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MONARCA

by

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Upmarket Fiction

*A Una Mariposa Monarca*

*Por Homero Aridjis*

*Tú que vas por el día
 como un tigre alado
 quemándote en tu vuelo
 dime qué vida sobrenatural
 está pintada en tus alas
 para que después de esta vida
 pueda verte en mi noche*

*To A Monarch Butterfly*

*By Homero Aridjis*

*You who go through the day
 like a winged tiger
 burning in your flight
 tell me what supernatural life
 is painted on your wings
 so that after this life
 I may see you in my night*

**Author’s Note**

 For many years I have witnessed the monarch butterflies wind their way through Texas each fall on their way to Mexico from Canada. I have researched them, created terrariums for them, planted milkweed for them and observed them. In my classroom, we have watched the caterpillars through their five instar stages to eventually create their chrysalis. The most magical part is of course when the butterfly emerges!

 One day in the fall of 2014, when my 13-year-old daughter was undergoing cancer treatment for an aggressive Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, I was feeling particularly troubled, but doing my best to put on a happy face for the students. We went out into the gardens and about 200 monarch butterflies descended upon us. Never before and never since then have I experienced such a phenomena. One of my Mexican-American students looked at me with bright eyes and exclaimed, “*Maestra, estamos en un jardín de maravillosas*!” Indeed, we were in a garden of wonders, despite everything that was happening in my life. I believe that day is when this story began in my imagination. My daughter survived cancer and eventually I made the trek to Macheros, Mexico, a little mountain village just 2 ½ hours west of Mexico City, very near the border of Michoacan, so that I could pay my respects to the overwintering monarch butterflies who once gave me hope at a time in my life when I was feeling hopeless.

 Like the fictional town in my story, Macheros lies on the edge of a monarch butterfly sanctuary. The mountain, Cerro Pelón, is a steep hike up from the town to nearly 10,000 feet above sea level, which you can also reach by horse. Joel Moreno, the owner of an amazing eco-bed-and-breakfast there, grew up on this land. It is very sacred to him and his whole family, who have been there for generations. He showed me (and again a second time when I returned while writing this book) the magical butterflies in the sanctuary. It is truly a miracle that they survive the 2,000 mile journey from Canada to Mexico. There are theories as to how they are able to do this, but the most prominent one is that they have their own inner compass guiding them. To see millions of them fluttering about when the sun comes out way up in the mountain is breathtaking. These pollinators, like bees, became an endangered species in July 2022. In September of 2022, I began writing this book. I also felt a certain connection to the Aztec remains in Mexico City, which is why I weaved in Itzpapalotl and the other deities. I feel like there is a lot of Aztec mythology that has been lost and is just now starting to resurface more, thanks to writers like David Bowles. I want to continue to elevate the knowledge of my ancestors and of previously silenced voices with my stories.

 My maternal grandmother, Juanita Perez-Gutierrez, was a small woman with a powerful presence. I held her hand while she passed and was pregnant with my oldest child the day she died. I feel like she held my hand a lot metaphorically during the hardships of the cancer journey. There is definitely a healing aspect/brujería in that lineage. When I became a Master Reiki practitioner, it was a natural process for me. It was not something unfamiliar at all when I would lay my hands on a person and feel what was happening in their energy field.

 As far as the transgender character, Liliana, is concerned, I am an advocate for trans people for many reasons, but one in particular is because I support loved ones who identify as such. Love is love.

**Prologue**

 Dark clouds shifted in unnatural slowness as the sun disappeared behind the moon.

Only a crescent of light seeped through and even that completely vanished in minutes.

Seven young women gathered like songbirds in the dense forest, depositing their blood

into a stone chalice held by a figure in white, at the base of the majestic fir tree that stood

well over 100 feet tall. Itzel lifted her white headdress, revealing the aristocratic features

of an Aztec princess. She took the contents in the cup and poured it into the gnarled roots

of the sacred tree. All of the women, save her, who had no blood to offer, chanted

together the Nahuatl poem of the butterflies as they surrounded the tree in the surreal

midday twilight. It was neither day nor night as darkness descended upon them,

everything falling into a hushed silence. An eerie stillness hovered in the atmosphere; the

green leaves on the thousands of trees suddenly were static. The whistling wind quieted

like a scolded child. Time and space moved in and out of one another, the past and future

nonexistent.

 Mocel leaned in close to Itzel, who stood tall, her aquiline nose lifted up toward the

sky. Placing a gentle hand over the hint of her sister’s curved belly, she could sense it

was a girl. Would she be born with the striking looks of both the Spanish conqueror

Hernán Cortés and her sister Itzel? She had watched Itzel become one of his favored

concubines, with her divinely haunting eyes, dark as obsidian. He had not yet realized his

seed had taken root. The sisters had been offered to him, along with several other women.

Lavish treasures, gold and gemstones, had also been bestowed upon Cortés, welcoming

him into the center of Tenochtitlan, as had been foretold.

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 Only days before in Tenochtitlan, it became strikingly clear that Itzel’s concerns were

no longer just her own. There was the life of her unborn child’s future to consider, in the

midst of the quickly shifting powers transforming their day-to-day lives. She had devised

a plan of escape to coincide with the coming solar eclipse with the help of Coatlicue, the

Great Mother, for the threats were mounting.

 Among the foreigners there was a slender priest who towered over the Spanish

soldiers. Riding a sleek black stallion, he could be seen in a gray-hooded cloak that lent a

sense of apprehension to his overall presence. He was called Father Espinoza and he was

especially ruthless to the women, whom he seemed to deeply resent. He had caught the

sisters praying to Coatlicue, despite his rabid insistence that they worship a woman he

called Mary, with skin so light it could have been made of lime. Upon this discovery, he

violently pushed the two of them to their knees and whispered in Itzel’s ear in the new

language that her child would be seized and raised by the church. Under thick lashes, she

dared lift her gaze to regard his stern black-bearded face and was unsettled by his

exacting blue eyes, the shade of an infinitely clear sky. Never in her life had she seen

eyes this color. She peered into them longer than she should have. A bony hand met her

soft cheek with a hard slap. “Insubordinate woman! Keep your heathen eyes off of me!

God punishes filth like you.”

 Itzel averted her eyes and kept them glued to a spot on the soft earth, wishing the

Great Mother would devour Father Espinoza right then and there. It terrified her that he

knew she was pregnant. How this was possible, as she had not missed her blood by long,

she could not be sure, but she suspected he had the gift of second sight. There was no

way she would let him touch her child, much less take it away from her. Keeping her

head bowed alongside her sister, she waited to raise herself until she could no longer see

his feet.

 That evening Coatlicue visited Itzel in her dreams. Itzel recognized her with her long

flowing hair, dressed in a white robe. She appeared to her as half woman and half snake,

representing the female part of universal duality and as such told Itzel that she was to

address her as Snake Woman. She beckoned Itzel to walk with her under the starry night

sky to Lake Xochimilco. Itzel stepped onto the cool banks with Snake Woman, glancing

up at the stars, shining brighter than she’d ever seen.

 Snake Woman gestured up to them, “You are Hijas de Estrellas, daughters of the

stars. To that place you will return one day, where the Divine Feminine warriors reside.”

Then Snake Woman looked into Itzel’s eyes with a darkened expression filled with deep

pain. “The life of your child and all of their future children are in grave danger,” she

continued. “Do not make my mistake. Do not leave your child on a path of destruction.

Go west into the tall mountains covered in the oyamel. It is the place where your

ancestors return each year in the form of papalotl (butterflies). You visited there once

when you were a child. Like the papalotl, you will know where to go. In this sacred place

on earth, there is a healing tree where you will find the mighty Butterfly Goddess,

Itzpapalotl. She and her Tzitzimimeh, the star goddesses, will protect you, but you must

leave in time for the arrival of the hidden sun, for that is when Iztpapalotl and the

Tzizimimeh will descend upon the invaders that wish you harm. Use the poetry of the

butterflies to summon Her, the Great Protectress of the Divine Feminine. She favors

blood magic. You must collect it from the women to feed to the roots of the healing tree.

The emerald stone that you were gifted will guide you to the tree and you will need it as

an offering to Itzpapalotl, for it was never his.”

 With that, Snake Woman vanished and Itzel woke with a heart full of conviction. She

ran her fingers lightly over her slender belly that was beginning to protrude. Soon enough

she would not be able to keep it hidden so easily. She searched for the small emerald

keepsake that she had secured in a leather pouch. She rubbed it between her fingers,

recalling how Cortés had been so arrogant about his bounty from Moctezuma. A very

large emerald, the size of two hands, had been acquired among the loot and he planned to

give it to some foreign queen he spoke about to Itzel after he’d taken her in his bed. She

listened to him, her ears now accustomed to the strange birdsong language he spoke,

while glancing at a tiny chunk he’d cut from this great emerald that lay in a ceramic bowl

by the bedside. It sparkled mischievously at her. She eyed it curiously. He followed her

gaze to it and placed the fingernail-sized gemstone between her small breasts, licking her

nipples. “Keep this if you like, for you please me in ways the others do not,” he had said

before sending her off.

 Something about the stone seemed mysterious and precious to her. She never let it out

of her sight and now she was glad she had not, as she now knew it held a greater purpose

than just its sparkling beauty. She felt her sister stirring as Mocel blinked her eyes open

in the pink light of dawn.

 “Mocel,” Itzel spoke into her sister’s ear, “I need you to choose five other women to

go with us far from here. Choose the ones still devoted to our ways and with varied skills

and you will need to gather their blood. Coatlicue visited me in my dreams with a

warning to leave.” Mocel nodded her head sleepily. She never doubted her sister, for Itzel

was wise like her mother had been and her dreams were always right.

 “Where will we go, sister?”

 “We will go where the ancestors return to in the mountains west of Xinantecatl

(Toluca). It will take us several days. We traveled there when we were little. There are

fields of flowers at the base of the mountain.”

 “I scarcely remember that place, but anywhere is safer than here for us,” Mocel

responded, hugging her sister close.

 “Yes. We can raise my child in our own traditions and not the ones being imposed

upon us. We can escape Father Espinoza and leave this world dominated by these men in

power who seek to control all of our lives. There we will begin anew.”

By day’s end, Mocel had selected the women that would journey with them. She

chose carefully by their loyalty to the Great Mother and their talents. Chantico was an

expert with plants and herbs while Tayanna was a healer. They often worked in tandem to

remedy the sick. Tozi and Ome were skilled in preparing food. Lastly, and perhaps the

most importantly, was Xalapa, who was educated in midwifery skills. They agreed to

share their collective knowledge and form a sisterhood. They were ready to follow Itzel

and her sister into the mountains as her dream had commanded they do. The women

gathered only what they could carry inconspicuously and met at the Templo Mayor for

last offerings to the gods in the cover of night that followed. As they left a revered place

that would never be the same again, they moved briskly through the mazes toward one of

the canals leading out of the center. Itzel felt the flutterings of movement in her womb

when she touched the rough volcanic stone of the wall at the base of the temple of Tlaloc

that already showed signs of desecration under Cortés’ orders. The invaders were using

the sacred stone to build new structures to a foreign god. She whispered to Tlaloc, the

god of rain, as she looked up at the sky, clear and laden with stars. She entreated him to

hold back the rain until they reached their destination. Again, the tiniest movement

trembled inside her, like butterfly wings. It was an auspicious sign. She felt for the

emerald inside the leather pouch hung around her neck. It was hot to the touch.

“Hijas de estrellas,” she heard from the skies, the same words from Coatlicue in her

dream. It was time to go.

 Signaling for the women to move swiftly, Itzel led them toward a boat waiting for

them in the canal. The sound of running water met their ears as they searched for the

brother of Xalapa. He helped them each into the finely constructed flatboat, made from

the branches of a juniper tree. The aromatic cedar scent imbued Itzel’s clothing as she

looked up at the velvet black sky dotted with stars. It would be the last smell she

remembered from Tenochtitlan. When they reached the western edge of the city where

they would begin their arduous journey toward the mountains of the papalotl, they bid

Xalapa’s brother farewell. He slipped an obsidian knife for protection and a small handful

of chapoltin (grasshoppers) into his sister’s pouch for extra sustenance on their voyage.

Itzel led them in the darkness through gurgling streams and vast, empty fields, the

emerald warming up in her hand with each correct turn in the changing landscape until at

last Xalapa insisted they stop and rest for the good of Itzel’s unborn child.

“You are running for two and eating for two, now,” she reminded Itzel as she lit a fire

to roast corn. Tozi took over the meal as Xalapa massaged Itzel’s feet.

“We can only rest until the sun rises, then we must continue our journey so that we

arrive in time,” Itzel stated, her eyelids growing heavy.

 She reached for her sister’s reassuring hand and fell into a fitful sleep with recurring

visions of Father Espinoza. He was feverish with snakes slithering in and out of his

mouth, those icy blue eyes rolling into the back of his head. Waking with a start, she

knew he was in pursuit of her. Birdsong and the soft illuminating light of the first rays of

the sun belied the looming danger. She quickly ate a meal of tortillas and roasted corn as

the women gathered their few belongings to continue westward the whole day long, with

only short breaks as Itzel was determined to reach their destination before it was too late.

At the end of the long day, as the sun was sinking low in the sky, Xalapa insisted the

women rest by the side of an immense basalt rock. Before they began making a fire,

Mocel noticed movement in a distant meadow.

 “I do not think this is the place to rest, sister.”

 Itzel looked in the direction that Mocel pointed, making out the familiar gray-cloaked

figure among others on horseback. They must have seen them as their horses galloped

toward them, picking up speed. Itzel’s heart began to race, guiding the women further up

the hillside. They took cover in a small cave opening, just as they felt the thundering

energy of hooves on the ground beneath them. It was cool and pitch black in the cave.

Mocel reached out instinctively for her sister’s hand, which she clasped as she slowed

down her breath. They could not afford to be caught now. They’d come too far.

 “Woman, you cannot hide from the likes of me or my men. How dare you try to

escape your fate!” The haughty voice of Father Espinoza reverberated from outside of the

cave.

 Itzel’s heart thumped like a ceremonial drum. She summoned the Great Mother’s

guidance as she rubbed the emerald between her fingers. Suddenly there was a shrill cry

followed by a man’s panicked voice announcing news.

 “Ernesto’s horse just tossed him onto the sharp edge of a rock! There’s blood

everywhere. He’s asking for last rites!”

 “How is that possible? Our horses are well trained,” boomed the voice of Father

Espinoza.

 “His horse was bitten by a snake. Francisco saw it slither away.”

 “That woman has bewitched the animals! Bruja, that child is not yours! She will not

grow up with your sins in her soul! Mark my words: this is not over, yet.” shouted Father

Espinoza, as the sounds of the horses faded into the distance.

 Mocel peeked out to see if the men had truly disappeared before the women emerged

from the cave. The sapphire sky had darkened further and night was imminent. Now they

continued their journey with a vigor that carried them west all through the long night, not

daring to stop until dawn arrived. When at last it did, they saw that they had reached the

base of the mountain they had been seeking. With the warmth of the bright sun, orange

and black-winged butterflies began to flit about the area, stopping to sip the nectar on the

yellow xochitica (flowers) that Itzel recognized from her childhood journey here. They

were a sign to her that they had indeed arrived…but would they find the tree in time?

Itzel swore she could hear the sounds of horses approaching. Though exhausted, their

adrenaline-infused bodies moved them through the steep and rocky path upward past

thick vines and countless trees. Itzel totaled the days back in her mind. Today the sun

would hide behind the moon, just as the Great Mother had foretold in her dream. Mocel

tripped over the roots of a tree, slowing the women down momentarily. As they stopped

to help Mocel back up, Itzel felt heat radiating from the emerald. She beheld a majestic

oyamel fir tree trembling with movement.

 “Look!” Itzel shouted, pointing up.

 The women could see it was not the tree itself moving, but hundreds of thousands of

butterflies in colonies hanging like heavy fruit on the slender, outstretched branches. The

Great Mother had guided her here for the singular purpose of summoning Itzpapalotl.

Pulling the white cloak out of her bag, she slipped it on as she directed the women to

gather, chanting the poem of the butterfly and feeding the gnarled earth beneath the tree

with their blood as the sun hid from sight. Within seconds after the eerie halting of

daylight, they heard the dreaded hooves again. The Spaniards had returned, for they were

relentless.

 “Now, I’ve got you!” Father Espinoza shouted.

But before they could come any closer, Itzel clutched her belly protectively, gathering

the last bit of strength she had and roared into the darkened day, “Never!”

 The butterflies, as if sensing the turmoil, fluttered wildly. The air picked up and a deep

wail of howling winds swirled violently with the sound of Itzel’s voice ringing

throughout the forest. As if nature were readying itself for the arrival of something all-

encompassing, hundreds of giant oyamel trees scented the air with pine as their massive

trunks bowed to an otherworldly presence. The snapping of cracked wood echoed

throughout the hillsides.

 A rapid quavering of butterfly wings surrounded the women, a hummingbird zipped

by, its brightly colored wings blending with the monarch butterflies. The collective

gentleness of wings beating formed a delicately fierce and protective barrier as the blood

curdling cries of the men sounded from beyond their sheltered space. Itzel could see past

nature’s fortification to make out a terrifyingly tall creature with giant, black wings. She

had a crown of feathers and flowers adorning her head. Her tall, dark body was painted

black and red. As she moved, the skulls hanging on a chain around her beautiful neck

clanged together, creating a frightening sound. Sharpened claws protracted from her

hands and feet.

 Itzel held the emerald tightly. It had indeed provided good luck and safe passage with

each turn they made. She peered into it as the green glinted a reflection of bright light that

emanated from Itzpapalotl. Itzel spoke to the stone, “You will return here again one day.”

With that, she launched it toward the goddess. It landed in one of the skulls around

Her neck. The goddess screeched as a fleet of female warriors with skirts made of skulls

and crossbones descended from the darkened sky, beating their wings collectively.

Everything went quiet as the Tzitzimimeh swiftly flew back into the sky and the fearsome

Itzpapalotl followed. The moon slid away from the sun, like a lover leaving an unmade

bed.

 The sky brightened, bringing the natural order of light back to day and as it did, the

men who had pursued the women far from Tenochtitlan lay in a bloody heap. All of their

horses, save the black one that Father Espinoza had ridden, had fled. Itzel drew the

powerful stallion to her. It nuzzled her and she claimed it for her own as her sister

prepared a fire. The women began the low, guttural chant again as Xalapa gave Itzel the

obsidian blade to cut deep into what was left of the men’s chests. After gathering the

hearts, the women lifted them up to the sky, thanking the powerful Itzpapalotl for her

help in keeping Itzel and her future children safe. They threw the hearts into the fire.

From the smoke emerged an enormous monarch. It filled the sky, flying upward into the

sun.

**Chapter 1**

**Death**

*She wept*

*And each*

*Salt-filled drip*

*Contained pieces of her*

*A uniquely composed*

*Momentary release*

*Of cells on the verge of*

*Elapsed time*

*Recalling an ending*

*Opening the space*

*For the conception*

*Of pieces of her*

*Arranged by her*

*With her*

*For her*

*In that when*

*That moment dies*

*It is a pretty death*

*With liquid attendants*

*Saying farewell with love*

 Alea held her breath as the low humming of the machine surrounded her body. She never thought of herself as claustrophobic until this moment in time. She prayed the results would yield a good cancer. What a strange paradox: a good cancer. In the realm of this disease, some were better than others. She’d only visited the oncologist a week ago, but within the span of three days, she’d been subjected to a biopsy and now a PET scan to determine the stage and treatment plan of what was growing, uninvited, inside her. Everything had changed the day her grandmother died. Alea had been having the same tired argument with Rob.

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 “You really want to wait? Your lease is up next month and you’ve practically lived at my place for the last six. Think of how much money we could save! Austin is getting to be so expensive…you said things are getting serious,” Alea said, feeling like a child begging for a pair of shoes that didn't fit.

 Rob’s dusky eyes looked past her. They had once sparkled, but now they were vacant.

 “Babe,” he sighed, moving his hands down her curved hips.

 It was hard to resist his advances, after all, there was no denying they had good chemistry together. She gave in, pulling her soft t-shirt off and tossing it onto the floor. Her body was responding to his touch as his fingers moved down her back. He knew it well. He coaxed her to the bedroom, her mind in other places still as he caressed her breasts, suddenly stopping. He rubbed a spot on her left breast, his eyebrows knitting together.

 “Wait, what? Do you feel something? I thought I felt something in the shower the other day, too.” Alea pulled away from him abruptly.

 “It’s probably nothing, maybe I’m just imagining it,” Rob said, pressing his erection against her leg.

 She felt for the small hard spot she’d noticed on her left breast where his fingers had been. Rob gently moved her hand away from her breast, trying to unbutton her jeans. Before she could push him away, the theme song from *The Twilight Zone* chimed on her phone, the synth pop ringtone breaking the awkward moment.

 “Your dad’s cockblocking me,” Rob made a face, pulling her outstretched hand away from the phone.

 She swatted his hands away as she answered her phone.

 “Alea, I need to let you know something, sweetie,” began the gravelly voice of her father. Something in his tone made her heart beat faster. She took a deep breath, moving away from Rob.

 “What’s going on, dad?”

 “Your *abuela* lost her battle with pneumonia. Your mother is obviously taking this hard, but she’s planning the memorial with your Tío Marco. We’ll all be going there soon. I just wanted you to know.”

 Alea’s mind flashed to the last time she’d visited her grandmother, a quick visit two falls prior. She felt guilty that she had been too busy with her life to take the time to visit more recently. It seemed like there was never enough time for everything. When she did visit, it always took a day or so to adjust to the high altitude near the border of Michoacan in the little mountain town of Xochitlalpan (so-cheet-lah-pahn). She had spent time with her *abuela* in her garden as striking orange and black monarchs scintillated under the cerulean blue sky while cool breezes caressed her cheeks. The steep hike into the mountain sanctuary rewarded her with the presence of millions more overwintering butterflies that covered the towering majestic fir trees known as oyamel. That experience never got old.

 “Are you okay, honey? Need me to come over?” her father asked.

 Alea paused as she looked at Rob, who was anxiously waiting to get into her pants.

 “I’ll be okay,” Alea whispered, then ended the call.

 Her eyes welled up with tears. Rob had never met Alea’s grandmother, Juana, and now he never would, she thought. Maybe it was the confirmation she needed. Her grandmother’s blessing was important as she always seemed to innately know things.

 “My grandmother died,” Alea said quietly to him.

 “I’m sorry, babe,” Rob said, pulling her closer, his nimble fingers fiddling with the button on her jeans.

 “I think you should leave.”

 She moved away from him, and stepped back into the living room to find her top.

 He followed her like a pouty child, still trying to paw at her.

 “I think you need to calm down, Alea. Everything will be okay.”

 “Really, Rob? I just can’t do this right now. I just found out my grandmother died. Come on. And there’s a lump in my breast! What the hell?” she huffed at him, annoyed that his dick was the only thing he seemed to care about.

 He shrugged his shoulders sheepishly.

 “I was just trying to make you feel better,” he mumbled under his breath. Women could be so confusing, he thought.

 “Rob, that’s not going to make me feel better right now. I don’t think you get it. I think I need to be alone to process all of this.”

 “All of what?” He replied, trying his best disarming look on her

 Alea crossed her arms. “Everything I just told you! Do you realize what’s happening to me?”

 Then there was a long pause from him followed by, “I think maybe we need a break.”

 Heading back to the bedroom to grab a handful of his shirts, he swaggered toward her closet door.

 She watched him with her mouth agape. Did he not understand that she just needed to deal with the shock of her grandmother’s death? Was he really just okay with breaking up completely because she was in a difficult emotional space?

 “Rob, I didn’t mean we should break up!” She followed him into the bedroom as she watched him sliding two pearl snap button-down vintage shirts off of hangers. Her heart began beating faster.

 “Look, babe, things have been rocky for a while. You have a lot going on and I just don’t know if I have the capacity to handle all of it. We can still be friends,” he offered weakly, avoiding eye contact.

 As she watched him move back out of her bedroom, a deep anger began to erupt from within her.

 “Wait a minute. What kind of boyfriend breaks up with his girlfriend after she finds out her grandmother has just died? And there’s a lump in her breast? You don’t have the capacity? Like you’re a water bottle and I’m too much liquid for you? What the hell?” Alea’s voice grew louder.

 “Look, Alea. It’s more like..like I’m Mike in *Stranger In A Strange Land*,” Rob said, referencing the vintage sci-fi book she had given him a few weeks ago, “he is learning everything he needs to about life on earth with Jill, but ultimately has to find his own way.”

