to anyone—slave or freeman—issuing an open invitation to degrade and destroy me. To break me for good as he put it. Bloody and exhausted, meh voice hoarse from screaming. I remember lying there, tears turning the dirt beneath me into mud, calling on Death—but I did not invoke God’s mercy. In that moment, I called on the Devil himself. I remembered the rumours—my beauty could charm the Devil it was. So I wooed him.

“And the Devil came.

“The moon was blood-red, and he stepped out of the shadows with a grin that chilled my soul. I offered him my eternal soul for vengeance. He agreed, sealing it with a signature in blood. My cow hoof became our bond—his to remind me who I serve, mine to remind them who I am, forever marking me as his acolyte. Yet freeing me from mortal chains. Power flooded my veins. I ripped through that plantation like a wild tempest. By dawn, the men and women who’d hurt me lay dead or wishing they were, and the woman they once called Bari’tari’a vanished in the wake of that carnage and La Diabliesse was born.





## Neigeme Glasgow-Maeda – Author Biography

Neigeme Glasgow-Maeda is a Caribbean-born writer, filmmaker, and cultural scholar whose work explores the rich intersections of history, mythology, and identity. As the author of *The Lore* anthology series, Neigeme delves into the folklore, traditions, and untold narratives of the Caribbean and its diasporas, weaving compelling stories that bridge the past with the present.

With a background in film, humanities, and cultural studies, Neigeme has spent years researching and documenting Caribbean oral traditions, visual storytelling, and the region's evolving literary landscape. Their work reflects a deep commitment to preserving and reimagining the cultural heritage of the Caribbean, infusing each story with the rhythms, textures, and spiritual resonances of the region.

Beyond writing, Neigeme is an advocate for Caribbean cinema and storytelling, actively engaging in discussions on the decolonisation of creative industries and the importance of indigenous narratives in global media. Their research and creative work seek to challenge dominant representations of the Caribbean, offering alternative visions rooted in the voices and experiences of its people.

Neigeme's storytelling is immersive and thought-provoking, blending history, fantasy, and realism to create narratives that are both deeply personal and universally resonant. Through *The Lore* and future works, they continue to push the boundaries of Caribbean literature, ensuring that its myths, legends, and voices endure for generations to come.



## *Author's Contacts...*

*Neigeme Glasgow-Maeda.*

*9-11 Rue Louvigny, Ville-Haute*

*L-1946, Luxembourg*

*neigeme01@gmail.com*

*+352 661 740 104*

*[www.ngmproduction.com](http://www.ngmproduction.com)*

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