 Alea couldn’t believe what was happening. Was he really romanticizing their break up by identifying with the main character from a book she had gifted him? He’d never even heard of Robert Heinlein until she introduced him to him. Maybe her grandmother had intervened after all. That phone call about her death couldn’t have come at a more critical time. How could she have ever wanted Rob to move in with her? It was clear to her now that the good times were easy—the sex, the flirting, the fun stuff. But when the chips were down, this is how he would react?

 “Except unlike Mike from the book, you weren’t born on Mars, Rob! Or maybe…you were. You know what? That’s fine. Just go. I’ll have Kiki get the rest of your stuff to you,” Alea said defeatedly, thinking of her best friend.

 The front door creaked as Rob opened it. He paused, almost said something, but didn’t. His hand waved mechanically at her, as if they were both strangers in a strange land together—so detached and devoid of emotion. Then the door closed. Alea looked down at her feet. A tear rolled down her cheek and plopped onto the floor right next to her little toe.

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 She had met Rob at the boutique clothing shop where she worked off of South Congress for a few years right after graduating college. A degree in humanities wasn’t exactly going to land her a great job with benefits anywhere in Austin, Texas and she knew that. But it was okay for the time being and she made good commissions there, what with all of the tourists coming in droves now. Rob was the hot manager next door at the boot shop. It felt thrilling that he took a liking to her as everyone had told her he wouldn’t be interested because he was still pining away for his ex. He was sexy and well connected with the coolest musicians that played down the street at the Continental Club. Lots of women vied for his attention, but he took a liking to Alea when they struck up a conversation about the Netflix series *Stranger Things* while sitting outside on the shared bench between the stores during a lunch break.

 He was a couple of years older than Alea and seemed sure of himself, something she hadn’t really developed in herself just yet. He liked to pick outfits out for her to wear and she let him, along with accepting a trendy perfume gift from him one day. She wasn’t even a perfume kind of girl, but the way he’d given it to her on a rainy day after drinks at the Hotel San José had seemed really romantic. But she should have paid closer attention when his co-worker sniffed her and remarked that she smelled like his ex, Riley. She ignored the red flag because they did have fun together and he was the only guy she’d ever met that knew the titles of at least some of the same fantasy and sci-fi books on her shelves. After several months of spending the night at each other’s places, they became an item and he ended up at her place more often than not as his place was cramped and not as nice.

 Alea knew her dad would be thrilled that they had broken up because Jay had never liked him. She’d recently landed a job with better pay and benefits at the University of Texas and her dad had hinted at her moving up in life, on a more mature path. Her dad also referenced leaving behind things, like the relationship with Rob. He’d never been impressed by him. She hated to admit it, but now she knew that her dad had been right.

 She started gathering items of his and throwing them in an empty cardboard Amazon box in the corner of her apartment. She texted a picture of the box to her best friend Kiki:

 *I need your help getting this box of crap to Rob, if you don’t mind. We broke up, finally. Lots of shitty stuff going on. Tell you all about it over drinks later.*

 Kiki replied right away:

 *Do you need me to come over? Are you okay? You deserve better, I’ve told you that. Of course I’ll get it to what’s-his-face…or maybe the trash can. Give me a week or so to finish up on a big event I’m in charge of at the Driskill Hotel. Love you, girl.*

 Alea cracked a feeble smile. Kiki was a loyal friend and had a busy social calendar as an event planner and had had her reservations about Rob, but put up with him because Alea was her best friend. Alea would have to let her in on everything eventually, but right now it was abundantly clear her priority was to get in to her doctor.

 The following week was a whirlwind of tests. She felt like she was on a fast train to hell, and finding time to squeeze in all of the appointments with everything else going on only made matters worse. The loneliest test by far was the PET scan. Kiki asked if she wanted her to be there, but Alea declined the offer. No one could be with her in the room, anyhow. Some things in life had to be done alone.

 She found herself in a cold place of sterile stillness. She remained a statue in the stiff blue paper gown as she heard the beeping sounds from the machine indicating that the test was over. She wondered if her grandmother’s death had felt lonely like this, which made her sad. No, it wasn’t possible. Her grandmother was beloved by many in Xochitlalpan. Alea imagined she’d most likely been in the presence of her beloved friend, Mamá Lulita. The technician brought her attention back to the present and helped her off of the table, letting her know the oncologist would call her with results in three to five days. Alea nodded absentmindedly and headed back to the changing area to put on her clothes.

 She had withheld all of this awful health news from her mother, Marisol, who was dealing with her grandmother’s passing and planning their trip for the memorial. She didn’t want to upset her parents more during such a difficult time. They’d be leaving together the next day. She’d have to keep it all inside and wait for the phone call while she was in Mexico. All these dreaded phone calls. Dead brown leaves crunched under her feet as Alea walked through the parking lot to find her car. She drove home alone to pack.

 Her apartment was a mess. She’d stopped caring about keeping things tidy after that awful break up day. There were piles of papers on the migratory pattern of monarch butterflies everywhere and fantasy novels scattered on the kitchen counters spilling into the living area. The trash hadn’t been taken out. Grabbing a small pipe filled with pot that the team leader at the lab had recently shared with her, she lit it up and breathed it in to calm her nerves. The skunky smell enveloped her space. She turned on one of her favorite song playlists and stepped over a pile of dirty clothes in her bedroom to get to her carry-on suitcase. There was a knock on her door. It was Kiki coming to grab the box of Rob’s things.

 Kiki’s freckles danced on her cheeks as she wrinkled her nose, commenting, “Dude, Alea. What are you doing? Hotboxing here? Let me help you clean up a bit.”

 “Nah, it’s okay. I’ve got it. I’m leaving tomorrow for my grandmother’s memorial. Will you water my plants on the porch?” Alea asked her.

 “Of course, I’ll make sure the lavender and rosemary are happy—I know they are special to you. Please check in with me and keep me posted on everything, okay? I love you, girl.” Kiki’s blonde hair framed her kind face, her soft blue eyes looking sympathetically at Alea.

 “I will,” Alea said, letting Kiki pull her in for a much needed hug.

 “I’ll take care of this box of bullshit and your plants. You just take care of you,” Kiki told her, grabbing the Amazon box and heading out.

 Alea closed the door and went back to sifting through things to pack when she glimpsed a silver flower charm bracelet Rob had given her. Fuck Rob, she thought. She now suspected it had belonged to Riley. She threw it in a bin and checked her phone. There were no messages from him and there wouldn’t be anymore. She knew it logically, but it was a habit she was still breaking. And besides, it would be a lie if she did not think that it would be comforting to hear from him. Hadn’t he said they could still be friends? Where was he now? Why on earth had she wanted them to move in together anyhow? What a *pendejo*.

 Alea stripped down to her bra and underwear and looked down at her breasts. They were a little lopsided, but had a nice shape. They were full and round, not too big, not too small. They gave her a feminine silhouette that had obviously attracted Rob once upon a time. What would it be like if she had to have one or both of them removed? How did this even happen to her? There was no history of breast cancer on her mother’s or her father’s side. What had she done to deserve this? She took another hit from her pipe.

 Alea was doing everything right. She’d taken the opportunity a few months ago to work at the university as a lab assistant where her mother worked with graduate students in the science department. She was finally doing what was expected of her: a steady job with healthcare, her own place, etc. Wasn’t that the succession of normal adult things? Cancer was not supposed to be on that list and neither was a break up or her grandmother’s death. At least not now and not all at once. She sighed heavily and began to feel the effects of the pot, slowing time down. The beat of the music in the background resonated inside her chest, further relaxing her anxious heartbeat. Alea moved with the beat, starting to dissociate from all the disastrous things happening to her in her life.

 *“Corazón, corazón, corazón*

*Yo te guardo tiernamente en mi canción*

*Corazón, corazón, corazón*

*Es tu llama que enciende mi pasión”*

These were the lyrics she heard from the band, Elastic Bond. She had told Rob that the last line, “*It is your flame that ignites my passion,*” was how she felt about him at one time. Obviously, that flame extinguished the day the phone call about her grandmother occurred. She felt nothing like that about him now. She fell into a fitful sleep halfway through packing and had a strange dream.

 High up in the forest above Xochitlalpan, Alea watched everything happen around her. She was part of all of the elements—the wind moving through the leaves, the branches heavy with thousands upon thousands of monarchs and the ruby-throated hummingbirds flying swiftly through the land. It was as if the whole forest was a moving symphony, with all of the animals and plants interacting together. Her grandmother walked peacefully in a white dress and waved goodbye, before disappearing into a bark-colored mass. It moved like a lung expanding and contracting, clutched against the trunk of an enormous tree. Alea watched in suspense as one by one butterflies broke away from the cluster, filling the air, moving high into the sky. Brilliant specks of orange, like confetti, fluttered in the sunshine. “*Hijas de Estrellas*” she heard before she woke to the sound of loud knocking.

 She grabbed a crumpled shirt off of the floor, threw it on and checked the door. It was her mother.

 “¡*Mijita! Que tienes?* Your dad called you three times! It’s time to go. Get your things. Why aren’t you ready?”

 Marisol was a no-nonsense woman. She peered in at the mess in Alea’s apartment while Alea stumbled into the bathroom to quickly brush her hair and teeth. She glimpsed herself in the mirror. Her tall figure was dwarfed by her go-to oversized sweatshirt with the singer Selena on it. Her chestnut hair, normally reaching past her shoulders in soft, springy waves, was a disheveled mess. She could hear the sounds of books being stacked together and papers being shuffled coming from the living room. Her mother could bring order to chaos in any situation. Under normal circumstances, this was something that Alea invited, but on this particular morning, it was especially irritating to her.

 “Don’t judge, Rob and I broke up,” Alea yelled as she headed to her room to throw on some clothes.

 “¡*Que mugroso*! I’m taking out your trash. *Ay, mijita*, it’s probably for the best that he’s out of your life,” Marisol retorted.

 The stench of spoiled food wafted up to Marisol’s nostrils as she carried the garbage to the door with a disgusted look on her face.

 “Meet me in the car in the parking lot. ¡*Ya es la hora!*” Her mother said firmly.

 Alea grabbed her last pair of clean underwear and shoved it and her toothbrush in her carry-on. She looked around at her place once more before shutting the door. She had the distinct sensation that nothing would be the same after Mexico.

**Chapter 2**

**The Memorial**

*Dying brings on new life*

*Resurrecting dormant connections*

*Beyond the ashes of your loss*

*Further than the stars*

*And back again*

*Into the galaxy of wide sprung matter*

*Perfect spirals*

*Propelling you onward*

*Beyond the bounds of death*

 Alea fidgeted in her bright pink dress as Father Maldonado spoke. The priest in an old-fashioned cassock seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time recounting stories of her grandmother, or maybe she was just tired. He was at her grandmother’s house often when she visited as a little girl, as both he and her grandmother were valued leaders in the spiritual community. He offered Mamá Lulita, her grandmother’s friend and neighbor, a moment to speak.

 “Juana had a heart of gold and was as wise as our trees in the forest. She was always busy making everything better for anyone in need, flitting around like our monarch butterflies. The monarchs loved her gardens, as she ensured they had plenty of nectar there. No one who ever visited her garden walked away empty-handed and no one who ever visited her home walked away hungry. Juana ensured that all who visited her felt loved, cared for and nurtured. But she had a formidable side, too, for she was not afraid to speak her mind. She helped to restore balance to our natural resources that were being mistreated and we must continue to complete her work on preserving the plants, trees and mountains that nature has provided in abundance here. She will always be remembered as *una mujer poderosa.* And I will dearly miss my beautiful friend.”

 Alea blotted away tears forming in her eyes. Indeed it was true. At least 100 people were gathered in the courtyard outside of the adobe church with its arched blue doorway. Bright orange flowers adorned the area, along with magnificent monarch butterflies and bees that flashed by. The saffron-colored marigolds gathered in nearby buckets scented the air with a pungent yet alluring musk, as the chill breeze teased the ruffles on the hem of Alea’s dress. She reached for her sweater to cover up her bare arms. Her tanned skin from the summer had by now faded into a light shade of mocha. She glanced over the sea of humble people gathered to say goodbye to her grandmother. Their whitewashed homes dotted the landscape like soft, white clouds in the distance. Nearly the entire village was present. Juana was loved by so many, as she had been a source of knowledge about the healing plants that she cultivated. Women often consulted her for guidance when it came to trouble with pregnancies and men sought her help with their love interests. Juana was a revered *mujer*, which was evident here, in this touching village convocation.

 The day before had been a blur of traveling for Alea and she still hadn’t yet caught up on her sleep. They flew directly from Austin to Mexico City, but had to go through customs on arrival. From there it was about another two and a half hours west to the little mountain town of Xochitlalpan. She knew it well. The road could be clogged with traffic, but it had not been as congested as usual. She’d stared out of the window of her uncle’s car as they drove westward from the city through Toluca with its bright yellow and orange buildings and then further through the basalt-covered hills and valleys along the way. She glanced at the pastures full of horses and cows blurring by as they continued up the winding road toward the rugged mountains. The air was always several degrees cooler in her grandmother’s village as it was at a higher elevation. She was glad she’d at least remembered to pack a sweater in her haste.

 Alea rubbed her eyes as she now stood beside her mother in the church courtyard and tried to focus on the present moment and not what was happening inside her body. The idea of hijacked cells replicating uncontrollably without ending essentially meant those cells were infinite. Immortal. Cancer was like a vampire, draining the light from a person. She shifted her weight and tried to clear those uncomfortable thoughts from her mind, wishing she could take another hit from her pipe back home.

 She glimpsed her mother crying silently next to her, her father placing a protective arm around Marisol’s shoulder. Alea slipped her hand in her mother’s. It was warm. She was a good head taller than her petite mother. She observed her mother’s aristocratic nose as her proud profile bowed down toward her chest. At that moment, her mother looked like an amalgamation of a lost Spanish-Aztec empress. She knew her mother had had a tense relationship with Juana. She’d heard the story that her grandmother was sad to see Marisol leave the village with Jay, who had met Marisol on a student visit with the Geology department from the University of Texas when they were both 19. Out of the corner of her eye Alea spotted a majestic orange and black butterfly, the size of her hand. It landed on her mother’s chest momentarily, as if her grandmother was anointing her daughter from another plane of existence. The winged messenger temporarily distracted Marisol as a hint of a smile reached the corners of her mouth. There was unquestionably an air of magic in this place, as there always had been.

 After the service, a somber procession led everyone back to the Maravilla Inn, run by Alea’s Tío Marco and his wife, Alicia. They walked along the short, dirt road that wound through the village, Mamá Lulita leading some of the women in the front in a hauntingly beautiful hymn. The azure blue skies above served to complement the orange and black monarchs darting through it contentedly.

 This generation of monarchs was unique. Every fall they made their way to this place, over thousands of miles north from Canada and through Texas on their way southward to a forest they had never visited. But they somehow knew that this is where they belonged. Alea resonated with this sentiment as she watched them follow the women singing. For as long as the townspeople could remember, the monarchs returned here each fall in time for Día De Los Muertos, when deceased loved ones were honored. It was common knowledge that the butterflies were the souls of their loved ones, and they were sure to keep the flowers grown here for hundreds of years abundant for them. They were the reason the town was named Xochitlalpan, which was Nahuatl for “Land of Flowers”. It didn’t surprise Alea in the least that her grandmother’s death coincided with such a meaningful time. It added beauty to the grief.

 Alea was weary from travel and worry, but took notice of a handsome man about her age heading into the bright blue and orange painted walls of the Maravilla Inn. It sparked enough interest for her to follow along and mingle a bit rather than head straight up to her room on the third floor. Inside the Inn, she sailed directly into the bar to get a drink, where she sat among a handful of tourists visiting to see the monarchs. Seated next to her was a group of what looked to be American college students, gushing excitedly about the photos they’d taken of the monarchs in the mountain as they held their phones up, comparing their captured moments. A beautiful statuesque woman was mixing drinks behind the antique wooden bar.

 “¡*Hola, guapa*!” she said sensually as she winked at Alea, gliding over to her.

 “*Hola*, I’m Alea. You must be new to the Inn, although I haven’t been back here in awhile. ¿*Como te llamas*?” Alea asked.

 “I’m Liliana. I’m kind of in hiding, *chica*. What do you want to drink?” she asked in a slightly baritone voice.

 “What’s your suggestion? And…hiding? *Yo, también*,” Alea responded.

 “Well, there’s a specialty the chef created called the Maravilla Cocktail. Want to try it? It’s smokey and at the same time just a little sweet.” Liliana managed to dodge the inquiry on hiding.

 Alea nodded. She felt like she was hiding from a lot of things, too. She watched Liliana rim a cobalt blue glass with chamoy then coated it with salt and tajin. She poured a hearty amount of mezcal into a shaker filled with ice, then added a much smaller amount of fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice and a bit more lime juice. After a drop of amber-colored agave nectar, she covered it and shook the concoction vigorously, Liliana flashed a gorgeous smile with perfect teeth at Alea. A glittering emerald stone bounced out of the boat neck line of Liliana’s dress, emphasizing her long, slender neck. It caught Alea’s eye. Something about it felt familiar to her. Liliana tucked it back under the top of the form-fitting dress and winked again. She poured the perfect combination of ingredients into the blue highball glass, adorned it with a sprig of mint and handed it gracefully to Alea.

 “So what are you hiding from?” Alea pressed, after taking a sip.

 “Girl, did I fool you? I’m *en transición*,” Liliana smiled mischievously.

 Alea gave her a second look. “Damn, you look incredible. *Pareces super perfecta.* What a place to hide!”

 Alea laughed about a trans woman living in this provincial little town, although with all of the international tourists from the fall until the spring, it was a bustling place.

 “Well, girl, Julian rescued me by bringing me here. Your *Tía Alicia* is *muy padre*. Julian introduced me to her a couple of years ago and she accepted me right away. Not like my family back in *el CDMX*. So, here I am.”

 Alea held up her glass and said, “*Salud, hermosa*. Julian? I remember him!” Alea wondered if the handsome man she had just seen was him as she added, “My *tía* is very cool. And I’m so glad you found a safe haven here.”

 “What are YOU hiding from?” she asked Alea, making eye contact and sizing her up with her beautiful dark eyes.

 “Uhhh ...I think I’d need several more drinks to tell my tale, *mujer*. I’ll be back,” she smiled at Liliana and headed out into the garden area to be alone.

 Alea stepped out to the manicured gardens surrounding a heated pool with a few guests scattered about on lounge chairs. She took a seat at a bistro table that faced the tall mountains in the distance and recalled her many visits to this place, feeling the pleasant beginnings of a buzz from the drink.

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 Her first recollection of visiting was at age 4. Her mother, who had by then become a professor of entomology at the University of Texas, had been accepted by a grant to be at the monarch sanctuary to study theories on monarch flight behavior. That had delighted Juana, as she would have extended time with both her daughter and her granddaughter, but she couldn’t understand why her daughter needed a grant to study her own childhood environment. As it turned out, Marisol’s schedule was so packed with research that Juana spent the majority of those weeks with just Alea and she treasured that time. She fed Alea, played with her and took her for her first visit in the sacred forest. Alea had been frightened by the horses that they rode on the journey, but her grandmother nudged her and cocked her head towards a little boy about her age sitting atop a brown mare with a look of confidence. Alea found her courage. She’d straightened herself up on her horse and peered at the little boy with the brightest, darkest eyes she’d ever seen. He smiled at her.

 “¡*Mi nombre es Julian*!” he chirped, looking like a proud grackle.

 Alea smiled shyly and Juana laughed at Julian’s boldness. He was Mamá Lulita's grandson.

 “*Puedes decirle tu nombre, mija*,” Juana whispered to Alea.

 “My name is Alea,” she said demurely. Julian made up a little song with her name in it.

 “*Alea, Alea, la niña bonita.*” That made Alea giggle and her grandmother smile.

 They became best friends that season and from that point forward, each time Alea visited, she would seek out Julian. She had not seen him in the last couple of visits, though. He’d been in Mexico City.

 Alea’s heart swelled at the memories of those carefree days and her special time with her grandmother. An ache in her breasts sharply returned her thoughts to her current situation and her heart rate increased. She definitely needed another Maravilla cocktail. If her grandmother was here, she’d be able to soothe her with tea for *nervios* and just her presence alone. She fidgeted, sighed and looked at her phone again. There was a heart emoji from Kiki, along with some silly pictures she sent of herself jokingly leaving the box of Rob’s things in the middle of the street. But there were no messages from Rob and no missed calls. It was clear she had made the right choice in letting him go, despite how hard it was, but Kiki had been there to keep her from any temptations of texting him. What really was agonizing for her now was waiting for the oncologist to phone.

 “*Alea, la niña bonita.”*

 The sound of a deep voice interrupted her troubled thoughts. A pair of the brightest, darkest eyes she’d ever seen were looking down into her large, honey-colored ones.

 “Julian?” she timidly began.

 “*¿Cómo estás*, Alea?” he asked as she stood up to greet him, trying her best to look put together.

 “You’re so much taller than I remember!” she exclaimed, realizing this was the handsome man she saw entering the Inn earlier.

 “And you’re even more beautiful than I remember!” Julian said, making Alea blush.

 “Remember all those times running up the mountain?” he asked with a fond look on his face.

 She smiled, nodding her head. Maybe Julian was exactly the distraction she needed from everything terrible occurring in her life. He was staring hard at her. Her cheeks felt hot as she looked away from his intense gaze, remembering a scene from many years ago, when they were 13. He was the first boy she’d ever kissed. It had been an awkward moment, but a memorable one.

 “Do you want to try some of the food I made for this occasion?” he asked her.

 “Of course. Wow, your English has improved!”

 “Yes, because I work with so many American and Canadian tourists!” he quipped. “I studied at a cooking institute in Mexico City, then worked in a busy restaurant there for a while and picked up quite a bit more conversational English along the way.”

 “So you came back to your home town?” Alea inquired.

 “Yes, Mamá Lulita is getting older and, well, you know she’s like my mother. I wanted to be close to her for a little bit and selfishly, I was happy to use my chef skills from Mexico City at your Tía and Tío’s tourist business, which has been booming. They hired me as the head chef in the kitchen and I’ve enjoyed it. I’ve been able to have creative freedom making all kinds of recipes. I’ll use them one day at a restaurant of my own.”

 As he walked away to make her a plate of food, she watched him. Julian had a fit body and his black hair moved playfully in the breeze. He returned with a plate of his own *hongos saltados,* foragedfrom the local forests. Her stomach growled, and she realized that she hadn’t had much of an appetite in the last couple of weeks. The mushrooms melted in her mouth. They were not like store bought mushrooms, even the ones that could be found at Whole Foods in Austin. They were earthier and more savory. He took her fork and slid a portion of the *pollo con mole rojo* into her mouth, its velvety spicy sweetness bringing more flush of heat to her cheeks.

 “It’s delicious, no?” he asked her, his long dark lashes framing his beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

 “So perfect. Almost as good as my grandmother’s!” she said, recalling her special moments with her *abuela*.

 Alea blinked away tears that she realized she’d been holding in.

 “She’s still here with you,” Julian reassured her, giving her shoulder a soft squeeze. Fervent rushes of warmth flooded her thighs with his touch.

 He wiped some stray *mole* off of her chin. She felt like there were *mariposas* in her stomach fluttering around. Julian leaned in to kiss her cheek.

 “*Bonita*,” he whispered. “Want to go for a walk on the trails before the sun goes down?”

 “Yes, but I need to change out of this dress and these shoes–they aren’t good for hiking.”

 Julian winked at her, saying, “All–good. I need to finish up in the kitchen. Meet me at the base of the mountain in an hour-you remember where the tours start by the horse stables?”

 She nodded again. How could she forget? It was her very first memory here. She knew where to meet him.

 Alea walked past the bar on her way into her room at the Inn to change out of her dress. She saw Julian slip by the bar on his way into the kitchen and give Liliana a sweet kiss on the cheek. She wondered if there was something going on between them. After all, Liliana had mentioned something about him “rescuing” her. A strange feeling escaped from Alea’s heart. What was it? Jealousy? How could she be jealous? She hardly had any claim on Julian. They had been childhood crushes for a brief moment in time. Liliana waved at her and gave her a sideways glance with perfectly arched eyebrows, almost as if she could read her mind. Alea waved back and headed up to her room, wondering at Liliana’s expression. Liliana oozed sultriness and mystery. Alea was definitely not feeling sexy these days, but something in the exchange between her and Julian belied that notion. She laughed at herself and the absurdity of her circumstances. Sometimes laughter was the best medicine.

 A light mist had formed as she glanced out of the window of her room toward the mountains. She rummaged around in search of a clean pair of socks, having remembered to pack a pair her grandmother had knitted for her. Alea smiled when she slipped them on, the soft woven threads hugging her feet like a gentle embrace. She took a minute to glance at herself in the mirror, pulling her hair up and adding some lip gloss. Her cheeks were flushed with the idea of meeting Julian, again. She tried to quell any sexy thoughts coming into her mind, but failed as she recalled how his touch lit her up in secret places. She shook her head as she shut her door and descended the stairs, making sure to grab one of the many rain jackets for tourists hanging on the hooks in the hallway on her way out of the door. In the rush, she dropped her backpack. The loud thud alerted her mother, who noticed her leaving on her way back to the meeting room with extra food for the gathering.

 “Are you headed to the mountain? You shouldn’t go by yourself, *mijita,*” she eyed her with a look of concern.

 “Mom. I’m an adult. And I’m meeting Julian. I can say goodbye to *abuela* in her favorite place,” she answered.

 “Okay, but *ten cuidado*. Julian knows that it’s not so safe out there after dark. Tía Alicia said they’ve had a lot of illegal loggerssneaking in the forest lately. They are infiltrating the forests to cut down the trees. Julian will know to bring you back before nightfall.”

 Alea nodded her head and made her way to their meeting spot at the base of the mountain. Julian was already there. He stood in the spot at the bottom of the rust-colored dirt path that led up the steep forested slope. He looked into her eyes deeply with that intense expression, drawing her into them. There was no longer an angsty awkwardness between them as there had been once upon a time when they were adolescents. She could not deny a delicate yet powerful force, like a magnet drawing them together. Soft drizzles of rain gently fell, leaving glistening drops like dew on his dark, thick hair. A quiet intimacy unfolded and enveloped them, like one of the rain clouds in the sky.

 “*Hija de estrellas,*” she heard in the distance, the voice from her dream. She looked around, searching for the source of it.

 “¿*Lista*?” Julian brought her attention back to the present as he offered her his hand.

 It was warm and powerful. A spark of invisible electricity passed between them as they began their ascent of the mountain, hand in hand. They walked in silence as the rocky path snaked up to the canopy of the pine and oak trees, which gave them cover from the light rain. It was rugged and beautiful with bright blue spikes on the salvia plants near the edges of the path, reminding Alea of the many flowers her grandmother had educated her about in the area. Alea breathed in deeply, taking in the aromatic pine smell that held so many wonderful memories from her childhood.

But she didn’t notice Mamá Lulita in the distance dressed in white, observing the scene unfolding.

**Chapter 3**

**Marisol**

*Let her be so wise*

*That her wings lift her to the skies*

*To see the earth*

*With both discerning eyes*

*Let my mistakes teach her,*

*Speak quietly to her heart*

*And gently, carefully reach her*

*So she may never part*

*From any notion of dreams withheld*

*And lastly, may she break*

*The last pair of tiny golden slippers*

*Worn for others' sakes*

 “¡*Ay, Marisol*!” Alicia was laughing with her sister-in-law about a happy memory of Juana singing off key to the song being played at the bar. They picked up the dishes from the banquet room and began folding the *manteles* decorated with the bright orange and blue colors of the Maravilla Inn.

 “You know *las monarcas* are officially an endangered species now, Alicia? We’ve been working on ideas to boost their population at the university,”Marisol stated.

 “Yes*,* we’ve seen their decline here. We knew this was coming, though, remember all of those ceremonies…” Alicia’s sentence trailed off, thinking that this may not be the best time to bring that aspect to the conversation.

 Marisol pretended to ignore Alicia’s comment about the ceremonies and hummed to the guitar strumming coming from the bar. She headed down the red saltillo tiled hallway to the middle closet to return the tablecloths in their proper place. She passed by the raincoats hanging on the way and heard a buzzing sound coming from the floor. She recognized it as Alea’s cell phone.

 “*Mi nena* has her head in the clouds,” Marisol sighed to herself as she picked up the phone and answered it without thinking.

 “Hello?” she said.

 “Is this Alea Najar-Smith? We’re calling with your results.”

 Marisol was taken aback and before she could reply, the person went on, “It appears the type of breast cancer detected is Invasive lobular carcinoma and the doctor would like you to come in to discuss your treatment plan the day after tomorrow. We have availability at 10 am, 1pm and 3:30. Which one of those works best for you?”

Marisol felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach and gasped.

 The person on the other end of the line responded, “Oh, I’m so sorry. The doctor had sent a message in your online portal. I didn’t think I was the first to communicate this information. My deepest apologies. She would like you to come in right away the day after tomorrow. As I said, we have those three time slots available. Do any of these work for you?”

 Marisol centered herself. “I apologize, too. This is her mother, Marisol Najar-Smith. I answered my daughter’s phone without thinking as she is not here right now. I will pass this information on to her as soon as I see her.”

 There was a pause on the line. “Oh my goodness. I didn’t mean to breach patient confidentiality. Please have her get back to us as soon as possible.”

 They hung up quickly. Marisol stood in the hallway, the tablecloths on the floor, now undone like she was. She was stunned. How long had her daughter known about this? This explained so much—her messy apartment, her absentmindedness, her carelessness at the lab in the last couple of weeks. Marisol felt a stab of guilt. She had attributed the behavior to her mother’s death and then the break up with Rob. Deep within her heart, she felt regretful for being so preoccupied with her mother’s death and funeral plans that she hadn’t been paying attention to the signs regarding her daughter’s well-being. She was extremely concerned about this news, but didn’t know how to approach Alea with it. Just then, Alicia appeared in the hallway with another tablecloth to put away. One look at Marisol made it clear that there was something on her mind.

 “¿*Mari, que pasa*?” she asked.

 Marisol just started to tear up, then composed herself. She didn’t even think she’d had any tears left inside her after the memorial. Alicia set down the tablecloth she’d been holding and wrapped her arms around her sister-in-law. They had known each other nearly all of their lives. After sharing the shocking news about Alea, Alicia tried to console her.

 “*Mira*, she’s not shared this with you because maybe she has it under control,” Alicia offered.

 Alicia, as sweet and open-minded as she was, did not understand what it was like to be a mother. She didn’t have any children of her own and couldn’t comprehend what it was like to watch your own *corazón* walking on the outside of your body. But Marisol knew she was trying to be a good listener and offer up sound advice. She took some deep breaths and noticed the sun was setting outside.

 “I’m not going to say a thing to her when she gets back,” Marisol stated.

 Alicia asked, “Where is she?”

 “With Julian in the mountains. They should be back any minute now,” Marisol answered, assuring Alicia as much as herself.

 “*Pues*, let’s get a drink and wait outside in the garden*,*” Alicia offered, taking Marisol’s hand and leading her into the bar.

 Liliana made them both an extra strong Maravilla.

 “I like Alea. She seems *muy fuerte*,” she commented to Marisol, as she handed her the icy glass with a blue rim lined with spicy chili salt.

 “She is. She was born a whole month early. Couldn’t wait to come out of me and see this world. She had no issues adjusting,” Marisol mused as she sipped her cocktail.

 “She’ll be okay,” offered Liliana.

 Marisol nodded, then gave Liliana a strange look. She hadn’t said a word about the phone call to anyone but Alicia and they had walked in together just moments ago. Whatever did she mean by that? Liliana just continued to stir up the drinks. Alicia looked at Liliana lovingly. She knew that hiring her had been a perfect decision. Not just because Liliana needed the job and a safe space, but also because she felt like the daughter Alicia never had. Alicia and Marco had tried, but had never been able to have children. Liliana showed up and it just felt like Alicia had found a kindred spirit. They had an immediate bond. Alicia had even been able to bring Liliana to the monthly ceremonies because Mamá Lulita commented that she had healing powers. She wondered if she’d be able to breach that topic with Marisol eventually…maybe after another Maravilla…

 Jay and Marco showed up to join their ladies with their second round. Marisol leaned into Jay. He’d always been a steady force in her life, even from the beginning when she met him here, in this very spot so many years ago. They had both been a few months shy of twenty. His hair was sandy brown and his green eyes caught hers. That spring she had been helping her older brother Marco at the Maravilla Inn, which was in its beginning stages. She was planning to go to the university in Mexico City to study biology, but then she met Jay. He was a very cute *guero* and knowledgeable about the soil and the rocks of her region. They began a conversation about the monarchs, which she knew loads of information about, having grown up around them all of her life. He was fascinated with her knowledge and more importantly, fascinated with her. They spent the spring and into that summer exploring the sacred forest together and venturing out to the surrounding regions with his geology team. They never parted ways after that. He asked her to marry him and they went back to Texas so he could finish his studies and she could begin hers. That broke her mother’s heart, but it wasn’t as if her mother hadn’t seen it coming. That, along with the fact that she had stopped attending the ceremonies with her mother, Alicia and the other women in the priestesshood. That’s the part her mother felt saddest about, but Marisol felt that Jay wouldn’t understand those customs. How could he? You can’t just tell a person that your matriarchal line descends from a sisterhood that worships a relatively unknown Aztec goddess. She decided that if she was going to Texas, some things were best left behind, stashed away. Only, she didn’t understand that the *tradiciónes poderosas* of the women in her family, no matter how deeply tucked away, would find their way back to her bloodline eventually.

 Marisol was feeling extra tipsy and couldn’t hold in the news any longer.

 “*Nuestra hija* has cancer, Jay!” she blurted out.

 Hearing those words come out of her own mouth startled her even more. Alicia reached out and held Marisol’s hand as Marisol shook her head again. Jay looked dumbstruck. Marco put a supportive arm around his sister.

 “What? How? I’m confused,” Jay uttered.

 Marisol was too upset to explain everything and bit her lip. Jay looked helplessly from Marisol to Alicia.

 Alicia filled everyone in. Jay was quietly processing everything, becoming teary eyed himself. He pulled Marisol close to him and kissed the top of her head. He nuzzled his face into her neck and brushed his lips against her cheek.

 “It’s going to be okay, *mi amor,*” he said. “We don’t know everything and Alea is a strong woman, like you. She’ll be able to handle this. We’ll be right by her side, helping her through it all.”

 Marisol nodded her head as she sniffed and began to breathe slower, her face full of red splotches. Marco handed her his handkerchief as she wiped her tears away.

 “*Hermana*, Jay is right. Alea is strong, like you and all of the women in our family line. We’ll help anyway we can, too,” Marco gave her a kiss on her head.

 “Where is Alea?” Jay asked.

 “She’s hiking with Julian,” offered Alicia.

 “Oh,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Well, listen, honey, let’s just call it a night. It’s early, but you’ve had an extremely rough day. We can talk to Alea in the morning. Let her be the one to tell us what she wants to do,” he gently advised as he stood up and offered his hand.

 Marisol nodded her head in agreement. She knew he had the right idea, but it made her angry that Alea was hiding this from her. And who knew how long Julian and Alea would be? Although it was dark and they should be back by now. However, her concern was now about the cancer, not the loggers in the mountains.

 Alicia spoke, “Listen, Marisol, let’s get you into a hot bath. I can send Liliana to fetch tea from Mamá Lulita. She may have already headed over there. They are very close.”

 Marisol nodded her head, she was grateful for everyone’s support. She took Jay’s hand and stood up next to him. He steadied her in so many ways.

 Alicia leaned in close to her sister-in-law, “Plus, we can have Mamá Lulita do a *limpia* on Alea, you know there is much power in our sisterhood. I know it’s been awhile.”

 Marisol recalled the ceremonies she’d participated in while growing up here with her mother and Mamá Lulita in charge, after her own grandmother had passed. She shivered. She wondered if Alea would agree to a *limpia* and if she could explain this to Jay. He would never question her. He was like that. And he’d be fine with something easy like that…but the other things, the ceremonies. Those were things she’d continue to keep to herself.

 Alicia headed upstairs to get Marisol’s bath ready. Jay led Marisol up to their room, shortly after Alicia when Marco excused himself to help clean up the dining area. Jay walked Marisol up to their room, where Alicia was adding salts and *hierbas* to the hot water running in the bath. Alicia gave her a gentle kiss and left their room. Alicia had that healing touch. She was patient and calm. And she soothed Marisol with her presence.

 Marisol breathed in the eucalyptus scented water filling up the tub and began to undress herself. She saw Jay’s green eyes studying her figure. She’d aged well, just like her mother had. Juana had been strong, with youthful eyes and a small frame, like her. Marisol stepped into the warm water, letting it encompass her nakedness little by little. There was a knock at the door and Jay brought her the tea that Alicia had sent. She breathed in its woody, pungent aroma and sipped it slowly. The musky taste always took some getting used to, and she remembered the smell from her mother’s *botanica*, or herb collection. Jay took a washcloth, dipped it into the warm water and began to gently wash his wife’s back, beginning at the nape of her neck. That spot was his favorite. She sighed, completely emptying her lungs as he massaged her neck, using the lather of the soap to slide his strong fingers along her tight muscles. The soap had a light scent of lavender, which was soothing to her. She relaxed further and closed her eyes. Jay kissed her softly on her lips.

 “Everything will be okay, my love,” he whispered in her ear soothingly.

 Marisol chose to believe him in that moment. She needed to believe it.

**Chapter 4**

**Sanctuary Secrets**

*A day begins and ends*

*The indifferent world revolves*

*All the passages in between*

*All the hours that dissolve*

*Into the minutes of our lives*

*And the moments yet unseen*

*Are yours to capture or yours to waste*

*The impermanent crossings we pass through*

*In this time and place*

 As Alea and Julian made their ascension into the lush mountain, the rocky path gave way to a pine-strewn earthen floor and the abundance of the bright blue flowers continued. Alea’s hiking shoes had collected mud from the damp earth as they climbed upward, which began making the journey even more strenuous for her. With each successive step, her feet became heavier. She exhaled audibly. Julian noticed her straining and led her to a resting spot at a large rock surrounded by trees covered in lichen. He took a blanket out and laid it over the flat top of the short but wide boulder. Alea was grateful for the respite. They sat together quietly as Alea caught her breath, her cheeks blushing. Julian studied her face. She had the same beautiful nose as her mother and her grandmother that curved gently, not unlike the beak of an eagle. He watched her as she parted her perfect mouth, her tongue running across the top of her bow-shaped lips. It sent shivers down his spine. He remembered kissing those lips once upon a time as a gawky tween. She looked away from his gaze. She suddenly felt shy that she was already worn out, but it always took time to acclimate to the high altitude for her when she visited from Texas. Memories flooded her mind of how her grandmother tended to her on the first couple of days of her visits where she would stay in the village down below. She would make sure to keep Alea calm and relaxed in her humble home, with plenty of fresh-squeezed orange juice and other tempting drinks to keep her hydrated.

 Julian untied one of her shoes, then the other, tending to her now. Here, in this serene place, she could sense her grandmother’s presence. He removed her shoes gingerly. She wiggled her toes, softly encased in the knit socks. She could envision the day her grandmother gave them to her as a keepsake for her 16th birthday, along with a sandalwood rosary. Julian found a stick to scrape off the caked-on mud. She watched as he took his time, working on the outside soles of the shoes. No words needed, there was a quiet, mutual understanding between them, it seemed. She glanced up at one of the branches of a giant oyamel, heavy with clusters of the monarch butterflies. They were still as they hung together, clumped in a colony of safekeeping for the coming winter. The muted black and orange colors of the creatures could easily be mistaken for dead leaves hanging precariously off of the branches. One had to be still and observant to see just how many of them covered the oyamel trees. No matter how many times she saw them, it was breathtaking.

 Julian opened his satchel and took out two sandwiches, handing her one. Although she had just eaten an hour before, she was hungry again. Her appetite was better here than it had been in weeks, she realized as her mouth watered. Exerting all the energy it took to climb the mountain spurred on her hunger. She took a few bites, enjoying the *jámon, queso* and avocado slowly while looking up at the sky, which was beginning to darken. She briefly wondered if they had enough time to make it to the top and back before the sun set, but her thoughts were interrupted by a monarch landing on her hand. Its brilliant orange and black wings became completely still, then slowly expanded, like a very long blink. It was mesmerizing. It took flight in the gentle rain, looking for shelter within the many colonies in the trees.

 Alea reached into her pocket to get a photo of the butterflies and realized she must have left her phone at the Inn. She could feel Julian’s eyes on her again. He was drinking her in as he took hold of her hand, caressing her fingers. His fingers were soft and warm and with each finger they touched, a current passed between them. He uncurled them, one at a time, tracing the lines on the palm of her hand. A feeling deep within her stirred, surprising her. Just days ago she had been in a numb stupor within the confines of a whirring machine to determine the stage of cancer growing inside of her. It felt like years had passed instead of days since then. Time was indeed relative. Somehow Julian’s presence in this sacred forest transported her from where she had been in Texas.

 “Are you ready to keep going?” he asked, his eyes shining brightly.

 Did he mean figuratively or literally? Either way, she *was* ready. She imagined his lips meeting hers, like when Mike had his first kiss with Jill in *Strangers in A Strange Land*, which she had been re-reading on the plane. But before she allowed herself to indulge any further, she shook her head as if to shake out the thought. How could she even be thinking about that right now with so much else on her mind? It was all well and good in those books that kept her mind off the present, but the reality was that she shouldn’t be starting anything romantically right now. It was not ideal at all. Things had just ended with Rob not that long ago. She was in an extra vulnerable place for many reasons. And she wondered if Julian had this effect on Liliana. She pictured Liliana’s long, slender fingers being uncurled by Julian’s. Another pang of jealousy surprised her. She had no right to be jealous. She was just hiking with Julian, her childhood friend. She told herself to snap out of it while she released her hand from his. He packed up the remaining sandwich halves and offered to help her up as they readied themselves to continue their journey.

 Standing up, he gently moved branches aside so they could avoid stepping on monarchs that had fallen to the ground in their unsuccessful attempts to fly away when the sun tricked them into thinking it was warm enough to leave. A break in the clouds gave way to a ray of light that illuminated the two of them. It was then that Julian leaned down and actually did graze his lips softly against hers. Alea’s whole body lit up with surges, like lightning in the sky. A delicious trembling radiated below her navel, making her knees feel wobbly. She tasted tanginess from the citrus dressing in their kiss. Without thinking, she pressed herself close into his body. It was as if they were back in time, replaying a tender scene, but in different, more mature bodies. She had not felt this type of passion before. It occurred to her that she had not really experienced this with Rob. With him, everything was always direct and to the point when it came to the physical aspect of their relationship. The sex had been satisfying, no doubt. He was not a lazy lover, but there was something much more arousing in just a simple kiss with Julian.

 Although Rob had compared himself to Mike, Alea recalled a line from a scene in the book, “...*when Mike kisses you he isn’t doing anything else. You’re his whole universe.*” This was how Julian kissed her. She was Julian’s whole universe in this tiny moment with every cell in his body revolving around her being. Once upon a time she thought that Rob’s store-bought surprises were romantic, but not anymore. The connection she felt with Julian was so much more intimate, sending sparks up and down her whole body, his touch making her ache for more. Just as his hands moved away from her, there was a rustle in the leaves nearby that distracted them both. Julian put a finger to her lips, motioning for Alea to stay quiet and still. She obeyed as he moved a few feet away from her to investigate.

 Alea began to shudder, as something felt uneasy in the air. She swore she saw a pair of cat eyes looking back at her beyond the trees. The sun was setting and darkness was descending on the forest. Alea reached down to adjust her pants and could feel something trickling down her leg into the top of her sock. She realized that in all of the chaos lately, she’d lost track of her period. It must have just started. The sensation of an ominous presence disturbed her. Her heart thumped in her chest.

 “Julian!” she called loudly, his name echoing throughout the forest. It was a bit darker now and she could just make out his silhouette close by.

 “I’m here, *bonita*! *No te preocupes*,” Julian reassured her, stepping back to her side. Noting that she was shivering, he pulled the blanket from the satchel and carefully covered her with it.

 “I swear I saw a mountain lion or jaguar or something!” she said, clutching onto his arm.

 “It’s possible. Let’s head back, it’s dark.”

 Julian embraced her and kissed the top of her head. She leaned into him, wanting to savor this moment, but at the same time wanting to flee. It was also becoming evident to her that she would soon need a change of clothes. They’d lingered in that spot far longer than planned and time had slipped away. She was glad her pants were black and that it was dark.

 The first star was just barely beginning to appear in the sky, along with the sliver of a crescent moon beaming silently between the treetops. The forest took on a purplish hue against the crepuscular sky. In the distance, they heard the sounds of men. A cool breeze whipped a stray strand of Alea’s shiny, wet hair against her cheek. Again, they heard a movement close by. She grabbed Julian’s hand. He gently led her into a dense clump of foliage, away from the path for safety. He motioned for her to stay hidden. He leaned in close to her, the sounds of their breathing seemed loud in her ears. They heard men’s voices getting closer.

 Julian grabbed what looked like a pistol from his satchel, leaving the bag on the ground. He stood protectively in front of her, facing the path towards the sounds of the voices. She could feel the blood pumping in her ears.
 “There’s a big tree right behind you, stay right by it,” Julian whispered to her.

 She backed up further and leaned into the smooth trunk of a very large tree, at least four feet in diameter as both her arms outspread didn’t even reach the edges of it. She pressed her back into it in an attempt to make herself flat. She looked up at its many slender branches near the top of her head, expanding into wider ones the further up she looked. It was so tall, it seemed impossible to see the top of it from where she was. The evening sounds were amplifying, as her ears pricked like a dog’s, ready to detect the tiniest utterances from both far and near.

 “Hoot, hoot, hoot,” she heard what sounded like an owl nearby.

 Alea squeezed her eyes shut. Her heart was beating loudly inside her ribcage. Her breasts were full and achy. Cramps were amping up as she felt warm blood trickle out of her and down her leg. Her period was in full force now. She breathed the scent of metal tinged with honey. At that moment, she felt something surrounding her feet, pulling her down to the forest floor. The dirt was cool and moist as she gasped for breath. It was as if her body was being swallowed up by the tree’s roots.

 Her fear of the armed loggers, coming for the trees in the mountains, disappeared completely. Something entirely unexpected appeared to be an immediate threat to her life. Not the loggers. Not a wild cat. Not even the tiny tumor growing in her breast. Something unnatural in this forest had beckoned to her and was now closing in.

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 **Chapter 5**

**Mamá Lulita**

*I see the once bright stars*

*That gazed upon me*

*Starting to wane*

*Dim, dimmer, dimmest*

*Transforming light energy*

*Into something new*

*All dying stars*

*Bring once unknown stars*

*and new elements*

*Into the universe again*

 Mamá Lulita had spotted Alea and Julian as she headed to the meeting spot. She’d just left the forest in her white cloak to spread some *hierbas* to commemorate Juana. She wanted to say a private goodbye to her best friend by herself. They had shared a life history together with secrets only known by the two of them. One thing they had always known was that their grandchildren would end up together one day.

 She smiled at herself when she saw them holding hands and spoke aloud to Juana, “They were destined to be here together, *vieja.* And at your memorial, too. *Que hermosa es la vida.*”

 Mamá Lulita continued to make her way down to her place slowly. When she finally reached the little arched wooden door, she breathed a sigh of relief. Hers was a small, quiet, humble home, right next to the Maravilla Inn. Wisps of peppery scented incense filled her *cocina*. She searched for the right herbs to make tea, sniffing the tin that contained the floral, leafy aroma of the *cascara sagrada,* and heated up the kettle. She was muttering some prayers to herself as the water came to a boil when she heard the soft footsteps of someone approaching. She stepped over the rosemary sprigs by the doorway and glimpsed the tall figure of Liliana.

 “¡*Hola, mi mujer*!” Mamá Lulita opened her arms to embrace her.

 “Mamá Lulita, how are you?” Liliana bent down to plant a gentle kiss on her downy cheek.

 “Oh, I’ll be okay. Juana’s *espíritu* is safe and I had a chance to say goodbye to her,” she said, smiling.

 Liliana nodded knowingly. “Well, everyone is finally settling down for the evening, but I’m here to fetch a cup of tea for *nervios*,” she said, luxuriant auburn hair framing her lovely face.

 “Oh, valerian, then,” mused Mamá Lulita, walking back into the kitchen to pull out the correct herb for the malady.

 Liliana watched as Mamá Lulita stirred dried leaves in a jar of heated water. The strong odor of valerian root wafted into the air. Although its smell could be a bit overwhelming, it certainly did the job of calming nerves. Liliana knew this from personal experience.

 “I’ll be right back, I have to deliver this to Alicia,” Liliana said as she carefully carried the jar out of the house.

 Liliana was new to the rituals but seemed to inherently follow along. Every month the women gathered to make blood offerings under the full moon to Itzpapalotl. They brought the *huēhuētl* drum to play while they chanted the words passed down from the ages for protecting the sacred forest and all the creatures within its realm. Mamá Lulita saw how quickly Liliana had caught on to identifying the hundreds of dried plants and herbs that she stored in her *botanica* and took her in as a sort of apprentice in her many levels of *curanderismo*. Mamá Lulita was a powerful healer and could sense that Liliana also had *mucho poder*. And, she’d only recently caught sight of her wearing that emerald. It was unmistakably the same one she recalled hearing about from Juana all those years ago. Too bad Juana wasn’t still around to confirm it. To Lulita, it was another sign that Liliana belonged with them.

 When she’d first arrived, Liliana had been in need of deep nurturing and healing. Liliana’s soul had been wandering lost in grief as she’d been cast away from her family and had fled an abusive relationship. Mamá Lulita recognized this and helped Liliana retrieve her soul back through many healing sessions. She’d alternated her time between healing Liliana and helping Juana, whose health had been on the decline. Once Liliana had recovered her *alma*, Mamá Lulita was able to teach her the methods that had been passed down to her for generations.

 Lulita’s own daughter had died in childbirth and she had raised Julian alone. Juana had helped Lulita heal during that time and she recovered fully, but she also saw that Juana had her own daughter to pass on the healing traditions. Mamá Lulita had no female descendants to entrust with her knowledge. Liliana came along and filled that void so naturally. She seemed to be exactly what both Alicia and she needed in their lives. Juana also agreed that Liliana contained potent feminine energy. She was able to soothe headaches, calm nerves and also help others recover their souls if *susto* hadcaused them to flee. She was incredibly charismatic and able to charm just about anyone who she came into contact with at the Inn. This was helpful to Alicia for her business. Liliana was a gift to them all.

 Liliana returned to Mamá Lulita’s and seated herself on the floor of the living room while Mamá Lulita lit a candle and swept the branches of rue over her, shaking the branches with her small, delicate fingers. Liliana was prepared for her weekly ritual to receive spiritual knowledge from Mamá Lulita. Although a very tiny woman, Mamá Lulita was very powerful. And Liliana was so tall that when seated, the top of her head came all the way to the narrow shoulders of Mamá Lulita, who stood just under 5 feet.

 “*Todas somos hijas de estrellas, estrellas están llenas de nuestro sagrado misterio. Le llamamos Itzpapalotl, protege a las monarcas* (We are all daughters of the stars, stars full of our sacred mystery. We call to you, Itzpapalotl, protect the monarchs),” they chanted the ceremonial words together.

 Mamá Lulita presented the tea to sip afterwards. She smiled broadly, revealing a missing bottom tooth. “This is a cleansing tea for your body. You’ll want to just take a few little sips, not the whole cup,” she reminded Liliana, who knew by the smell of the tea that it was *cascara sagrada.* They took small sips together as they prepared the area for their ritual.

 The red rebozo was draped across the mattress as Mamá Lulita lit the copal, moving the sacred incense around the room carefully as it cleansed the space of any negative energy. Liliana held the *quiquiztli* and blew into it to call to the four directions, just as Mamá Lulita had instructed her. Just as they were about to begin, there was a heavy knock at the door. Mamá Lulita opened the door to a man with his shirt torn and covered in mud. It was Julian. In his arms was Alea.

 “¡*Mijito*!” Mamá Lupita exclaimed, opening the door wider to let him pass through.

 Liliana moved quickly to aid Julian in carrying Alea’s unconscious body to rest on the rebozo.

 “We were in the mountains and something happened,” Julian paused to catch his breath. “We were by the healing tree, Mamá Lulita. I had Alea move close to it so I could keep an eye on who was approaching.” His breath was still rapid as he took a minute to gather himself.

 Liliana brought him a glass of water while Mamá checked Alea’s pulse and placed a warm cloth filled with herbs over her brow.

 “Then what?” Liliana asked him.

 He looked exhausted, glancing from Mamá Lulita to Liliana and took in a deep breath before speaking again.

 “There was something very strange there. At first, I thought it might have been the loggers that we’ve been fending off from the trees…but there was something else. Something dark. It felt like a…I don’t know how to describe it other than a cold presence. I heard some men in the distance screaming loudly and then the sound of the cries of an owl,” he managed to say.

 Liliana’s body stiffened at his description.

 “An owl?” she asked, her pulse beginning to race.

 Mamá Lulita watched Liliana carefully. “Yes. And then Alea yelled my name, so I turned back to her,” he finished, still catching his breath.

 “*Un momento,*” Mamá Lulita said, a look of concern on her face.

 Mamá Lulita located an egg and moved it over Alea’s body, then cracked it into a glass dish. The yolk was black. She nodded her head, confirming something to herself. Liliana whispered a prayer, holding Alea’s limp hand.

 “What happened to Alea?” Mamá Lulita asked, moving her hands over Alea’s arms. “What was she like when you found her?”

 “I turned around and she was on the ground, at the base of that tree. She was moaning, but I could not wake her. It’s as if she was in a coma or a different state of mind. I wanted to get her out of there as fast as I could. I tried to get her to wake up, but she would not. I had to lift her and carry her back down. I don’t know what happened, but I couldn’t wake her up!”

 Liliana removed Alea’s shoes and loosened her sweatshirt.

 “¡*Mira!*” she called out to Mamá Lulita. She pointed to the blood on Alea’s pants.

 “¡*Ay, dios mío*! And she was at the base of the healing tree?” Mamá Lulita whispered.

 Julian nodded, asking, “What do you think happened to her?

 “I think I know, but let me get to work on bringing her back to be sure,” Mamá Lulita responded as she hushed everyone.

 Liliana reached over and touched Julian’s hand in a gesture of reassurance. Julian looked on as his grandmother began circling Alea’s still body, reciting incantations. Liliana joined her. Mamá Lulita sprinkled rosewater from a vial onto Alea’s wrists and neck. She laid her hands on Alea’s feet. Alea’s body began to tremble, but her eyes remained closed.

**Chapter 6**

**Messages**

*When your brightness expands*

*Some are blinded*

*Some are scattered*

*Some are reduced to small specks*

*The torrent of stardust*

*That trails behind you*

*The bitter is never without the sweet*

*Self-exoneration*

*Permutation*

*A strange beauty lies in disintegration*

 Alea found herself in a strange dreamlike state. She was disoriented, but soon remembered that she had last been at the base of a giant tree in the forest. Where was she now? How did she get here? Had Julian encountered the illegal loggers? There were so many questions in her mind, but she didn’t feel scared. Who was she? She looked down at her body, which wasn’t there. There was no breast with a tumor. There was no brown wavy hair or amber eyes. There was no face, no feet, no hands, no body. Just the idea that the whole of who she was was greater than the sum of the parts. Alea was an entity, an energy, *una alma*. Had time taken her back to the womb?

 “Alea, your name means to rise, to ascend,” she heard a familiar voice from nowhere and everywhere.

 Alea had heard that before. It was from her mother. She recalled sitting next to her in a large brown chair, snuggled up in a blanket asking why she was named Alea.

 “Your father and I chose the name Alea because we believe you will do great things one day!” her mother said, hugging her.

 The memory faded as a gleam of light appeared and her grandmother was with her in this place now, wherever they were. They were outside of the realm of time. She floated in this place. Waiting, existing, being.

 Her grandmother spoke. “*Mijita*, it’s up to you, but you are not alone. I knew it would be you.”

 “What do you mean by this?” Alea questioned, as everything darkened and it became quiet and still. In the distance she heard a song her grandmother would sing to her when she would visit her as a child, the tremolo of her voice carrying a deep emotion with it. Something about being daughters of the stars.

 “Your mother rejected her place in the sisterhood after me. It’s up to you to make the connection as I knew it would be. That’s why I taught you as much as I could when you would visit as a little girl,” her grandmother’s voice spoke from far away, her voice echoing.

 A memory appeared as Alea saw herself running into her grandmother’s garden as a little girl, her fingers pressing into the cool dirt around the miniature spikes of a young rosemary plant that her grandmother had propagated from a stem cutting. Her grandmother pointed to the lavender and the calendula. Alea’s little voice rose happily as she named them appropriately, much to Juana's delight. She remembered that her own grandmother had shown her how to tend to her herbs.

 “I still don’t understand what sisterhood you are speaking about, abuela,” Alea spoke into the void. It remained quiet, her grandmother’s presence vanished.

 Alea remained in darkness for what seemed like a very long time, although it could have been just minutes. Or centuries. There was no time in this place. A vision came to her now.

 There was a young woman with dark, thick wavy hair and familiar looking almond-shaped eyes, lined with long lashes. Her belly protruded with pregnancy. Alea watched her walking along the tobacco fields near the village down below. A young man was by her side. The woman was in distress, clutching her belly and pausing to hold on to the man that was with her. Fluid leaked out of her as the man took off his jacket and lay it on the ground. He helped her to rest atop the jacket as she panted through contractions. She was in the throes of labor. The man looked around helplessly. It was clear he did not know how to help her, yet he did not want to leave her side. The exigency forced him to leave her to seek help, and he ran fast toward the houses in the village. The woman gave birth alone to a little boy. Weak from labor, she pulled him out from between her legs to rest him atop her breasts. He searched hungrily for her nipple as she drifted off, blood spilling out of her and seeping into the earth. A flash of bright light descended from a figure in the sky to the woman on the ground as a giant monarch butterfly fluttered out of the woman’s heart. Alea heard the words, “He was born to protect you!” That was where the vision ended. What did it mean? Why had she seen this?

 Alea remained in her dream state until she felt herself coming back slowly. She opened her eyes in dim lighting, disoriented. Her ears were ringing.

 “Where am I? What happened?” she asked, feeling flustered as she checked her hands and felt for the curls in her hair.

 Coming back to consciousness, she blinked again to take in her surroundings and saw a beautiful face beaming down on her. Her eyes adjusted and she recognized it to be Liliana. Julian was close by, watching her guardedly. Instantly she realized something familiar in the shape of his eyes. It must have been his mother she’d seen in her vision, the mother he’d only known for a few moments when he was born. She could still hear the words his mother had spoken. She felt the soft touch of someone on her arms, not unlike her grandmother. It was Mamá Lulita. She looked up into her gentle brown eyes, crinkles forming on the edges as she smiled gently.

 “You are back here, now. You are safe,” Mamá Lulita’s voice soothed her.

 Alea blinked her eyes a few times as she heard the gentle murmurings of prayers coming from Liliana. The two women ministered to Alea’s body, moving their hands over her with grace. She closed her eyes and felt as if she was suspended in a sea of warm saltwater, gently rocking from side to side. She took a long, deep breath and released it, her heartbeat slowing down. Alea felt different. She had much to ask Mamá Lulita. She felt more powerful, yet lighter than she did before she had arrived.

 “You are okay now, Alea. Your *susto* is gone. Let me make you some tea,” Mamá Lulita murmured.

**Chapter 7**

**Darknesses**

*Night Scout*

*Spirit of the hidden realms*

*You called out*

*In the night with its slinking, tender light*

*Caught me, heedless in my faraway flight*

*Who? Who? You asked*

*And I heard the question*

*Though I found no origin*

*Surrounding my perception*

*What were you foraging?*

 El Búho ran a tight ship. He knew how to get the job done as he’d been involved in all kinds of risky operations since his early twenties. That’s why his older brother Rico sent him here to supervise things. He checked in with *los químicos* frequently. They were the mixers of the noxious chemicals to make the meth up in this tent operation in a swath of land they had overtaken in the mountains, hidden away from the authorities. It was easy to take advantage of this no man’s land as it was preserved and not owned by anyone in particular.

 Tonight he was overseeing a batch of meth being baked in the large, metal cylindrical cans when one of the loggers he paid to keep his area secure from the locals alerted him of possible intruders. A *químico* wearing a gas mask was dumping in a concoction of chemicals compacted together in what was referred to as a “*galleta*” into a vat of liquid when a small explosion interrupted the conversation. An acrid smell filled the forest and everyone scattered into a clump of nearby trees that hadn’t been felled.

 El Búho was deeply annoyed. What kind of idiot could mess up this mix? It had practically been prepared for him. He pulled out his pistol and shot the *químico* who had made the mistake.

 “*Oyé*, Emilio! Go check to see about the intruders. Kill whoever you see. We can’t afford to lose more profit,” El Búho ordered one of his men.

 Emilio, upon seeing the man in the mask fall to the ground just seconds after his orders, quickly gathered together five other men. He wanted to find whoever he could and take care of the problem, lest they be next in the fallout for *Los Hermanos*, the drug cartel that had come to these mountains. The men headed down the path in the direction that the logger reported hearing sounds of people.

 “How many do you think there are?” one of his guys whispered to him.

 “*Quien sabe*, but we need to kill them and bring them back to El Búho to prove we have done our job,” Emilio answered with fervor.

 He had a wife and kids depending on him and so did most of the men with him. They tried to stealthily move down the path, but Chofo tripped and accidentally set his gun off, sending them all into a fit of yelling, each one blaming the other.

 “Shhhh! I hear something,” Emilio silenced them all.

 There was rustling nearby. A shadow in the distance darted from one area to another. It was hard to see, but Emilio went ahead and fired his gun and missed.

 “¡*Pinché cabrón*!” he said, mostly to himself.

 They had to get this person or who knew what El Búho could do. Chofo stumbled again, this time near a large rock.

 “Wait, do you smell that?” he asked Emilio, sniffing the air.

 “What?” Emilio asked, looking around.

 “You don’t smell that? It smells like pussy. Right here.”

 Emilio snorted, “You just miss your wife, *güey*.”

 “Oh hell no, I miss my *novia*, not my wife!” Chofo retorted, laughing much too enthusiastically for Emilio’s liking.

 Everyone knew about Chofo’s wife, Isabel, a legendary beauty. But because he was a compulsive womanizer, Chofo neglected her for other ladies. It was rumored that El Búho’s brother, Rico, the head of the cartel, had a soft spot for her and therefore gave Chofo extra allowances for his impulsive behavior. Good thing, because Chofo was unreliable. Emilio really did not want Chofo to be a part of his *grupo*, but he was also the more responsible one and El Búho knew it. Emilio figured El Búho thought he could keep Chofo in line, but it was not really possible.

 From out of seemingly nowhere, a very beautiful woman with long black hair appeared, surprising and captivating all of the men, but especially Chofo. To be fair, he was easy prey when it came to pretty ladies. Her face was very pale and she had bright red full lips. She wore a golden tiara adorned with flowers and feathers. Her perfectly shaped breasts were scarcely covered by a shimmering robe, her dark nipples peeking through the material. In addition to her unnatural beauty, the men were taken aback by her appearance in the middle of the forest.

 “I think you may be lost, *señorita*,” Chofo began, attempting to be valiant as he puffed up his chest.

 She moved closer to him, growing taller until she towered at least two feet above him. She sprouted flint-tipped wings that were sharp as the knife he had in his back pocket. Her hand opened up, transforming into paws with keen-edged claws. She swiped at Chofo, leaving deep gashes in his chest, blood seeping through his clothing.

 “¡*Ya valí madre*!” he yelled and turned to run, screaming in a high pitched voice.

 The other men watched on, stunned into pure horror as she lifted her feet to expose sharp talons, which grabbed hold of Chofo by the belt, lifting him up as his legs continued to mechanically run in mid-air like a wind up toy. She dropped him into her skeleton mouth, *una golosina* to savor. Screeching loudly, she devoured him whole, regurgitating up some bones and spitting out a silver ring. The men stood frozen with fear. One by one, she attacked them. Before Emilio had a chance to turn and run, she called into the sky. A swarm of what appeared to be winged female warriors wearing skulls and crossbones descended from above, the sound of their wings beating collectively. Emilio stared into the terrifying mouths coming at him and his last remaining men, glancing over at the awful giant winged woman-beast, whose mouth was dripping with Chofo’s blood. There were skulls rattling against one another around her neck. Her ghastly wings expanded fully. Emilio’s last thought was of his home and how he’d wished he hadn’t chosen to get mixed up with *Los Hermanos.* They were chewed up and spit back out onto the ground. Everything went quiet as the winged warriors ascended back into the night sky and Itzpapalotl followed, with 6 hearts clutched in her paws.

 Back at the tent, El Búho grew impatient for the return of his men. He’d heard some shots fired in the distance and not long after, a hell of a lot of screaming. *Si quieres algo bien hecho, hazlo tú mismo* he heard his brother’s voice in his head, chiding him. He sighed heavily and knew that to be true, again. If you want something done right, do it yourself…except that he had enough expendable men now that he could send others. He grabbed two of his personal guards and sent them down the path the group of men had taken to check on the situation. They moved discreetly through the dark forest, much better than the previous men had done, until they came upon a break in the trees. The coppery scent of blood reached their nostrils. They crouched down to survey the area for any signs of imminent danger. It was eerily quiet. They remained still for a good 10 minutes to ensure that no one was lurking nearby before moving any closer. Their eyes had adjusted to the dark and could make out the outlines of bodies on the ground a couple of yards ahead. One of them took out his lighter to illuminate his view. He was astounded at what he saw.

 “¡*Puta madre*!” He exclaimed.

 The other guard pulled out his cell phone and directed his flashlight toward the scene. On the ground lay the bodies of 6 men, Chofo being one of them. They could tell it was Chofo by the only identifying item left on the ground: a silver ring with an owl carved into it. Their bodies were mangled and bloody. They looked as if…as if they had been torn apart by some type of animal, perhaps a wildcat? There were no signs of bullets. What person or thing could have done this to them? They wondered. It didn’t seem possible that any patrols of the sanctuary could do this—they’d have to have certain weapons to inflict this type of violence. The other guard sucked in his breath as he cautiously stepped closer to the bodies.

 “*Dios mio, no hay corazónes*,” he whispered, noting that all 6 of the men had their hearts ripped out of their chests.

 “This is *loco*,” he thought.

 The two guards headed back to report their findings to El Búho.

**Chapter 8**

**Liliana**

*Curves in motion*

*Soft waves*

*In the undulating sea*

*Circles spiraling*

*Triangular mystery*

*Ballads and songs*

*Carefully crafted*

*Throughout history*

*For the life-giving*

*Power of femininity*

 Gabriel Santa Cruz was the youngest in a family of three brothers in the quaint neighborhood of Coyoacán in Mexico City. His father and mother ran a bookstore, close to the university. His mother was a tight-lipped devout Catholic, very involved in the local church near their home on a quiet residential street near the Jardín Hidalgo. Although raised in a conservative, middle-class family, Gabriel never felt he fit in with them. His father coached both of his older brothers’ soccer teams and the family never missed mass on Sundays. Gabriel had very strong, athletic legs but he was not interested in soccer like his brothers and he did not believe in all of the oppressive rules of the church. The only thing he enjoyed about church was observing the handsome clothing of the men and women on display in their Sunday best. He enjoyed history as well as fashion and always had his nose buried in the cast off vintage books from his parent’s bookstore and didn’t have time for much else. As he grew to be a lanky teen, he very much enjoyed meandering the nearby Colonia del Carmen, a charming area built in 1890 and named after Carmen Romero, the wife of then president Porfirio Díaz. Wandering through the winding cobblestoned streets, he imagined he was once a close confidante of Salvador Novo López, a fabulous writer and entrepreneur in the 1920s. Like Gabriel, he defied machismo and conservative Catholicism. However, Salvador Novo López lived his life very openly and authentically in tune with his sexuality. That was something Gabriel wanted very much to do, but unlike Sr. López, he could not live so freely. His family would never understand. In fact, one day his father found one of the old magazines from the bookstore’s collectible sections. It was titled *Contemporáneos* and was filled with essays and poetry by the Mexican Modernists. He’d caught Gabriel trying to emulate the homosexuals from that time period and was so horrified that he told Gabriel it was “*pura basura*” and threw the valuable journal in the trash. Gabriel was emerging as a poet and an intellectual. His sleek teen body and high cheekbones did not match his two older brothers’ rugged looks and it was becoming more and more apparent that he might be more a *mariposa* than a chip off the old block, which absolutely frightened his father.

 When Gabriel began taking classes at the university, he became good friends with a beautiful woman in his art class named Anna. Anna was everything he wanted to be: feminine, sexy, sultry and liberated. She’d grown up in a very open-minded family of artists. With the help of Anna, Gabriel found a job at a nearby restaurant that she frequented and saved up enough money to move into a shared space with her and her older cousin, Geraldo. Whereas Anna was free-spirited and kind, Geraldo was rather sullen and had a mean streak. He was also at least a good eight years older than they were, so he considered himself to be superior, although he wasn’t nearly as academic as either of them. Gabriel and Anna needed Geraldo to afford the apartment together. Gabriel could not imagine going back to live at home, where he could never be as free as he could be here in this heavenly place with Anna. So Gabriel worked on appealing to Geraldo’s moody side with his poetry and his wit. Soon, the three of them got along famously.

 Geraldo made good money supposedly working at a hotel with his older brother, although he must have worked other jobs and they couldn’t be sure of exactly what he did in these side hustles. It seemed he may be involved in some illegal activities, including being a part of a group of *franeleros.* Gabriel suspected this, as he noticed a pattern of Geraldo being absent on the weekends, the busiest time in the borough. Due to the congested and often overcrowded public garages, the *franeleros* were pretty thuggish and known for charging for street parking, threatening anyone not paying up that their car could incur damages. Anna and Gabriel chose to look the other way, just as Geraldo seemed to do regarding Gabriel’s flamboyant idiosyncrasies.

 On the weekends without Geraldo skulking around, Anna and Gabriel would dress up in Anna’s flowy bohemian outfits and do each other’s make up, as they both had tall, slender builds and beautiful skin. Gabriel had grown his coppery locks long and took to adding lash extensions to accentuate his large, honey-colored eyes. They hosted late night poetry readings with music after Gabriel got off of work and invited over other like-minded folk. One evening, a fellow Oscar Wilde aficionado came to join them, looked at Gabriel reading from his poetry, gently swaying to some accompanying guitar and declared his swan-like beauty was like that of a lily. They made passionate love that night, his lover calling him Liliana and henceforth he became Liliana. Liliana started using feminine pronouns, which fit her so much better. Like the silk slip dresses cut on the bias that fit her beautiful figure, “her” and “she” draped perfectly on her flickering soul. Even at her job at the cafe, Julian, the handsome chef, encouraged her to own her femininity. Liliana was stepping into her own authenticity and it looked good on her. It also looked good to Geraldo. He began showing up at the restaurant where Liliana worked, keeping notes on the men she flirted with, including Julian.

 Anna found a plastic surgeon through her social connections that would help Liliana with breast implants and hormones. Geraldo, who had been observing what was happening from the sidelines, offered to help financially with the transformations she needed to feel more like herself. There was something enticing about Liliana. She attracted men and women wherever she went. She was flirtatious with her poetry and began leaving Geraldo notes to find, giving him something other than his illegal money making schemes to focus on. And he hadn’t been laid in several months.

 Before too long, Geraldo and Liliana began a torrid, secret affair. For as feminine and striking as Liliana was, Geraldo was hunky, masculine and very macho. Liliana felt she owed it to Geraldo to indulge him. He’d helped her become who she wanted to be, after all. And he reminded her of it often.

 He’d push Liliana up against the wall from behind, cupping her breasts in his hands and whisper hotly in her ear, “These belong to me and me alone. Don’t you forget that. Don’t be shaking them in any of your customers’ faces.”

 Liliana was at once thrilled and alarmed by his behavior. She’d never been so coveted before and the attention was flattering at first. Their connection was fiery and explosive. They’d inevitably wind up in Geraldo’s room while Anna was at school and Geraldo would unlock parts of Liliana’s sexuality she’d never experienced before. To Liliana, loving others was easy. She felt she was created for sensual experiences of all kinds and her beauty naturally attracted the attention of others constantly. Geraldo couldn’t handle sharing Liliana with anyone else, yet he had a difficult time accepting the fact that he had fallen for a person who had been born with a dick. He was a man’s man. How could this be happening? He was conflicted over too many things with Liliana. He’d never be able to tell any of his gang members about her and heaven forbid his brother ever find out about his perverse affair. So he took his personal conflict out on her often. He’d get too rough with her after sex or give her the silent treatment if he felt she’d been too flirtatious with others.

 Anna was too occupied throwing parties for a new love interest to notice what was happening right under her nose. And there was no way Liliana would tell her about it. Nor could she go home to her family for help. Her parents didn’t even speak to her anymore. She was very alone, more than ever now. One dreadful evening, Geraldo drank too much and couldn’t take it anymore. He smothered Liliana’s face with a pillow after making love to her, hoping to extinguish this woman who tormented him so badly. She screamed and pushed him off of her. He slapped her face and left in a huff. Afterwards, Liliana looked at herself shamefully in the bathroom mirror, failing to cover the evidence up sufficiently before going to work the next morning.

 She arrived at the restaurant for her shift with an ugly bruise. Julian noticed it right away and pulled her aside to find out what happened. Something about Julian’s kind eyes allowed for Liliana to open up to him about what was going on between her and Geraldo. She desperately needed a friend.

 “Look, Liliana, I’m heading back to my little hometown near the mountains to be with my grandmother and begin as a head chef at the Inn next to her that hosts tourists during monarch migration season. They’d be happy to have you work the bar. It’s far away from all of this nonsense. The mountain air is fresh, life is simple there. People won’t know anything about you, but will accept you because you’ll be with me. You can start your life again, as a whole woman. My grandmother is a healer, she can help you. She’d be happy to have you with us. You do not deserve to be treated like this. You are Liliana.” He emphasized the last sentence with such a deep sincerity that Liliana had never quite experienced from a man.

 A tear rolled down her pretty cheek and Julian’s soft fingers brushed it away. Somehow she knew she could trust him. She left with him the next week and never looked back.

**Chapter 9**

**Itzpapalotl**

*What stirs her*

*Only the burs that stick inside the lace lined space*

*Oh the flutterings of the old, burned wings*

*Drawn in, though they may be summoned out*

*Reeling from thorns that are still sharp*

*Yet certain steps retrace forgotten paths*

*Altering the trajectory of the stars, as it were*

*Never to be known the same again*

*That is what lies inside*

*Like chards broken into bits*

*A mosaic of light and sound*

 “Why did I feel my grandmother’s presence so strongly? And where was I? What happened to me?” Alea asked as Mamá Lulita listened quietly and nodded her head knowingly. Alea had finished the tea and was feeling much better in the caring presence of Mamá Lulita. Alea rested her head on Julian’s shoulder, squeezed between Liliana and him.

 “Your grandmother was the most powerful healer in this village, Alea. There is much I need to tell you. It’s clear that it’s time for you to know more about her,” Mamá Lulita began, crossing herself and casting a glance at a picture of Juana on her coffee table.

“Five hundred years ago, in the very forest where you’ve been many times, a group of women called upon a powerful goddess for protection. These women were fleeing the Spanish soldiers led by a malevolent priest who wished them harm as they were still worshiping the old gods and goddesses of Tenochtitlan. The women were escaping sexual servitude, as they had been gifted to Hernán Cortes. There was a leader in their group named Itzel, a Nahuatl name meaning unique. Itzel was a powerful priestess. It is said she had prophetic dreams and that the Great Mother appeared to her in a dream to tell her to gather her sister and five other women to this forest in order to summon the goddess, Itzpapalotl.”

 Alea’s eyes lit up, “I remember hearing that name, Itzel, from my grandmother. Doesn’t *papalotl* mean butterfly in Nahuatl? My mother told me that.”

 “Indeed, it does. Itzpapalotl is the Butterfly Goddess,” Mamá Lulita responded, smiling.

 Alea’s body relaxed and she leaned more into Julian’s shoulder. Liliana slid her hand into Alea’s. It was as if they were all little children gathered together to hear a story by the campfire.

 Mamá Lulita continued in her quiet, low voice, “Itzpapalotl was created in the highest heaven of Tonatiuhichan, but it was in the middle heaven of Tlillan-Tlapallan where she met the seductive Xochipilli, the god of pleasure, music and homosexuality. Xochipilli had a twin sister, Xochiquetzal, the goddess of romance, beauty, and sex, though it is also said the two of them could have been one in the same. In any case, Itzpapalotl fell deeply in love with Xochipilli.”

 “Legend was that two of Xochipilli’s friends fought each other to gain his sister’s love as she was irresistible to all, for she represented the purest form of desire. These two friends went to extremes and got into all sorts of trouble with other gods attempting to woo Xochiquetzal, eventually angering Tonatiuh, the sun god warrior, who rode with his eagles and killed them. Xochipilli was enraged by what Tonatiuh did because his two friends were not warriors and were therefore an easy kill for the sun god. He vowed to avenge them, but he was no warrior–he was the god of sex and love. Itzpapalotl knew better and tried to convince Xochipilli to let it go, but he was too stubborn. Itzpapalotl had a magical Veil of Invisibility, a cloak so powerful that no magic could see through it. Itzpapalotl gave it to her beloved Xochipilli and armed him with a dagger made from one of her obsidian claws so he could face Tonatiuh. When Xochipilli got close enough, he delivered a strike to Tonatiuh’s chest, and succeeded in killing him. When the rest of the gods of middle paradise found out about this killing, they made up their minds that it was a treacherous collaboration on behalf of the couple, Itzpapalotl and Xochipilli. They punished them by sending the two from middle heaven to Tlalocan, the first paradise. This was the realm ruled by Tlaloc, the god of rain.”

 “Xochipilli and Itzpapalotl lived happily in Tlalocan for a time, but their happiness was not to last. The god Xipe Totec came and killed Tlaloc after a long struggle, causing the paradise to collapse. Most that lived within Tlalocan fell to earth while others went to the underworld. However, Xochipilli was on the other side of the forest when Tlaloc died so that when everything flooded, he was caught unawares and died while Itzpapalotl used her butterfly wings to escape the great devastation. Itzpapalotl was never able to find Xochipilli again.”

 “Grief-stricken, Itzpapalotl fell to Tamoanchan, the underground paradise. It was during that fall that she lost all her faith in happiness and her once beautiful wings withered. She found the loss of her Xochipilli so devastating that she allowed herself to slowly die in the cave of Cuauhnahuac, where the Creator God Ehecatl made the first man and woman. However, it turned out that the sacred cave had regenerative properties and restored her back to life, but she was much changed and not as she had been before. Itzpapalotl was now a darkened goddess, full of sadness and aggression. She had a terrifying capacity for destruction. Her grief had transformed her.”

 “One day, the cloud-serpents Xiuhnel and Mimich disguised themselves as men in order to go into the cave where Itzpapalotl lived to capture her. But Itzpapalotl had the ability to shapeshift into a seductive woman with long black hair and ruby red lips. She persuaded Xiuhnel to drink her menstrual blood from a stone chalice. He fell into a stupor and made passionate love to her, completely mesmerized. Under her spell, she could do what she pleased with him. She devoured him, tore open his chest and offered his heart to the night sky. Mimich ran away but Itzpaplotl descended upon him, too. After slaying the two serpents, she had a thirst for blood, and began drinking it from all those she killed ever after. Itzpapalotl also had a fleet of servants. They were beautiful star spirits that fell at her feet. In their darkened state, they became monstrous, skeletal women known as the Tzitzimimeh. They were the women who had died in childbirth and were given a special place in her realm, as they protected the Divine Feminine.”

 “The Tzitzimimeh! Julian’s mom must be one of them. I saw her die in childbirth in my vision,” Alea exclaimed.

 Mamá Lulita affirmed this with a look. Julian glanced from his grandmother to Alea, surprised.

 “Keep going!” Liliana inserted.

 “Well, the gods sought to punish Itzpapalotl for desecrating the sacred cave so she was cursed to lose whatever she found precious to her heart, and for all of her days to be filled with sadness. So although she rules over Tamoanchan, an underground island paradise that has her temple in the center, she grieves the loss of her beloved Xochipilli, god of eroticism, music and homosexuality. Her temple is built from the skulls of jaguars, peering out with green emeralds as eyes and she still possesses the Veil of Invisibility, which no mortal nor god can see beyond. Itzpapalotl is a mistress of blood magic. When summoned she can change to attack her victims as needed. Itzpapalotl is most easily summoned during the dark of night and solar eclipses during the day. These times are sacred to her and she and all her Tzitzimimeh can be called upon to kill if needed.”

 “What a story, Mamá Lulita,” Julian said, mouth agape.

 Alea furrowed her brow and asked, “But what does all of this have to do with my grandmother and me feeling her presence and what I experienced?”

 Liliana stroked Alea’s hand with her long, sensual fingers. “Itzel, the pregnant priestess who helped to summon Itzpapalotl, can be traced to your grandmother, Juana.”

 “Hmmmm,” Alea tried to imagine this.

 “The power is passed down through the females in that bloodline, Alea,” Mamá Lulita added. “And you are of this lineage.”

 Alea paused and questioned, “But why now?”

 “There is a portal in the sacred forest that can only be opened every 52 years. It is a sacred Aztec number. And it can only be opened with the menstrual blood captured in the roots of the healing tree where Itzel first summoned Itzpapalotl. And by a chosen female in the lineage of the priestesses of Itzpapalotl,” Mamá Lulita stated.

 “Are you saying Alea is the chosen female?” asked Julian, sitting upright.

 Mamá Lulita answered evenly, “Alea, your grandmother was the head priestess of her time from this lineage. The portal opened 52 years ago for her, which is when she learned her mission was to heal the land that was overrun with pesticides. And now, the butterfly sanctuary is in danger of being deforested by illegal loggers. Jauna passed on the legacy of protecting the butterflies to you.”

 Alea shook her head in disbelief. She had a brief flashback to wearing a white gown with her grandmother in the forest during one of her childhood visits. She recalled standing in a circle, surrounded by older women in white. It only happened once as her mother became upset upon hearing about it from her on the plane ride back to Texas.

 “Why isn’t my mother a part of this?” she asked, bewildered.

 “She had another role to play in saving the monarchs. Her destiny was not this path. She rejected the sisterhood, but that was the way it had to be. It’s clear that you are the chosen one, for so many reasons,” Mamá Lulita whispered.

 “But I did not choose this!” Alea cried out, feeling as though life was throwing many wrenches on her path that she did not seek.

 “No, you did not. But the portal opened for you and allowed you to see what you needed for tonight. So it shall be,” Mamá Lulita answered.

**Chapter 10**

**Leaving**

*In between the blush of life*

*Lie the ties we make*

*The tangled fibers of love*

*And imprints that leave our hearts*

*Permanently rearranged*

*In between the blush of life*

*Lie the ties we break*

*The endless procession of leave-takings*

*And wistful good-byes that leave our hearts*

*Empty again*

*An open space*

*For more laughter and song*

*For more solongs and, ashes*

 Jay gently woke Marisol with soft kisses on her shoulders. She shrugged them off and stretched, then froze for a minute, remembering what she’d learned the night before.

 “Jay, we need to speak with Alea,” Marisol murmured.

 “I know, my love. We will. Let me get your coffee and some *pan dulce*,” he offered.

 Marisol nodded her head and pulled the sheets over her head as Jay got dressed and left the room. She wanted to disappear from all of this stress. She wished her mother was here to calm her*.* Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized she’d never see her mother again and never get the chance to make amends not just for leaving behind the rituals, but also something else: her connection to her birthplace.

 She had worked so hard for all of the achievements in her life once she went to Texas and Jay had helped her with her goals. She’d risen from a young woman who only knew a little English in a small village in Mexico to become a fully bilingual, highly educated and deeply respected professor of entomology at an American university. She wrote grants and published academic journals to save the monarchs of her native land that swept through Texas every fall. And she raised her beautiful and stubborn daughter with the man of her dreams. She had accomplished more than she ever imagined, just as her mother had somehow known.

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 She recalled her 12th birthday celebration with Alicia, who would marry her older brother Marco, helping her make *una corona* with flowers from the field. Juana called the girls in to have them change into their white dresses and take the chocolate with them to the gathering at dusk to the sacred spot with the other women.

 “This is a special birthday, *mija,*” her mother had told her. “You’ve begun the changes already and soon enough you’ll be a young woman, no longer a child.”

 Marisol remembered looking up at her beautiful mother, with her dark, smokey eyes, almost black as night, her perfectly smooth skin and high cheekbones reflecting the beauty of an ancient princess of the Mexica of long ago days. Marisol often wondered why her mother had never remarried after her father had died when she was a baby. There wasn’t a shortage of suitors. Marisol watched on quietly as men, both in the village and those who came to visit from faraway places, pursued her fiercely. Marco checked them out carefully, acting like the man of the house, even though he was just a boy. But Juana refused them all. She told her children there had only been one love in her life and that was their father and that her position as the lead healer in the region was enough for her to feel complete. It seemed to be true, although there had been one mystery man who had visited for a single night.

 Alicia and Marisol attended the ceremony with Juana, Mamá Lulita, Alicia’s mother and other neighboring women who gathered monthly. Mamá Lulita was the one who looked at Marisol that evening and whispered something to Juana, who nodded in agreement.

 Just as the women were opening the circle, Juana leaned down to Marisol, “Mamá Lulita says you will be the one to carry on our traditions when I no longer can.”

 “No, mamí, I think maybe it should be Alicia,” Marisol resisted, looking at her friend. Alicia always seemed more interested in the ceremonies than she did. In her twelve-year-old mind, she couldn’t fathom the responsibility of leading the ceremonies. Alicia smiled at Marisol, her hazel eyes sparkling.

 “My darling, the line goes from me to you. We are descended from a line of women who have come before you, all the way back to Itzel. Your heart will realize it is your destiny. There are many things you can’t even imagine yet. But one day you will understand,” Juana stated matter-of-factly.

 Marisol couldn’t imagine doing what her mother did. She had a restless heart and an urge to fly away, like the butterflies did each spring, but she nodded her head, to make her mother happy.

 “Will I lead the ceremonies, too?” Alicia piped up from behind Marisol.

 “You’ll find a firm foundation here. You’ll be the steady force for all. Your heart will build a place to come back to again and again. You will help to continue the *tradiciones*. That’s your destiny,*”* Mamá Lulita assured Alicia.

 Marisol felt annoyed. It almost seemed she was not given a choice. She knew in her heart she would leave one day. She would keep it a secret. When Jay came along seven years later, she knew he was the one that would take her north with the butterflies. Her mother was angry and sad when she left. Marisol couldn’t understand that at the time. But she understood this now. Her own daughter was keeping a secret from her. Was this what she was getting in return for rebelling against her mother?

 Hot tears formed in her eyes, but then she felt something. A feather light touch on her hand. She looked around the room. No one was physically there, but it felt like her mother was with her, giving her some kind of reassurance that all was forgiven.

 Jay returned to the room with breakfast. The rich aroma of the coffee reached Marisol’s nose. She sat up in bed as Jay set the tray next to her. She leaned into him and he stroked her hair lovingly. Marisol reached up and held his face in her hand. His eyes looked deep into hers.

 “Everything will be okay, Mari. We’re heading back tomorrow and we can help Alea with whatever she will need from us. Have faith, my love,” Jay said, as he handed her a hand painted tin *nicho* with a glass front, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe inside. “Father Maldonado asked me to give this to you last night, I almost forgot.”

 Marisol inspected the worn little tin. She’d seen it in her mother’s house since Father Maldonado had given it to her when he first came to lead the church here. It was a special keepsake. She sighed and dipped a piece of pan dulce in the steaming coffee. She felt a little better after nibbling on the bread.

 “Let’s head down to the restaurant for a full breakfast before we leave, Mari,” Jay convinced her.

 She dressed and headed down a flower lined path to the quaint dining room with him where the smell of fresh corn tortillas and bacon lingered in the air. The brick red colored saltillo tiles on the floor gleamed as Liliana approached them to ask them what they wanted for breakfast. The dining room was full of tourists chattering excitedly about visiting the nearby sanctuaries. Marisol ordered the *chilaquiles rojas*. She noticed Alea sitting with Julian at one of the corner tables in the dining room and elbowed Jay.

 “She sure is spending a lot of time with Julian,” she whispered to Jay. “I wonder if there is something blossoming between them.”

 Jay rolled his eyes and gave Marisol a “mind your own business” look. “I imagine your mother said the same thing about us all those years ago,” he said, sipping his coffee.

 Marisol smiled at that, her olive cheeks turning a deep shade of pink. Alea looked over at her parents and smiled. Marisol grabbed Jay’s hand and squeezed it.

 “Jay, I can’t bear to think of anything bad happening to our sweet daughter,” she whispered, trying to stay focused on eating her *chilaquiles*.

 Jay leaned over to kiss her cheek, saying, “Sweet? I think you and I both know our daughter is more fierce than sweet. I know where she gets that from.”

 Alea and Julian were reflecting on the strange events of the night before when Jay approached them.

 “Good Morning! Alea, would you join your mother and I when you are finished with breakfast?” Jay asked.

 “Of course, dad,” Alea answered, smiling at her father.

 Alea and Jay were very close. She could tell there was a look of concern in his green eyes. She had the feeling that he knew about the cancer, but how? She had not told a soul here. Somehow, he had found out.

 As Jay walked back to the table with her mother, Julian gave her hand a squeeze.

 “Are you going to tell them what happened?” he asked, referring to the incident in the forest.

 “I’m not sure. But I know they are going to want to know why I won’t be heading back with them to Texas tomorrow,” she answered him.

 “Okay, *bonita*. Well, I need to get back to the kitchen and check on things. Mamá Lulita mentioned we should meet at the church to speak with Father Maldonado. We’ll talk more then.” Julian gave Alea’s hand another squeeze as he left for the kitchen.

 Alea sipped more coffee and joined her parents, who were finishing breakfast. Her father brought a chair over for her and she sat between them. Her mother had a worried look in her eyes. Something was definitely up, it was clear.

 “Okay, Alea, I’m just going to come out and say it,” her mother began. “We know about the cancer. The doctor called yesterday when you were out and I accidentally took the call. They thought I was you.” Her mother set her phone down and slid it over to Alea.

 Alea sucked in her breath. How did her mom have her phone? She looked from her mom to her dad. She was hardly prepared to handle everything about the cancer on her own, much less with her parents. Her mother already had so much on her mind. The last thing she wanted was to burden her parents with her health issues. She took a deep breath in and closed her eyes.

 “Where was my phone?” was the extent to which Alea could respond to her mother’s statements.

 “You must have dropped it in the hallway on your way out to meet Julian yesterday-that’s where I found it,” Marisol responded.

 The three of them sat in awkward silence together. Alea looked down at her lap. She did not know what to say, nor did she know how she was going to explain to her parents that she may be delaying her return to Texas.

 Liliana, as if sensing the tension, came by their table, her graceful presence a relief. She swept in with extra coffee pours and gave Alea a wink.

 “How’s everything tasting to you, beautiful family?” Liliana asked in her husky, warm voice.

 “Everything is amazing,” Alea answered, putting on a smiling front.

 “Let me know if you need anything else,” Liliana said as she sashayed off to the kitchen.

 “She’s quite a beauty, isn’t she?” asked Jay, admiring Liliana as she left a trail of invisible stardust behind her.

 Marisol rolled her eyes and elbowed Jay in the ribs. That made Alea laugh. She was grateful for the levity. She really didn’t know what to say to her mother about the cancer, but before she could respond, all their eyes were on a police officer dressed in a khaki uniform who entered the dining room.

 “I wonder what this is about?” Jay asked under his breath, as Marco walked over to the mustached man and began a conversation with him.

 “I’ll go find out,” Marisol started to stand, but Jay offered to go check instead to give his wife and daughter an opportunity to continue the conversation alone. He placed his napkin on his chair and headed over to speak with the men.

 “*Mija*, your dad and I are 100 percent here for you. I don’t understand why you would have not told us about this. We are here to support you financially and here for you emotionally. And I know I can find a top oncologist for you in Austin. Sharon, in the lab has a sister-in-law who works at Texas Oncology. Do you need a second opinion?” Marisol began, now that she and Alea were alone.

 Alea breathed deeply. Her eyes welled up as she knew her mother meant well. She would always go to any lengths to help her and she knew that.

 “Tomorrow when we go back...” Marisol’s sentence trailed off while Alea strategized on how to tell her that she was not going to return with them.

 “I’m not sure I’ll return tomorrow, mom,” Alea said quietly, interrupting her mother.

 Marisol’s eyes grew wide.

 “Not returning tomorrow? But, the doctor said you need to go in for the appointment. Surely it’s best that…” Marisol’s voice was rising with anxiety.

 “Listen, mom. I love you and I know you are worried. I chose a board certified oncologist that my doctor recommended. I know that I’m in good hands. I think I wanted to spare you and dad any extra stress right now. But, there are other things going on here. I had an experience in the forest yesterday,” Alea began.

 “What do you mean by that?” Marisol asked, crinkling her forehead, confused.

 At this point, Jay returned to a clearly tense conversation. He kept quiet, placing his hand on Marisol’s arm for support, but she swiped it away, feeling on edge.

 “Well, maybe you wouldn’t understand. After all, you left. I learned all about the priestesshood, Itzpapalotl and our connection to all of this,” Alea waved her arm around in the air. She was more than annoyed. A feeling of anger, fierce and fiery, was rising up within her.

 Her mother’s face fell and her jaw dropped open. How could Alea speak to her like this? And how did she know about all of those secrets she had guarded so carefully? Before Alea said anything more that she would regret, she pushed away from the table and headed upstairs to her room, hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

 Marisol was stunned. Jay reached over to soothe her, but to no avail. Marisol was deeply hurt. He had no idea what his daughter was referring to, he had no idea what to say to make his wife feel better and he had no idea what to do to iron out the tension between his two favorite women. He just figured it best to remain quiet and let things fall into place as they would, eventually. He cleared his throat and changed the subject.

 “Well, apparently there was a crime in the forest last night,” Jay began.

 “What?” Marisol was nearly at her wit’s end.

 “That police officer is Chief Muñoz. He asked your brother if he’d heard or seen anything last night. Six men were found dead.”

 “Is that what Alea was talking about? I don’t understand. She should definitely come back home with us tomorrow,” Marisol sighed, exasperated.

 “Well, she is, isn’t she?” Jay stated, matter-of-factly.

 “Uh, no. Apparently she needs to stay here because of an experience she had last night.” Marisol air-quoted the word experience with two index fingers. Now Jay was visibly upset.

 “She is just as stubborn as you. Maybe this will bode well with the difficult journey she is facing—she will have the grit to handle everything that lies ahead. I am not happy about her staying here, but she is an adult and we can’t force her to do anything, Mari, you know that better than anyone.”

 “I think she got her stubbornness from you,” Marisol jabbed tersely and then took a deep breath, adding more gently, “But, you are right that we have to let her figure it out, Jay. We’re just going to have to.”

 “Just like your mother had to let you go your own way, too,” Jay added tenderly, reaching out to take Marisol’s hand in his. She squeezed it and held on to it for strength.

**Chapter 11**

**El Búho**

*Dormant slumber*

*Amidst the hushed quietude*

*Stillness holds a transformative potency*

*Like the young century old trees*

*And the watchful view of the owl*

*Bathed in the faintest light*

*All of us captive*

*To the sun*

*Telling us to lean into*

*The length of the day*

 El Búho was alarmed by the reports from the two armed guards he sent to check on

things. They were visibly shaken by what they had seen and it was clear that he was

going to need to call in reinforcements from Mexico City. He braced himself for Rico’s reaction. The worst part would be telling Chofo’s wife about what happened. Or, maybe not. Rico favored her. It was anybody’s guess how Isabel had ended up with the not so savvy Chofo. Everyone said she was far too smart and stunning to be with the likes of him. She would be upset, that was a given, but Chofo’s death would bring about an opportunity for Rico to move in on the soon to be grieving widow. The biggest issue would be how to deal with whatever was interfering with their operations. El Búho had a gut feeling Rico would want to consult with Don Dario to handle whatever strange entity they were dealing with, and this was something that disconcerted him greatly. Because it ultimately meant that he would have to see Don Dario. He hadn’t spoken with him since Liliana.

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 Several years earlier, when El Búho was still known as Geraldo, he’d made the mistake of letting his wild, younger cousin Anna convince him to move in with her and her newbest friend. When they had first all moved in together, he’d noticed something enticing about Liliana (then known as Gabriel), but was so busy with all of the street activities and drug hustles he was doing that he figured he’d be able to ignore those urges. But little by little, Liliana was pulling him closer and closer into her orbit. She’d walk around the apartment with her silky robe loosely opened, baring the most elegant figure Geraldo had ever seen. She’d read her poetry to him and tease him, leaving him wanting more from her. He wasn’t even into poetry, but it was more the way the words flowed together like a song out of her sexy, pouty lips that reminded him of his first teenage crush. Her lips are what got him.

 Geraldo was convinced she must have put a spell on him. He found himself hustling

extra to help her pay for her breasts, which looked and felt lush and womanly. Of

course, her newly purchased curves and the softening of her skin (thanks to the

estradiol she was taking) made her even more irresistible to him. He was smitten with

her in so many ways and was starting to feel completely out of control, something he did not like. He was used to commanding the situation, especially when it came to women, and not getting in over his head with any of them. But not Liliana.

 It just so happened that about that same time, Rico was in the beginning stages of forming a powerful cartel, *Los Hermanos*. Without revealing anything suspicious to anyone, he sought the help of a dark *brujo* he’d heard about from his Tio Cesar. Rico was considering having all of his potential members initiated with Don Dario’s black magic and sent Geraldo to check him out first. Don Dario had a reputation for being especially adept at breaking spells, in addition to initiating people into the powers of dark magic.

 Don Dario could be found at El Péndulo, the combination bookstore/cafe in the posh Polanco neighborhood, just north of Chapultepec Park. The first time Geraldo ventured out to meet Don Dario, he walked into the charming bookstore with wood floors and curved green rails leading upstairs. He’d never set foot in a bookstore, much less one this extravagant. He observed the actual pendulum that hung from the ceiling on the top floor down to the center of the bottom floor, right near the entrance to the cafe section. He scanned the first floor and, not finding who he was looking for, headed up the serpentine stairs. He walked past a stained glass window overlooking the street below to a sitting area scattered with cushioned chairs and a plush velvet sofa opposite the esoteric section. On the sofa he spotted him.

 Don Dario was an older gentleman who dressed impeccably with thick black and silver hair that he slicked back with Tres Flores Brilliantine, leaving the scent of jasmine in the air around him. He had bluish-gray eyes that appeared more blue when he wore lighter colors. He had a silver, perfectly trimmed beard and was tall, a few inches over 6 feet. In addition to his striking physical characteristics, there was a sense of mystery about him and he carried himself with a bewitching presence. When he walked into a room, all eyes were on him. He was very charismatic and could charm even the fussiest crying babies into quiet stillness with just one look.

 It had been a sunny spring day at the beginning of May on that fateful visit when he met Don Dario. He remembered because Don Dario had remarked about it, curiously.

“Today is the 2nd of May, is it not?” Don Dario had asked, taking a look at his watch, to which Geraldo nodded.

 “And you came here for a specific need dealing with a lover?” Don Dario pressed, looking at Geraldo steadily.

 Geraldo had not mentioned his problem, so he was taken aback by this presumption, which was in fact, correct. He nodded his head.

 “I have the perfect item for you to break this tormenting love spell, my friend,” Don Dario said, as he pulled out a small, black pouch.

 Before Geraldo could question why the date was significant or how Don Dario knew what he was seeking, he was struck by what Don Dario withdrew. It was a stunning emerald pendant that Don Dario claimed came from the Underworld. According to Don Dario, his beloved gave it to him on his one and only visit there. Apparently it did not hold any power for Don Dario as it contained light and he was all darkness. But Don Dario said if the lover that plagued Geraldo was connected to the light, as his long dead beloved was, then it would work to break the spell. Geraldo imagined that Liliana possessed light magic. There were practically sparks that flew off of her radiant presence. So he took the pendant in desperate hopes that it would break the spell. And it did. For, after Geraldo gave Liliana the necklace, she soon disappeared. And he stopped being distressed by thoughts of her. He was free of her.

 However, Don Dario told Geraldo that a certain Aztec god of one of the underworlds, Techlotl, would want something in exchange for the emerald. He told Geraldo he must pledge his allegiance to Techlotl. Geraldo knew nothing about Techlotl.

 Techlotl was an old, relatively unknown god, characterized by the owl, who would often warn people of his arrival. He collected his fallen mortals easily. Humans were all consuming and became addicted to things, even to each other. If they summoned him for their desires, He would gladly give them what they wanted, but only for something in return. Humans, being humans, were greedy and shortsighted for the most part. And they died so easily of diseases and accidents, which were guaranteed wins for Techlotl. He was a lazy debt collector.

 Afterwards, Don Dario had Geraldo branded with an owl on his chest, instructing him, “You made the pledge by using the pendant. You belong to Techlotl. He will not change his mind unless you give him that emerald back. So it’s up to you.”

 Geraldo was incensed. “But that’s not exactly fair. I didn’t realize this when you gave that pendant to me.”

 Don Dario shrugged his shoulders. His eyes turned an ice blue and he looked viciously into Geraldo’s eyes. He spoke calculatedly.

 “Fairness is not a term that we, who have chosen the darker paths, are able to offer. Dark magic. You knew that’s what I dealt with and you came to me for help. Don’t pretend you didn’t know. There is always a price to pay.”

 After he got the brand of the owl on his chest, Geraldo became known as El Búho to his brother and all of the cartel members. Rico sacrificed him rather than getting himself mixed up with Don Dario and decided it best to just keep his brother as the conduit to the dark arts. No need for anyone else to be initiated.

 And that’s how El Búho had left things back then. Undone. He was not keen on having to deal with Don Dario again, but he had known he would encounter him again eventually.

**Chapter 12**

**El Brujo**

*I had the opportunity*

*To feel the loss*

*To remember the acuity*

*Of the pain across*

*And within myself*

*And how it has felt*

*Heart pushed off of the shelf*

*Left with a bruise and a welt*

*All lost things*

*Are a gain to someone*

*Gathering slings*

*When the pain is done*

 Don Dario grew up in an orphanage not far from the borough of Cuicuilco, which many considered to be the oldest area in the Valley of México. When the Xitle volcano in the area began a series of devastating eruptions between 245 and 315, much of the area was covered in lava and the citizens fled. At this time, the rise of Teotihuacán began and some of the Cuicuilca people migrated to the city. The name Cuicuilco, meaning “place of songs and dances” was one of the most prominent ceremonial centers in ancient México. It was an auspicious sign for Don Dario to land near such a long ago perilous and sacred region.

 Life had not been easy for Don Dario in the beginning. He’d been deposited at the doorstep of a white and red adobe building after he’d been found wandering the streets barefoot at 4 years old. He could only recall faint memories of his mother cooking in a small area inside a one bedroom shack. This and that somehow his mother died, but he couldn’t remember how, only that possibly it may have been in childbirth. The last memory he had of his biological family was of his father crying behind him while he was propped up on the handlebars of a bike. Perhaps his father could not bear to raise him alone or his father was too deep in despair. Whatever the reason, Don Dario was left on the side of a winding dirt road.

 He knew there was something magical on his path, though. A torrential rain came and he hid under the canopy of a tall tree with enormous leaves, sheltering him from the storm. As he viewed the large drops splatter the ground, his stomach began to growl. He hadn’t eaten in several days. He closed his eyes and imagined he was with his mother in that small dwelling he’d considered home for a short time. He could smell the earthy corn tortillas and a pot of beans in the air. His mother’s voice whispered to him, “Dario, you will find your way, but it will be through darkness.” He did not know what she meant by that at this tender age, but he held onto this statement the rest of his life. For, when he opened his eyes, the rain had ceased as quickly as it had started. The sky was dark and the wind howled. A large barn owl, with a heart shaped face was perched on a branch above his head. He swiveled his head around and hooted at Dario three times. Dario ambled back into the road, wondering what he should do next when a man appeared nearby. The man was thin and hobbled with a cane and smelled like jasmine as reached out his hand to little Dario. Dario took the tall man’s hand and was taken to an orphanage to live out his childhood until the age of thirteen.

 When Dario was thirteen, he had nearly given up on the idea of being adopted. He had watched as many of his younger companions were selected by nice middle class families to begin anew. The head nun told Dario if he just prayed harder, his dreams would come true, but he knew that couldn’t be the case. He remembered the words of his mother: “Through darkness.”

 Dario noticed he was particularly adept at persuading one of the younger nuns for certain privileges-staying up past the designated bedtime, sneaking in treats from the nearby dulcería and even giving Dario goodnight kisses on his cheek, which he was in desperate need of as he lacked maternal love.

 Sister Antonia found herself very drawn to the boy. She brought him a bottle of Tres Flores Brilliantine to comb through his thick hair that stood up in disarray most mornings. The scent of jasmine wafted into his nose, reminding him of the man who brought him to the orphanage. He knew it was a sign. He began looking at her with his unusually blue eyes and she could not refuse him.

 One night when she was tucking him into bed, she leaned in to give his cheek a goodnight kiss. He whispered to her with the commanding tone of an adult, “Find me a permanent home. Soon I will be too old to be kissed goodnight by you, Sister Antonia.”

 Sister Antonia felt a chill enter her that she couldn’t shake. The boy’s eyes narrowed as she pulled away from him. Indeed, the hair above his top lip was beginning to darken and in recent months his voice had deepened. Sister Antonia knew he would go into a boy’s home within the next year and at that point it would be nearly impossible for him to be placed with a family. He would grow up lost and she couldn’t bear the idea of that for him. Whatever he wanted, she felt compelled to give him. Something about how he had ordered her directed her to go to desperate measures to find him a family. So she did.

 An older couple who had been running out of time to bear children visited the orphanage the next week. Sister Antonia saw this opportunity and seized it. She learned, upon inquiring about their finances, that they were wealthy and lived near Chapultepec Park. The mother, Rosa, wanted a younger child. Sister Antonia tried to point her in the direction of the older children’s unit, but the mother was intent on finding a young child she could mold. However, the husband seemed like he could be persuaded. He gave Sister Antonia a certain look and she knew what she had to do.

 “Excuse us while I take your husband into the office for a little more paperwork, señora,” Sister Antonia told Rosa.

 Sister Antonia gave Domingo exactly what he desired on top of the heavy oak desk in the empty room of the office of the orphanage, but before giving into him completely, she used her own powers of persuasion. As he slid his fingers up her thigh, thrilled to be taking her virginity, she clamped her legs shut tight.

 “Only if you adopt an older boy.”

 “I don’t see that as a problem.”

 “Then sign the papers for Dario and you can have what you like,” she breathed into his ear.

 It didn’t take Domingo more than two seconds to scribble his name on the adoption papers. He could hardly wait to unzip his trousers. His wife hadn’t touched him in years.

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 Rosa and Domingo provided a nice home for Dario with all of the luxuries he’d never known-a good education, more food than he could dream of and even a housekeeper. They provided everything he needed, but love. Rosa and Domingo never bonded with Dario, because shortly after he was adopted, Rosa became pregnant. Rosa claimed it was a miracle, and indeed Domingo knew it was. Ever since they had adopted Dario, Rosa had been constantly seeking Domingo for sex, which hadn’t happened since they were first married. It was as if bringing Dario into their home had broken a dry spell. Sister Antonia had given Domingo a gift alright.

 Rosa gave birth to a little girl, whom she named Berenise. Domingo and Rosa doted on little Berenise and ignored Dario. Despite this, Dario loved his little sister and learned how to soothe her when she cried by looking into her hazel eyes. Berenise loved her older brother too. And though she did not understand why her parents neglected Dario so, she delighted in his presence.

 When he was 16, Dario had a dream in which a dark spirit taught him a spell. As his parents didn’t pay much attention to him, they had no idea what he was up to in his room in the evenings and on the weekends. They did not know he was practicing black magic and that he was a natural at it. They were too busy attending galas and focusing on Berenise to worry about Dario.

 The day after his 18th birthday, before he was to head to university, Dario was in a particularly foul mood. Berenise was now 5 years old and his parents were giddy with the idea that Dario would finally be out of the house and they could just be a quaint little family with the only child that they adored. Dario was angry at Rosa and Domingo for refusing to love him. Around that time, he had been deep into studying Techlotl, one of the Aztec gods of the underworld who was represented by an owl. Dario was particularly drawn to Techlotl as he recalled the barn owl he saw right before being found and placed at the orphanage. Techlotl could be summoned to destroy things that no longer served a person and had the ability to shape shift. Dario summoned him, thinking it wouldn’t work. To his surprise, a large owl, not unlike the one he’d seen as a child, appeared to him and swept through the house, creating an illness within Rosa and Domingo. Within days, they both complained of gastrointestinal issues and within weeks, they perished.

 As Dario was now officially an adult, and as their heir, everything was to be left to him, including his younger sister, Berenise. The estate lawyer was leery of relinquishing everything to him, but Dario was more convincing than ever. His abilities to manipulate people and situations, just as he did at the orphanage with Sister Antonia, were even more powerful now.

 Dario embraced his young adulthood with a hefty estate, plenty of money and a sister whom he raised and shared his magical powers with. But although she proved to be a powerful sorceress, hers was not a dark magic. Yet, together, they became an impressive force. When she turned 17, they fell in love and married. But it was not to last. Berenise collapsed of a brain aneurysm two months after their nuptials. Dario went mad with despair.

 It was then and there that Dario was initiated into his full powers of darkness by Techlotl, who promised him that he would allow Don Dario to visit his beloved Berenise in the underworld once every 7 years. Don Dario became quite skillful with his magic and was sought after by all sorts of people, including politicians, cartels and federales. They all knew he could be found upstairs at *El Péndulo* in Polanco, near his stately home. He had indeed found his path to power through darkness, as his mother had told him, with the help of Techlotl.

**Chapter 13**

**Acceptance**

*And even the harsh desserts*

*Where the sea once was*

*Have vestiges of a former way of being*

*To teach you*

*Life can change*

*And shift, yet even so, it adapts*

*Everything you need is*

*Where you are*

*Let yourself fall a little back to earth*

*Forces pull you downward, inward*

*For a reason*

 Alea slept the deepest she had in over a month. She woke up refreshed to the sounds of roosters crowing in the distance, stepped out of bed and looked out of the window at the lush gardens and pink and violet sky. The mountains were an amethyst color in the morning light, welcoming the break of day. She stretched and yawned, ready to face whatever today would bring. A light tap on Alea’s door brought her attention to it. She cracked the door and saw her mother and father with their suitcases in hand. She opened it wider to give them both long, warm hugs.

 Marisol whispered to her daughter, “Whatever you need to do, do it with conviction. Those are the words of your grandmother that she spoke to me once and I know she would say the same to you. I believe in you, *mija*. I will see you back in Texas when it is time for you to return.”

 Alea could feel her mother’s heart beating against her body. She felt a beam of white light surround her. She closed her eyes. Her father stepped closer to speak to her, embracing his two favorite women.

 “Alea, please be careful. Your aunt and uncle will keep you safe and I trust you know how to keep yourself safe. I know you know what to do, even if I don’t understand everything. We love you. We’ll see you when it’s time, darling,” he whispered into her ear.

 “*Te quiero siempre, mija*,” her mother said as she held her face in her hands and kissed her cheek.

 “I promise to call you soon. I’ll be back before you know it and I’ll be sure to schedule my appointment with the doctor. I love you both,” she told them, then retreated back into the room, the morning sun rising higher, filling the room with a golden light.

 Everyone’s emotions had calmed down considerably and Alea had had a lazy day to rest and spend in bed after their heated conversation at breakfast the day before. Kiki had called to check in on her and promised she’d be available to take her to any appointments when Alea returned. Alea mentioned that she had run into a childhood friend who was now a chef at the Inn. Kiki wanted to see pictures of him and Alea realized she hadn’t taken any of Julian yet.

 “Don’t worry, I’ll get some today and text them to you,” Alea told her.

 “Girl, your voice sounds different…”

 “How?” Alea asked.

 “You sound, well, you sound like you like him.”

 “Oh come on, I knew him when we were kids. Besides, I have too many other things on my mind, as you know,” Alea guffawed.

 “It’s true you do. But…I know you, Alea. Life is full of surprises, especially at the strangest times. He kissed you, right?” Kiki countered.

 Alea didn’t answer.

 “Well, that says it all. Send me a picture of this hottie. Maybe this break from Austin is exactly what you needed right now. Don’t be afraid to enjoy yourself, even if everything is a little chaotic right now. Keep me posted on when your flight returns. I’ll pick you up from the airport if I’m free and you know I’m coming with you to your next doctor appointment!”

 Alea was deeply grateful for their friendship when she said goodbye to Kiki. She knew Kiki would be there for her when she returned, eventually. At the moment, Alea realized that as she had hastily packed very little, she had no clean clothes left after today. She headed downstairs to the laundry room to start a small load.

 In the laundry room, located behind the front desk, she ran into Liliana, who was busy starting a load of tablecloths and towels.

 “Well, you look like a summer rose. I think you caught up on some much needed sleep, chica!” Liliana’s warm voice filled the room.

 “She does, doesn’t she?” Julian chimed in, appearing in his apron. He was grabbing some clean kitchen towels.

 Alea blushed.

 “Do you need anything? I can have a special plate of *huevos a la mexicana* ready for you right away,” Julian offered.

 “That sounds perfect,” Alea smiled as she left the laundry room and followed the short cobblestone path outside the door to the dining room.

 It felt wonderful to be taken care of as she sat at the same corner table she’d been at for breakfast the morning before. She surveyed the room, with its bright yellow walls dotted with shiny ceramic monarch butterflies and wooden sculptures. There was a large group of people speaking French gathered at the two tables next to her. She couldn’t make out what they were saying, but they were dressed for an adventure in one of the mountain sanctuaries to see the monarchs and she smiled at the fact that this little area drew so many visitors from all over the world. The butterflies were magical in so many ways. They had definitely added income and fortune to many of the communities surrounding the preserved areas.

 Liliana brought Alea her breakfast.

 “Julian says to meet him at the church after breakfast. Mamá Lulita wants to meet you both there to speak with Father Maldonado.”

 Alea nodded, then dived into the scrambled eggs mixed with onions, jalapeños and tomatoes. They were so savory and tasted even better scooped up and rolled into the warm corn tortillas.

 After finishing her breakfast, Alea left the Inn to walk down the winding dirt road past the field of flowers to the church. She drifted through the gardens in the courtyard, which were still bustling with bees and butterflies. The morning sun warmed everything up to a perfect, mild temperature. As she approached the entrance to the church, the smell of sandalwood incense and beeswax candles drifted in her direction. She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Julian’s smiling face as he joined her, entering the church together.

 Father Maldonado welcomed them. He had led the mass for her grandmother’s funeral, and looked to be in his early sixties. He was handsome for his age and had a kind face. His hair had sprinkles of gray in it and his broad, genuine smile revealed a few crooked bottom teeth. Although he was a fit man, he walked with a slight limp that was barely noticeable, but Alea had observed it as a little girl.

 “Let us wait for Mamá Lulita to join us,” he spoke, gesturing for the couple to sit in the front pew facing the altar.

 Alea took a seat on the worn red velvet cushion atop the wooden pew. Julian sat next to her and offered her his hand. It felt warm and safe holding hers. Father Maldonado lit a candle sconce on the wall under a replica of a painting of Mary Magdalene by Juan Correa. Alea had studied this painting in her art history class her junior year in college. Juan Correa was born in 1646 and was an Afro-Mexican, the son of a dark-skinned physician from Cádiz and a free black woman. He became one of the most prominent artists in New Spain during his lifetime as he brought about a contemporary quality to painting that broke away from its Spanish lineage. She remembered the professor dissecting this particular image and peered into the painting carefully. There was an invisible diagonal line that split the scene into two halves with the left side filled with material things like the jewels scattered all over the floor, symbols for repentant tears and lust. On the right side Mary is shown inside a grotto in a garden, surrounded by a skull, a book and a crucifix; items that represent the fleeting moments of life. But her face is what transfixed Alea, back in college and still now. A calm expression on Mary Magdalene’s face haunted her. What was she thinking? Who was she really?

 Next to this was a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Alea had grown up with this image in her home. Her mother had candles and little tin sculptures of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the kitchen. It was just part of her heritage.

 Father Maldonado noticed Alea looking at the artwork and spoke.

 “Did you know that ten years after the arrival of the Spanish, the Aztec people resisted the male god presented to them by the Catholic priests?”

 “I knew there was a transition from the Aztec religion to Catholicism, but I was not clear on when this occurred,” Alea responded.

 Father Maldonado continued, “It was not until Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego—a humble indigenous man—on the hill of Tepeyac that the Aztecs converted to Catholicism. The Catholic church declared this vision of Guadalupe as a representation of the Virgin Mary. Even though missionaries worried that the indigenous people saw Guadalupe as a manifestation of their great Aztec mother goddess Coatlicue, the veneration of Guadalupe was permitted. It allowed for the transition of the religion, and therefore a blended culture, to happen.”

 Alea nodded her head, imagining what this must have been like in Mexico, long ago. Mamá Lulita’s voice echoed from the entrance.

 “Ahhh, Father Maldonado is telling you of our complicated history. The Divine Feminine is all the representations of Mary–Mary the mother and Mary the fallen woman. You remember the story of Coatlicue? One of her iterations, the Goddess of Childbirth had a son, Mixcoatl, the storm god. Legend had it that she left him one day on a path but eventually went back to find him, but she discovered that he was gone from the place where she had left him. In the spot where he had been was a sacrificial dagger. She cried great tears and they were so many that they filled the waters of Lake Xochimilco. The Great Goddess was known to haunt the waters of Xochimilco.”

 “That’s *La llorona*! Yes, of course! I didn’t realize her connection to the Aztec goddess!” Alea exclaimed, recalling the scary legend of the grieving ghost that kept her up at night as a child.

 “Yes, *mija*. The Divine Feminine has many forms. Itzpapalotl is another such goddess. She invites us to come to consciousness by going into a different kind of darkness—the unknown. The Divine Feminine is that unique feminine essence within all of us. When accessed, it can assist us in shedding our fear and ushering in courage and thereby protecting what is sacred.”

 Julian and Alea listened carefully to her words. She’d brought up Itzpapalotl again. Mamá Lulita walked up the aisle to where Julian and Alea sat and stood next to the pew. She glanced at Father Maldonado and nodded her head at him.

 “You see, Alea, we have not forgotten our roots in this little church. We have not lost contact with our original beliefs in this land. The Divine Feminine has existed for centuries here and I ensured that we protected it ever since I arrived,” Father Maldonado spoke.

 Alea nodded her head, still unsure of what he was getting at and quite surprised at his expansive view on religion, of all things. Mamá Lulita could see that Alea needed further explanation. She looked at Father Maldonado. He gestured for them to follow him behind the altar, where a turquoise colored woven rug covered a rectangular door in the floor. He unlocked it and lifted it up, which led down a short but steep staircase into a crypt. One by one they went down into the cool, dark room, about the size of Alea’s room where she was staying at the Maravilla Inn. Father Maldonado turned on a dim yellow light hanging from the ceiling. Their eyes adjusted to the small space that contained shelves that lined the walls with relics. Alea looked around, scanning the many strange collected items: skulls, bones and what looked to be a rusty metal chest plate that had been ripped apart by something fierce. Father Maldonado spoke.

 “I have ensured that the church protects the sisterhood that was led by your grandmother, Alea. After Father Dominguez passed and I took over 40 years ago, Juana gave me the key to this crypt. She shared with me the legend of her ancestor, Itzel, and how she escaped the Spaniards 500 years ago. Itzel wanted to preserve her traditions and took her sister and others to escape the new power and call upon the help of Itzpapalotl, the Butterfly Goddess, who provided protection. Juana believed these are the skulls and bones of the men who pursued Itzel. And this is a piece of armor torn apart by the fearsome goddess,” Father Maldonado pointed to the rusty armor that Alea had been eyeing, giving her chills.

 Father Maldonado continued, “It seems history may be repeating itself, Alea. You, like Itzel, have been able to summon the Goddess at this time. There is a need to preserve and protect the land, which is in danger of being overtaken by evil forces.”

 Mamá Lulita nodded her head and spoke, “Yes. The goddess has profound transformational powers. Her fate had been to be cast into misery and destined to have all things precious to her taken away, as I told you. However, our sisterhood can help restore Itzpapalotl’s rightful place in the high heavens by saving the monarchs. They are precious to this place as they are reincarnated souls of not just our ancestors, but also the women who have died in childbirth and disease, like my daughter. We cannot let them perish. We cannot let all things precious to Itzpapalotl continue down a path of disappearance because of bad people doing harm to our land and taking away the sacred trees.”

 Alea and Julian nodded their heads, mesmerized. Mamá Lulita continued, “Only the right person at just the right time can access that portal with sacred feminine blood. And it seems that it is you, Alea. Yesterday, Chief Muñoz reported there were 6 men mysteriously killed in the mountain. The way they were slain…well, it is definitely Itzpapalotl.”

 Julian covered his mouth, exclaiming, “That’s what that screaming was? What do you mean by the way they were slain?”

 Father Maldonado replied, “Their hearts were missing. That’s a telltale sign.”

 “Oh my God!!,” Alea gasped. “But I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do? I don’t want to be the cause of murders! Why?”

 Father Maldonado replied, “You are not the cause, dear child. Itzpapalotl was summoned because there are dangerous and corrupt people cutting down the trees and infiltrating the sacred forest to use it for hiding their drugs. Because there are large swaths of nature preserves, cartels have taken advantage of hiding their operations in it. She has been summoned because our monarchs are in peril and it is clear that she has made her presence known by what has occurred. She invited you in, but you will need to go further into the underworld to find out more. We are losing the trees to the loggers and the cartels. Corruption is rampant. She has awoken and been called upon. If the monarchs die, we all will perish.”

 Julian spoke, “Isn’t there a way to do this without Alea visiting the Underworld? It has to be simpler than that.”

 Mamá Lulita answered, “There is only one way. But you were born to help her, Julian. Your mother is one of those monarchs. She knew when she died that you would be here now, in this time and place, to help. There is magic between you and Alea and you found your way to the healing tree at just the right time. But you must go back to it to learn more.”

 Alea thought about everything that was being revealed to her. She thought about the way her mother so diligently studied the monarch's flight behavior in hopes of finding ways to keep them protected in the scientific arena. She thought about her grandmother and the lessons she had taught Alea about the sacred forest and the natural world. She thought about how her experience had been both frightening and fascinating and she wondered if she could handle going into the underworld. She spoke.

 “I will do this. But I have to get back to Texas very soon. My time is limited because…” Alea’s voice trailed off. The reality of her diagnosis loomed heavy on her mind now.

 “Because there is a sickness growing inside of you,” Mamá Lulita finished her sentence.

 Julian looked wide-eyed at Alea. Alea looked just as surprised at Mamá Lulita. How did she know?

 Father Maldonado placed his hands over Alea’s head and began praying while Julian

placed his arm around her shoulders. Mamá Lulita moved closer, her hand gently

touching Alea’s back. Alea was filled with a sensation of warm light. She felt very

supported and nurtured by the love radiating from everyone around her. Out of the corner

of her eye she noticed movement from the top of the stairs. It was Liliana coming down

to join them. She approached, laying her hands on Alea’s heart. A shiver went through

Alea as she felt the strength of everyone in the space, and more than this, she somehow

knew she had the protection of her ancestors.

**Chapter 14**

**Returning**

*Lungs, breathe*

*Anger, seethe*

*Heart, beat*

*Move, feet*

*Fingers, feel*

*Feelings, heal*

*Eyes, blink*

*Brain, think*

*Living is an act of courage*

 After the revelation in the crypt at the church, Alea went for a walk by herself to her

grandmother’s home. It was being repaired and turned into a little botanica (herbal shop)

and space for Mamá Lulita to practice her curanderísmo, as it had been gifted to Mamá

Lulita upon Juana’s death. She walked through the creaky old wooden door into the

empty living room space with saltillo tiles. In the air, the faint smell of the smoky, sweet

copal incense could still be detected.

 Alea peeked into the small bedroom that her grandmother and mother had shared,

imagining what her mother’s life had been like as a child living here and remembering

staying in this very room during her visits as a little girl herself. Tío Marco had had his

own space sectioned off in the living room until he became a teenager, at which point an

uncle took him into his house to finish raising him. It was a very humble home with

sparse furniture and decorations, but there was something peaceful and magical about it,

regardless. Alea’s favorite part of her grandmother’s home was the kitchen, which still

contained the odor of rich spices and oranges, smells she associated with her

grandmother. She touched the broken blue tiles on the small countertop, now empty in

preparation for renovation. There were many memories this small kitchen held and she

distinctly felt her grandmother’s presence.

 A breeze stirred the wind chimes that still hung right outside of the kitchen window,

bringing her attention to the tall lavender growing in the garden. Stepping into the garden,

Alea recalled propagating the lavender as a little girl that now reached her hips. The

upright silvery green-spiked leaves brushed her legs as the breeze continued to rush

around her, filling the air with its comforting, medicinal aroma. It was as if her

grandmother were speaking to her through the plants. She dreamt her grandmother was

with her, gently holding her hand and guiding her from her house into the sacred forest.

When she awoke, the sun had traveled closer to the mountain tops in the distance. She

brushed herself off, heading back to the Inn to freshen up for dinner.

 That evening, Alea and Liliana met Julian in the kitchen after dinner had been served

to the guests. Julian planned to have their own private feast together that night and

discuss their ideas. He set about creating a sumptuous meal and pulled Alea and Liliana

in with him to make Chiles en Nogada. He instructed Alea grab the blanched walnuts that

had been soaking in milk. Liliana filled the blender with the drained walnuts, queso

fresco, sour cream, sugar, and cinnamon. They puréed it all until it transformed into a

completely smooth and creamy consistency, not unlike whipped cream.

 Meanwhile, Julian charred the chiles, removing the burned skins, slicing them with nimble expertise as he removed the seeds. He guided Alea to brown the fresh ground pork, leaning into her from behind as he sprinkled chopped apples and spices into the pan. She felt that electric charge from his body against hers, making her weak in her knees. On the chopping board, Liliana chopped fresh cilantro. The spicy, sweet and savory flavors filled the kitchen with an aroma of the combination of faraway places, all blended together, like the people of Mexico. Julian swiftly added raisins to the picadillo. Stepping back from the cooking frenzy, Alea watched, mesmerized as Julian scooped the picadillo mixture into the opened pockets that the charred chiles provided. He masterfully drizzled the puréed walnut cream mixture on top and sprinkled bright red pomegranate seeds and the finely chopped cilantro on top, looking like the colors of the Mexican flag, as was intended rom this classic Pueblan dish. The smells were making Alea’s mouth water. Liliana had left to make Maravillas at the bar for the three of them. Julian turned Alea around to face him and held her close, looking into her amber eyes. He brushed a silky curl away from her beaming face.

 “You know I’ll be here for you, no matter what. I am here to help you in any way that

I can, bonita,” he told her, lifting her chin up to kiss her gently on her fleshy lips that

flamed like red chiles.

 When she kissed him back, his lips were soft and generous. She pulled him even closer to her, feeling the heat rise from where her thighs met up to her flushed cheeks. Was it hot in this kitchen from all this cooking? They would have kept going, but Liliana called to them as she approached.

 “Come on, you two! Drinks are ready!”

 The three of them sat down outside in the garden area under the stars to enjoy a fresh

salad prepared earlier to go with their Chiles en Nogada dishes. The smell of smoke

drifted by them from the fire pit on this perfect night. Everything was incredibly luscious

and flavorful, which Julian attributed to the fact that it was made with affection by the

three of them working together. They toasted to their friendship and Liliana began a

tribute to Julian as Alea wrapped herself in the wool blanket that was neatly folded over

the back of her chair.

 “You know, Alea, you will not find a man as generous and kind hearted as Julian. Let

me tell you the story of how Julian, a chef at a cafe where I worked in Mexico City,

saved my life.”

 Julian looked at Liliana lovingly and gave her a wink. Alea leaned back in her chair

and prepared herself for the story she’d been waiting to hear.

Liliana continued, “Julian was a very sexy chef. Well, let’s face it, he still is. And part

of his appeal is that he loves others with an open heart, full of joy and kindness. I had a

bit of a crush on our dear Julian at the time. But I was busy enjoying my new lifestyle

with a friend I lived with from the university and I was having way too much fun to stop

and try to win Julian over…if you know what I mean.”

She cast Julian a knowing look and he smiled. She went on.

 “Unfortunately I got mixed up with my friend’s older cousin, who was also a

roommate. He wasn’t exactly the best mate a girl could have, especially a girl like me.

But I was still figuring myself out and in a rather vulnerable place. My family had

stopped speaking to me and I didn’t know what to do when this guy, Geraldo, turned

violent.”

 Alea gasped, “I can’t see someone as strong as you allowing anyone to abuse you,

Liliana. Why?”

 Liliana replied, “Well, as I said, I was emotionally vulnerable. And…well, to be quite

honest, he was really amazing in bed. Truly. He took me places, girl, I still think about

how hot that sex was. He and I are what I would call Twin Flames. One soul is the light

and one soul is the darkness. And the two together are a mirror of one another. A union

like that is explosive. He was getting himself mixed up in bad things—drug deals, illegal

activities and I swear some dark magic at the end of our run. I remember him talking

about some owl god and a brujo right before I left.”

 “What?” Julian interrupted. “I didn’t hear about that, Liliana. Is that why you had that

look on your face when I told you I heard an owl in the forest last night?”

 Liliana raised her eyebrows. “I didn’t tell you about that, my dear, because it was the

last thing I remember before leaving that awful situation. And yes, I have a feeling he has

something to do with what’s happening in the forest, don’t ask me how or why…but I

digress…the point is, Alea, our man, Julian, he’s simply amazing. I don’t know if I’d be

alive without him. You see, he saw me the day I came in with bruises. He didn’t judge

me. He never did, never. He simply told me that I deserved better. And that I was

welcome to come with him here and that I would be accepted. Now if that isn’t a sign of

an angel walking around here on earth, I don’t know what is. Because that’s what he is to

me. An angel here on this earth.”

 Alea nodded her head. Now she could see the love that they shared. She understood

that Liliana was not in love with Julian, but simply loved him just as he loved her.

 Liliana added, “Now I’m telling you this because you need to understand that Julian is

going to be there for you, Alea. When he says he’ll help, he means it with all of his heart.

You can trust him. I know that what you’re being asked to do is scary. But Julian has

your back. And so do I.”

 Alea knew this in her heart, but it made her feel even better to hear it out loud. She felt

the need to explain a bit about her situation.

 “I believe this. And I am scared, but honestly, I don’t think much is scary compared to

what I’ve been going through by myself at home.”

 Julian reached over to touch Alea’s shoulder.

 Liliana cleared her throat. “I could see there was a darkness growing inside you, Alea.

I have pretty good intuition, Mamá Lulita has helped me to develop this skill. I always

knew I was different, but I didn’t know it wasn’t just my sensuality. So I knew it when I

first saw you. But I also saw something else in you. I saw white light surrounding your

whole body. Angel energy. The white light of protection. I just know whatever happens,

you have something special and that all will be well.”

 Alea blinked away tears. She hoped Liliana was right. She had never really thought of

herself as special before. The three of them stood together quietly, no one uttering a

word.

Julian broke the silence “You do have something very unique, Alea. I’ve always

known that about you. Even when I was a little boy. Whatever you need, I will help you.

I only want you to be confident in what you choose to do. If you are ready to go back into

the forest, I will help you, guard you, do whatever it is that I am called upon to do to keep

you safe.”

 Alea knew this to be true. She could count on Julian, that was a given. But, would she

be able to carry out what she was being called to do? Or was she just an imposter playing

the part of something she didn’t really have the capability of accomplishing? Was she just

in some strange head space because of her recent diagnosis? Maybe these peculiar

dreams were driven by her anxiety about facing her own mortality combined with dealing

with her grandmother’s death.

 As if Liliana could see her thoughts churning through her mind, she offered some

words of comfort, “Everyone has self doubt at times. It’s part of being human, Alea.

Oftentimes the people who can recognize our potential most are the ones standing outside

of ourselves. Our ancestors, our family, our friends…even a stranger. You only have to

trust what others see in you is real. You get to choose whether to take that leap of faith or

not.”

**Chapter 15**

**Kingdom of the Sun**

*She called, "walk with me"*

*In day and night*

*We traveled*

*Beneath the sun and the moon*

*I heard the songs of people*

*Illuminated in the caverns*

*Of an earthen womb*

*I am Solar Strength,*

*Woman Spirit*

*Curandera of Great Magic*

*Transformative Divine*

*The Left Behind Tragic*

*She whispered to me*

*As she opened her Great Wings*

*And took to the sky*

*Leaving me brighter*

*My hands feeling lighter*

*Upon waking from that dream*

 Alea drew herself a bath to start a new day. The hot, steamy water felt welcoming as

she stepped into it. She reflected on the words Liliana had spoken to her before coming

back to her room the night before. Alea knew that of all people, Liliana had lived more

than most in the realm of self-doubt, what with everything she’d experienced in finding

her identity in life. Alea let the hot water soak away her fears and doubts as she prepared

herself for the journey into the mountain ahead. As she luxuriated in the water, she heard

another knock on the door and Liliana called her name on the other side of it.

 “Come on in, I’m in the tub,” Alea called.

 Liliana brought a tray of food into her room. Alea sniffed the aroma of a Mexican

breakfast and indeed, as she peeked over at what was on the tray, it was a plate full of

huevos moltuleños, one of her favorites that her grandmother made her as a little girl

here. The corn tortillas stacked with beans in between them, topped with ham, eggs over

easy and smothered in red sauce with a sprinkling of cotija cheese was making her mouth

water. Liliana saw the look of delight on Alea’s face as she brought a cup of hot tea and

set it on the edge of the tub.

 “Girl, leave it to Julian to ensure that you are well nourished for today and really any

day. He works his magic through his food, doesn’t he?” Liliana remarked as she peered

in at Alea’s body.

 Alea somehow wasn’t shy around Liliana. She felt at home as she took a sip of the

black tea with just a hint of fresh milk in it, while Liliana looked at her.

 “May I be so bold as to say, you have quite a beautiful body, Alea,” Liliana began, her

eyes lingering over Alea’s round breasts.

 “Well, my stunning friend, you are one to talk,” Alea responded, smiling.

 “Yes, I do love my body. Even if I had to augment it. But it feels like the me I was

supposed to be. I think every woman should love everything about their body, even its

flaws, which are really perfection, I believe. Each body is unique and why would anyone

want it to look the same as anyone else? It’s totally unfair that women are conditioned to

believe there is a beauty standard that they cannot attain. I always found that so

degrading, even when I was Gabriel. What matters is that you are grateful for your body

and all of the wonderful things it does for you. It houses your spirit. It helps you

accomplish amazing goals, walk through the world and experience how the wind feels

against it, the exhilaration of climbing a mountain, the way a kiss tastes on your lips. And

it can give you, and others, the most exquisite pleasure there is on this earth.” Liliana’s

voice lowered at the end of her last line.

 It was highly arousing, hearing Liliana speak so sensuously about bodies. Alea

blushed, her nipples hardened.

 Liliana moved closer to her and whispered in her ear, “May I kiss you?”

 Alea nodded her head. Liliana’s lips were hypnotic. They were soft on hers as she

kissed her. Liliana leaned in further to caress her breasts.

 “I thought you were into men?” Alea interrupted.

 “I thought you were, too, darling,” Liliana responded.

 “I am, but you turned me on,” Alea said, feeling a hot flush in her cheeks.

 “Oh, my beautiful Alea, I do that with most people. I am like that Xochipilli and

Xochiquetzal, all wrapped up in one. Two spirits, intertwined together, presented in

god/goddess form for the mere mortals on earth to understand in their simplicity. Doesn’t

that sound amazing? It does to me.”

 Alea smiled at that. She had friends who were transgender in the lab where she

worked back in Austin. Two spirits seemed like a very sacred understanding of the world.

More all encompassing of being human.

 “Well, I have to say, Julian is going to devour your beauty. Or perhaps you’ll consume

his. Either way, I’m glad I had a chance to kiss you beforehand. You are a marvelous

being. And I adore you. I’m so glad we are friends. I will protect you on your journey. I

have something to give you to help you along the way,” Liliana said.

 She pulled out the emerald, set beautifully in silver that Alea had noticed that first

time they had met.

 “This was given to me by Geraldo,” she began.

 “The guy was abusive to you?” Alea shrank back from it.

 “Yes. But it has sacred powers. Geraldo gave it to me as he felt it may protect me. He

told me I contained light.” Liliana looked down at the emerald, lost in a memory.

“I don’t understand, Liliana. Why would he want to protect you when he was abusive

to you?” Alea was confused.

 “Because people are conflicted and there aren’t always straight paths, love. Twin

Flame relationships are a push and a pull. They are contrasting and don’t always make

sense, but they serve a purpose. And somewhere, deep down, Geraldo did love me. He

gave this to me to protect me from his own worst self. In the end, it did protect me. I

wore it the day I left with Julian to come here. That day, as I packed all of the belongings

I could fit in one suitcase, Geraldo was supposed to come home early and I was going to

say goodbye to him. I knew in my heart of hearts that if I waited that we’d make up again

and start anew in our never ending cycle, that’s how pathetically toxic it was with him.

We were so drawn to each other and I wouldn’t be able to leave. But something pushed

me to not wait around for him, that I was to go and never return. I’m telling you, this

precious stone kept me safe and guided me. And it will keep you safe, too. I think I’ve

just been holding on to it until it found its rightful owner. And I think it is you, my dear,”

Liliana said, as she adjusted the silver chain around Alea’s neck.

 Alea felt a tingle as the emerald lay perfectly on the notch of her clavicle.

 “If you ever want to borrow it back, I am fine with that, you know,” Alea said as

Liliana kissed her cheek.

 “I may ask for it again, but for now, it is yours,” Liliana smiled and left her to finish

her bath.

 After washing her hair, Alea stepped out of the bath, dried off and relished her

breakfast while watching the sun rise higher in the sky. She felt more sure of herself

today. She dressed herself and readied herself for meeting Julian downstairs.

Julian packed leftovers from the night before to take with them on their journey into

the forest. They headed out together again. Only today was a perfectly clear day, no rain

in sight and they were starting out earlier in the day so that they could take their time

exploring the forest before returning to the sacred tree again.

 They headed back into the mountain and made their way up the same path they had

traveled before. Everything looked familiar and they were close to the area where the

immense oyamel stood. Alea could take in its majestic beauty in daylight. She touched its

smooth bark, recalling her strange dreamstate.

Julian softly interrupted her thoughts, “Let’s go higher up to the meadow and enjoy a

little time in the sun, the butterflies will be active with all of the sunlight. Itzpapalotl

appears when the sun sets. Let’s take time to enjoy the meadow, clear our minds and

return here later.”

 He offered Alea his arm and she took it as they hiked further up the mountain towards

the meadow. They climbed up through the thick trees and vines, the path changing from

rocky to dusty and eventually reaching the open meadow near the top. Alea sucked in her

breath, remembering how perfectly entrancing it was. She hadn’t traveled this far into the

sanctuary in years. As the sun shone brightly, a few butterflies blanketing the surrounding

trees began to glide through the meadow. Within minutes, thousands of them darted all

around the meadow in a dreamlike quality. The grass was green and fresh and the flowers

were resplendent, delighting in the light of the sun. Everything was alive and joyful.

Julian pulled Alea down onto the ground with him to sit and rest for a moment. They ate

the leftover Chiles en Nogada, which were even tastier than they had been the night

before, if that was possible. Julian pulled out a chocolate mousse after they were satisfied

with lunch. He spooned a creamy portion of it into Alea’s mouth. He watched her savor

its sweetness as she licked her lips. And then, without hesitating, he asked her if he could

kiss her. She answered him, pressing her lips against his.

 Julian gently began to unzip her jacket. Something rustled in the nearby branches of a

tree. Alea noticed a squirrel chasing another one out of the corner of her eye, but focused

her attention back on Julian’s art of undressing her. It was nothing like the way Rob had

done in their time together. Everything was more sensual, slower, more intentional. Her

jacket slid off of her body and fell to the ground. He unbuttoned her shirt, each button

giving way to her light mocha colored skin. The warm sun shone on her breasts and arms,

making her feel like one of the nearby flowers in the meadow. Julian carefully cupped her

breasts in his hands and kissed them, opening his mouth to warm them further with his

hot tongue, sliding over them with exquisite tenderness. With his attention on her breasts,

she couldn’t help but think about the tumor growing inside the left one, breaking the spell

momentarily. As if he could sense her thoughts, he looked sweetly into her eyes, resting

his cheek against hers in a gesture of comfort. A delightful feeling arose from deep inside

her as though she were the very wetness from the morning dew, sliding down like drops

on a blade of grass. Julian kissed her cheek, moving down to her ribcage and stomach.

His kisses were feather light, igniting so much warmth between her thighs. His breathing

was heavy, she could feel it on her skin, making her tremble with anticipation. She

wanted to see things through to their natural conclusion. He slowly inched her pants

down until they reached her ankles, where they could not go past her socks or her shoes.

She giggled at that as Julian smiled at her. He hovered over her as she lay on the ground,

placing his face level with her hips. He pulled her hips closer to his face and breathed her

in. His hot breath made her stomach flip. He kissed her through her panties, creating a

heady combination of her own juices and his mouth, which thoroughly soaked her. Her

heart was beating like the wings of a hummingbird caught inside of her. The sun shone

brighter on them, but she stopped him from going any further, feeling overwhelmed with

emotion. He sensed her hesitation and rolled to the side of her on the ground, wrapping

his arms around her.

 “Julian,” she panted heavily.

 “Yes, *amor*?”

 “You may not exactly want to go down on me right now…you know I’m still...” Alea

was flustered.

 “Bleeding?” Julian finished her sentence.

 She nodded as he began kissing her breasts again, moving back down to her stomach,

where he gazed up at her.

 “In the Aztec legends, blood magic is the most powerful magic there is. It binds lovers

for eternity.”

 Taking the top of her underwear between his teeth, he pulled her panties down,

nuzzling his mouth into her further. She lay on her back, casting her eyes upward to the

sky as he pleasured her magnificently, his tongue working to bring her to climax.

Hundreds of black and orange wings flitted about in the endless blue overhead as she

moaned with pleasure, but he didn’t stop after one time. He kept going and as he did, she

heard the sound of thousands of delicate wings beating all around them, coming and

going in waves, as if nature were in tune with her body. The sun poured over the two

lovers, as they themselves were now elements in the magical forest, made even more so

by the delicious tension between them. They spent the whole day exploring each other

with moments of rest under the sun in the meadow. It was pure bliss. Alea felt a warm

sensation at the base of her throat. She touched the emerald that lay there and heard

Liliana’s words from the morning echoing in her mind, “Your body can give you, and

others, the most exquisite pleasure there is on this earth.”

**Chapter 16**

**Hermanos**

*Light does not choose where it shines*

*She said*

*Or to whom it may fall*

*Knaves and doves*

*Are indistinguishable*

*In the shadows*

*And each of us can be swine transformed*

*To a pearl of light*

*That we once beheld*

 El Búho rushed to Mexico City to visit Rico. His driver took him to the exclusive

neighborhood of Santa Fe, where Rico’s living room faced the enormous La Mexicana

Park, a nearly 70 acre site that was relatively new to the city. The large, open air quarry

had once contained two sand mines, but now was a giant park surrounded by luxurious

condos, restaurants and paths for running. As Rico was an avid runner, he enjoyed living

within walking distance to the park in his high rise with a butler and bodyguards.

 El Búho was buzzed up to the top floor of the building and allowed into Rico’s place

by Ocho, one of his bodyguards. He got his name because he’d once killed eight people

in a bar fight. Now Ocho gave him the eye, as he always did. There was tension between

them as Ocho had vied for El Búho’s spot as second-in-command of the cartel since its

early inception, inflating himself in an attempt to become a more dominant player. Ocho

was waiting for his chance to take El Búho’s spot and held it over his head as much as he

could.

 “Your brother is in the middle of dealing with something. Is this an emergency? You

know he doesn’t like to be interrupted,” Ocho said.

 “It’s none of your business, but it is an emergency,” El Búho responded, ignoring

Ocho’s glare.

 “What happened now?” Ocho pressed.

 “That’s between me and Rico,” El Búho responded curtly.

 Ocho led him to the front room and left him there to wait on a hard marble bench. El

Búho looked around at the art on the walls facing him, noting the print of the nightmarish

Catharsis, a mural by Jose Clemente Orozco that could be found on the walls of the

Palace of Fine Arts. His brother had an enormous reproduction of this work of art framed

in gold, hanging prominently in his front room for awaiting guests. There was a lot going

on in the painting, what with dark visions of humanity plagued by conflict, decay, and

destruction. In particular, the figure of a laughing prostitute, provocatively lying on her

back surrounded by disembodied heads with their garish faces caught his eye.

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 Neither El Búho nor Rico were raised around much culture, but at the hotel where

they briefly worked for a time, Rico was drawn to the art hanging on the walls. He

particularly favored the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo paintings decorating the main

hallway, but he was specifically drawn to Orozco for his representation of class struggle

and violence. He related to it. After all, the two brothers had been brought up alone by

their single father who worked as a servant to a wealthy family. Their mother had left

when they were young and their father drank heavily when he wasn’t working, which

resulted in a lot of angry outbursts and physical violence with the boys. Rico protected

Geraldo but also bullied him, often taking out his anger at his father on Geraldo. And, as

Geraldo had never done well in school, he ended up dropping out at 13 to work full time.

Rico was older and began a job as a busboy at a posh hotel restaurant downtown near the

zócalo and convinced his boss that his younger brother could help with laundry services

behind the scenes. Geraldo landed the job and never stopped working since that day. The

two brothers got an apartment together as soon as they could to escape their miserable

father. Work, hustle, work, hustle. Rico promised Geraldo they would rise far above the

ranks of the peasant class one day, however they could. Soon, Rico had found ways to

make that happen, beginning with small-time drug hustles. But as he was determined, he

became the king of a much larger jungle.

 “He says you can go in now, only if it’s necessary,” Ocho appeared and told him,

bringing him back to the present

 “It is,” El Búho grumbled.

 Ocho led him into the dining room where it was clear Rico was in the middle of a

heated discussion with one of his men, Rodrigo. The mood was tense as El Búho waited

to speak.

 “So, I hear you fucked Montserrat,” Rico was saying as he cut up a pear.

 He was seated at the head of his long wooden table. Rodrigo sat at the other end,

staying silent. Slice. Slice. Slice. Rico cut three slender, half moon shaped pieces off of

the ripe green pear. Finally Rodrigo spoke.

 “I did, but jefe, I had no idea she was yours.”

 Rico got up, a tourné knife in his hand and told Rodrigo to get onto his feet and face

him like a man. Rodrigo rose and approached Rico.

 “I hope you liked it because she’ll be the last woman you fuck, *hijo de la chingada*,”

Rico said, as he reached up and carved Rodrigo directly above his left eyebrow.

It was a deep cut and blood began to trickle down to his face, then slid over to the side

of his cheek, rolling like tears down to his chin. Rodrigo winced but stood perfectly still.

El Búho knew where Rico wanted to cut next on Rodrigo’s body. They really couldn’t

afford to lose a guy like Rodrigo. He was very tough and took care of a lot of people that

got in the way of their operations. He intervened.

 “¡Hermano! Wait! Rodrigo is one of our best men. We are going to need him for the

shit that’s going down at the lab. I have things to report to you!”

 Rico paused. He normally didn’t let his passion get the better of him. His brother

brought his reason back to him as he cleared his throat and set down the knife. Usually he

was the one to keep steady, not his brother. He couldn’t lose it now. It was true that

Montserrat was just one of many of his ladies and wasn’t worth losing Rodrigo over.

Rodrigo was spared and Rico gestured for Ocho to lead him out so that he could have a

private conversation with his brother. El Búho reported the mysterious killings that

took place in the mountains.

 “Brother,” Rico spoke quietly, but sternly, “you and I both know these deaths can’t be

from something ordinary. You’re going to need to visit Don Dario.”

 As El Búho predicted, Rico was insistent about Don Dario. Rico passed a hand over

his salt and pepper pompadour and looked directly at El Búho with his large, dark eyes,

as he inquired about Chofo.

 El Búho responded with dread, “Chofo was one of them, yes.”

Rico’s jaw twitched, but he was not too distressed about any of the other guys. He

didn’t have to do any of the dirty work. Rico was now in a position that he could call the

shots from his gated castle.

 “I’ll get someone else to inform the other wives, but you must visit Isabel, personally.

Make sure she knows she’ll get some compensation for Chofo’s death and make sure she

knows it’s directly from me. This is priority number one,” Rico raised his thick eyebrows

at El Búho, ensuring he understood.

 El Búho nodded his head in compliance. He had to talk to Isabel first. He headed back

to the car and had his driver take him to the address given to him to speak to Chofo’s

widow.

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 El Búho was curious to meet the infamous Isabel and tried to prepare himself for

whatever her reaction would be as they traveled across the city to the address. He got

buzzed in through a security gate and knocked on the large, arched wooden door of

Chofo’s residence. A tiny, older woman answered the door.

 “A sus ordenes, señor,” she mumbled, her head bowed.

 “May I speak to the lady of the house, please?” El Búho asked the servant.

 She closed the door and left him standing on the porch, waiting for at least five

minutes. He shifted his weight, trying to think of how he would deliver the news to the

widow. He hoped his face looked sincere and sad. He tried to summon a feeling of

despair for the loss of Chofo, but he was aggravated that his brother had pulled him into

the cartel a year ago. Why Chofo? He’d always been a loose cannon. But Rico had told

him Chofo was fearless, and that was a good trait to have to work in a drug cartel. El

Búho felt like Chofo was fearlessly stupid, which was another thing entirely.

The door re-opened. Isabel stood in the doorframe. She was glorious. Her hair was a

coppery brown, cropped short with waves. She had tawny brown eyes, a few shades

lighter than her hair and her skin was a creamy light bronze. She shimmered like a gilded

painting. She was wearing a bright blue pantsuit and carrying a chihuahua. A single pearl

hung on a gold chain, right at her decolletage. El Búho had a hard time looking away

from the luminous pearl that danced upon the tops of her soft breasts as she moved to

close the door behind her.

 “Who are you? Is this about Chofo?” she hissed at El Búho.

 El Búho was stunned. He had obviously heard about the beauty of Isabel from just

about everyone, but he’d never actually seen her in person. She took his breath away. He

tried to focus his eyes on something other than her face, so he looked again at that damn

pearl, bouncing off of her ample breasts as she raised her voice at him and her breathing

increased.

 “Look, just tell me what the idiot did now. I know this is about him. He better not

have done something stupid or I’ll chop his damn balls off. Wait a minute…are you

Yasmin’s husband? Yeah, he’s been fucking her. I found her nasty panties under MY

bed. He fucked her in MY bed. Did he do that at your house, too?” asked Isabel, but all

El Búho could do was stare at that pearl, which was exactly where he wished his mouth

could be.

 The chihuahua began yapping. Isabel opened the door and shoved it back inside the

house, bending over to reveal just as ample a behind as breasts. The pantsuit accentuated

her small waist as she swiveled back around and crossed her arms over her chest,

squeezing her large breasts closer together, creating more cleavage.

 “Okay, mister. What the *chingada* is going on?” Isabel continued as she snapped her

fingers inches away from his face.

 He could smell her scent on her fingers. A light musky, sweet scent. He wanted to

place her pretty fingers around his dick.

 “*Hijole*,” she sighed, “would you stop staring at my tits, please.”

 El Búho finally snapped out of it. He had been so focused on how to delicately deliver

the news to Isabel about Chofo, he’d never considered that she might not even like her

husband nor that she’d be so damn sexy. He loved sultry women.

 “Excuse me, señora,” he started but didn’t get very far.

 “Señora? I’m not a señora. I mean I am married, but I’m still young. I’m not a

señora,” Isabel interrupted.

 “Isabel,” El Búho said her name. It sounded perfect in his mouth.

 She looked intently into his eyes. Her eyes were so beguiling. She softened.

 “Yes?” she responded, as if him saying her name shut her up for a minute.

 “Your husband, El Chofo, has died,” El Búho finally said. He waited for her reaction.

Isabel stood still. She was quiet and stared off into the distance for about a full minute.

“However, Rico wants you to know you will be receiving compensation. From him.”

El Búho added.

 The hint of a smile could be detected on her shapely lips. Isabel looked at him for

another long minute. Then, she drew herself up and cleared her throat.

 “Who are you, again?” she asked him, her eyes sparkling, a glimmer bouncing off of

them.

 El Búho felt a charge go up his back with that look from her.

“They call me El Búho, but you can call me Geraldo,” he answered.

Isabel gave him a straightforward stare and without hesitation commanded him, “I

need a good celebratory fuck, Geraldo. Come inside.”

 Geraldo was shocked, but obedient. He stepped inside the corridor. She directed him

to remove his shoes as she slipped her high heels off of her feet. She was a petite woman

without her heels on, but still had a large presence. She led him through another hallway

and up a spiral staircase. He watched her ass moving in a sumptuous manner as she

walked up the stairs ahead of him. When they reached the top, it opened up into a large

bedroom with marble floors. There were two large, arched windows on opposite sides of

the heavy, Spanish king size four poster bed. Isabel removed her pantsuit, peeling it off in

one fell swoop. She was not wearing anything underneath as she climbed onto the bed

and opened her legs.

 Geraldo could not believe what was happening. He took her in. She was magnificent.

Her skin glowed and her high cheekbones had a slight flush to them. Her pubic hair was

dark and lush. She was ready for him and he was ready for her. He began to unbutton his

white shirt when she noticed his scar.

 “Geraldo,” she spoke his name, sending more shivers through him.

 “Isabel,” he replied, still savoring the way the L made his tongue touch the top of his

teeth.

 “What is that on your chest?”

 Geraldo went from being at the ready to fuck Isabel all afternoon to a deflated state.

He looked down at the owl scar and remembered he still had yet to visit Don Dario and

that his brother would not be so keen on him having his way with Isabel. He began to

button his shirt back up and tucked it in.

 “Hey, what are you doing?” Isabel asked, very disappointed. “I really, really need

this,” she said, starting to slide her fingers into that perfect point between her legs.

Geraldo turned around so he could not see her and spoke to the door. “Isabel, there’s

nothing more I’d rather do at this moment in time than lick every inch of your body. But I

cannot. I have to do something first. I will be back, though.”

 He heard Isabel say, “What could you possibly have to do? I guess I’ll have to take

care of myself, then.”

 Geraldo began to descend the stairs and called back up to her, “You do what you need

to do, Isabel. But I promise I will be back and I will satisfy you like no other you’ve ever

met. Just give me a little time.”

 He could hear her moaning with pleasure as he slipped on his shoes and walked out of

the front door.

**Chapter 17**

**The Underworld**

*I came undone*

*In the undone world*

*Fragments and pieces*

*Misplaced, I thought*

*Until I walked on*

*And gazed again*

*At myself unfolded*

 Alea and Julian lay together, clothes strewn about nearby, under a soft blanket on the

fresh earth. Julian played with her milk chocolate-colored curls while she looked up at

the sun, which was now starting to disappear behind the tops of the trees. Out of the

corner of her eye she saw movement; a collective flutter of hundreds of wings moving

nearby. It sounded like rain falling on a bed of dried leaves. She stared up at the vivid

blue sky that contained sporadic streaks of orange and black moving above them.

 “They are so beautiful!” Alea pointed at the sky. He smiled and kissed her.

 “We spent this whole day,” Alea’s voice stopped and she blushed.

 Julian nodded his head, smiling mischievously at her. It was time to head back to the

tree. The day was nearly over, although it had only seemed like an hour had passed since

they’d arrived. He began searching for all of Alea’s clothing and she giggled watching

him wandering around naked, his ochre skin matching the mellow-brown light that

bathed the forest surrounding the meadow.

 He searched among the blue salvia plants to find her clothing, returning it to her. She

slid on her blouse with care and was zipping up her jacket as Julian was dressing himself.

He was dazzling in the dusky light of the evening sky and she wanted to stop and cover

his body with kisses once again, but the day was coming to a close. They packed up their

belongings and hiked back down to the spot where the giant tree gloriously stood. Alea

noticed the emerald warming up the closer she moved toward it.

 “I think I’m ready for this,” she whispered to him.

 “You are. It’s calling to you. I’ll be close and keep watch.”

 Alea moved in close to the imposing tree, glancing up at its many slender branches

stretching outward, the sky above now a dark, eggplant shade. She leaned up against the

smooth trunk. It felt right. Nothing happened, but the pendant was blazing with heat.

Without warning, she felt herself being pulled down into the roots, just like before. A

bright light glinted from the necklace and she felt a warm, inviting light encompass her

whole being as she was pulled even deeper into the earth. This time she was ready for her

descent, but it was not the same as before.

 Alea felt the cool dirt surround her whole body as she slid further below until she

found herself in an open space. It took a little bit of time for her to adjust to her

surroundings. She glanced down at her feet, which were now bare. In the distance she

heard the faint sounds of water running. She was drawn toward a stream, parting reeds

and vines as tall as her shoulders out of the way to reveal it. It ran peacefully beside her

now. She felt a strong urge to dip her feet in it, submerging in a toe. A jolt shot through

her entire body as both a mystical and precarious energy snaked up the entire length of

her back.

 “Hijas de estrellas,” she heard the words from her dream echoing in the air. Her head

was light as a fluttering, evocative of the monarchs, entered her body filling her with a

trembling sensation under her navel. Everything around her seemed to be charged with

electricity. She rubbed her eyes as a heavy mist covered the entirety of the stream. The air

was eerily still. Something began to emerge from the middle of the mist-covered water, in

the form of what appeared to be a woman. Alea blinked her eyes to confirm what she was

seeing. From the depths of the water, a yard or so away from her, a woman with an

otherworldly beauty rose to the surface. Her hair was long and black, shiny and slick

against her head and shoulders. A pair of bright red lips gave her an enticing, yet

dangerous expression. Her cinnamon skin was adorned with black and red floral paint

while a crown of lotus flowers and eagle feathers stood proudly atop her head. It was

clear this was not just a woman, but a powerful creature. Drops of water ran down from

her shoulders to her arms, all the way to her fingertips, making her skin glisten. She

nearly glided to the edge of the bank, sending ripples throughout the water. As she

approached, Alea tried to back away, but she was unable to move. Remaining still, she

awaited what came next, knowing she was in the presence of a goddess.

 She summoned up her courage to speak, “What is this place?”

 The goddess opened her mighty arms, sweeping them around, the muscles flexing in

her shoulders powerfully.

 “We are in the Kingdom of the Sun of the West, the setting sun. This is my dominion

and the place where the women who have died in childbirth come to after death. They are

the Tzitzimimeh who carry the sun into Mictlán as fierce goddesses, as they are powerful

warriors who have fought great battles. I am here to guard them until they leave to visit

earth as hummingbirds and monarchs each year. Like Itzel, you have come to seek my

help.”

 Suddenly, a pair of massive wings expanded beautifully behind her, sending the

remaining mist away instantly. Alea could feel the wind from her wings rushing by her

face.

 “You are here to unearth your ancestors,” Itzpapalotl continued, opening her hand as

monarch butterflies flew into the air. They danced like little fairies all around her.

Itzpapalotl took notice of the gleaming emerald on Alea’s neck and a flash of darkness

moved across her face. Her nails extended into claws, momentarily revealing a terrifying

glimpse into her fierceness. Alea clutched the emerald and felt a burst of energy

physically move her, like a shockwave

 “Where did you get that emerald? It is from my temple.” Itzpapalotl said, moving

closer to Alea.

 Alea felt such an acute ferociousness flowing from the goddess, it was dizzying. She

closed her eyes to steady herself. Her head pounded. She thought of her grandmother’s

healing hands soothing hers the last time she saw her. She summoned up a fearlessness

she did not know she had within her to speak.

 “A friend gave it to me, but it was given to her.”

 Itzpapalotl now stood over her and carefully inspected the gemstone. Alea held herself

very still, sensing a vulnerability in Itzpapalotl’s presence. She breathed sharply, forcing

herself to remain calm. In her mind she was transported to the clinic during her PET scan

before coming to Mexico. She flashed back to how still she had to be in the machine, as

still as she was now. There she had been alone with just the sounds of whirring, like birds

in flight, surrounding her with radioactivity to inspect the insides of her being. Here,

there was an equally daunting entity examining her. It felt surreal.

 “A borrowed treasure. Its purpose is to protect and you have been granted this,”

Itzpapalotl suddenly stated emphatically. “You are much changed, Alea. Like your

ancestor, Itzel, within you is the supernatural strength required for what lies ahead in your

path.”

 Alea was unconvinced that she truly did have what it took for the many uncertainties

that awaited her, both here and in Texas. Itzpapalotl brought forth a silvery material and

placed it over Alea. She looked down and was stunned to see herself disappear.

 “This is my Veil of Invisibility. Use it to keep yourself hidden from both gods and

mortals, when you return in two days’ time,” Itzpapalotl advised, disappearing back into

the depths of the stream, which ran red with blood now.

 At once Alea felt the air shift. A cool breeze lifted her hair off of her face. She folded

up the veil and stepped back completely onto the loamy soil near the edge of the stream,

checking to see if there was blood on her feet. But the blood was gone and only clear

water ran in the stream now. She turned, moving back through the reeds and came face to

face with an exceptionally beautiful woman with dark eyes and skin. Alea gasped. Her

profile looked like her mother’s. The woman spoke.

 “Do not doubt yourself. Arise, like the women before you. You have a warrior’s heart,

you will see. In two day’s time, you will return to the forest. It will become clear what

you need to do, trust yourself. The demise of the monarchs is imminent. You are here to

save them, and in turn, save yourself.”

 Alea was mesmerized by her presence, noticing the white huipil with a colorful sash.

It was a traditional long, shift-like blouse worn by Aztec women and she knew this must

be Itzel.

 “You must keep the oyamel forest safe for it is being destroyed,” her ancestor

continued, “And if they disappear, so will we. Without us, everything will die. Our

memories, the butterflies, the people.”

 With that, she leaned in and kissed Alea softly on the cheek. Her lips were as gentle

and loving as her grandmother’s. Alea felt a surge of energy move through her as Itzel

turned and walked away. Closing her eyes, she lay on the soft ground, feeling depleted.

“I just need a little rest,” she told herself.

 But she was back at the base of the tree in no time. For just a brief moment, it was as

if she were floating above her body, looking down upon herself, arms outstretched with

Julian standing close by to her. And suddenly her spirit was funneled swiftly back into

her being as she felt herself returning.

**Chapter 18**

**The Ring**

*They said "you won't make it back"*

*Fare thee well*

*"You will be dead to me" I heard*

*But death begets a new life*

*For inside a chrysalis*

*A being dissolves*

*Unrecognizable, one might say*

*I don't think I made it back*

*To where I was*

*The world is not as it was before*

 Liliana was gathering the yellow marigolds from the buckets in the courtyard to bring

into the church where Mamá Lulita and Father Maldonado were. The twinkling lights

leading into the arched doorway of the church were brightening the courtyard in the dark.

Inside was an elaborately decorated altar with candles, picture frames of deceased loved

ones, food offerings, flowers and ceramic skulls. The first of November was near and all

of the townspeople were preparing for Día de Los Muertos.

 As Liliana began arranging the flowers with Mamá Lulita, they heard footsteps

approaching. Eduardo Muñoz, the police chief, strode towards them.

 His handlebar mustache twitched as he said, “Pardon my intrusion, ladies, but we’ve

been talking to the community and asking around for a bit of help. We’ve found a piece

of evidence we are sharing from the murder scene, in hopes of some clues.”

Liliana and Mamá Lulita looked at one another, then back at him.

 Chief Muñoz adjusted his round glasses on his plump face and looked down at the

notes scribbled in a battered little notepad. “As you have heard, the reports reveal that six

bodies were found, dismembered and with their hearts removed. We still can’t determine

who they were, but we did find this and we are checking to see if anyone has any leads

for us from it.”

 Chief Muñoz held up a bag with something glinting inside it. Liliana could make out

the circular shape of a ring. She peered closer and noted the engraved wings. It was a

bird, and more importantly, it was in the shape of an owl. Her heart sped up. She felt like

this was somehow connected to Geraldo, remembering him speaking about owls before

she left Mexico City. Mamá Lulita looked at the ring and asked him if she could have a

closer look. He handed her the bag and she moved it around in between her fingers

through the plastic.

 Handing it back to him, Mamá Lulita quietly said, “This belongs to los traficantes de

drogas. Los Hermanos.”

 Chief Muñoz gave her a quizzical look, responding, “What makes you think that? It’s

what we suspect, but we are trying to determine who did this, exactly. We do have

information from the police in Mexico City that the Los Hermanos drug cartel is cooking

up meth in the mountains nearby.”

 Liliana felt a strange squeezing sensation in her chest upon hearing this. She closed

her eyes and tried to find her footing.

Father Maldonado, who had been listening nearby, responded to Chief Muñoz,

 “Mamá Lulita knows with her connections to spirit. I will hold a prayer service for

protection.”

 Chief Muñoz responded, “We’ll have extra patrols close by just in case. If you hear

anything more, please let me know. We are here to help. Stay out of the mountains after

dark.”

 With that, he left, and Father Maldonado gave Mamá Lulita a look, as did Liliana.

Mama Lulita crossed herself and cleared her throat to say, “We know Alea was able to

summon Itzpapalotl, but now I am certain this cartel will be looking for some magic of

their own to use, if they haven’t already. They will know there’s no other way to fight

back. I know who they will summon.”

 Father Maldonado crossed himself, too.

 “Who will they summon?” Liliana asked.

 “If that ring is a sign, which I gather it is, it will be Techlotl,” Mamá Lulita said.

Liliana waited to hear more, and Father Maldonado provided it.

 “Techlotl is one of the gods that resides in one of the nine layers of the Underworld.

He is associated with owls. He helps the Lord and Lady of Mictlán collect their dead.”

 Liliana asked, “Owls?”

 She could hear the voice of Geraldo in her head mentioning them when he gave her

the emerald necklace, making the hair on her head stand up.

 Then she asked, “The same underworld as Itzpapalotl?”

 “No, mijita. There are different underworlds, depending on how a person dies. Mictlán

is the place where the typical dead go to-old age, accidents and so forth. Remember that

Itzpapalotl resides in Tamoanchán—the underworld for women who died in childbirth or

from female diseases. You see, there are different underworlds based on how you die.

Techlotl will want his prizes if the cartel summons him. Alea will need as much

protection as possible. I wonder if she and Julian are back from their journey, yet?”

Mamá Lulita pondered.

 They finished placing the flowers around the altar and carried the extras to place at the

nearby gravesites in the town cemetery.

Father Maldonado spoke while they were placing the marigolds on Juana’s grave,

 “You know the story of the marigold?”

 “Tell me,” Liliana responded, as she made a heart pattern on the fresh earth with the

orange and golden petals.

 “The marigold, known as cempasúchil in Nahuatl, was a combined word meaning

twenty, (cemposalli) and (xochitl) flower. In other words, marigolds were “flower of

twenty petals”. Legend has it that they were miraculously gifted to the Nahua by

Tonatiuh, their sun god, to honor their dead, which is why they are still used to this day to

celebrate the Day of the Dead,” he answered.

 Mamá Lulita smiled, adding, “Juana told me that story, too. You hear that? We are

honoring you, mi amiga.”

 Mamá Lulita asked Liliana to accompany her back to her house from the little

cemetery. They made their way there, where she’d been preparing a caldo on the

stovetop. Along the winding road in the dark, they spotted two silhouettes off in the

distance approaching. It was Alea and Julian. Despite the darkness, Liliana sensed light

radiating all around them, especially around Alea.

 “You were gone the entire day! Chief Muñoz came by the church and said to stay

away from the mountain after dark,” Liliana warned.

 “That may not be possible. I have much to share with you both,” Alea said, “But first,

I need to eat. I am famished.”

 “I have caldo. We’ll eat together and share stories,” Mamá Lulita stated as they

followed her to her little cottage.

 The rich smell of broth greeted them as they entered the house. It was still warm on

the stovetop. Julian dished it into 4 bowls. The savory chicken and vegetable soup filled

their stomachs with satisfaction. Julian heated up some of Mamá Lulita’s corn tortillas to

place in the center of the table. When everyone was satiated, Mamá Lulita lit the candles

surrounding the altar in the living room as they gathered into that space.

 Alea began speaking: “I met the goddess. She appeared to me and gave me something

for protection when I return in two days to the mountains.”

 Alea held up the silvery cloak and placed a hand under it, which disappeared

completely. Liliana gasped.

 “*Caramba*, that’s amazing!” she exclaimed.

 Mamá Lulita added, “In two days we will be celebrating Día de Los Muertos, an

auspicious time for traveling between the two worlds.”

 Alea continued, “Itzel showed up. She told me I would know what to do to protect the

oyamel trees. She said if they die, everything dies. The butterflies will disappear and so

will all of our memories here.”

 Mamá Lulita’s eyes shone with tears. Julian stepped close to his grandmother to

embrace her.

 “What exactly will you need to do, Alea?” Liliana asked.

 “Oh!” Alea went on, touching the emerald pendant, sidetracking her response. “This is

from Itzpapalotl’s temple, she told me it found me!”

 Liliana arched an eyebrow and remarked, “How did Geraldo get that? That is so

strange.”

 “He gave that to you?” Julian asked Liliana, astounded.

 Liliana nodded. Mamá Lulita seemed to connect the dots. She spoke.

 “I think I know. When you first came here, Liliana, I worked on you many, many

times to help you release the *heridas abiertas* (open wounds) you had in your soul. I

remember you mentioning that Geraldo, the one who spoke to you of dark magic and

owls, gave you the emerald that Alea now wears. As you remember me saying, Liliana,

Techlotl, the god of the Underworld is represented by the owl.”

 Liliana, “Yes, he told me it would provide me protection. And it did. I was guided to

give it to Alea.”

 Mamá Lulita paused to draw a breath. She continued, “Yes, and I know this stone. It

has a very long story. It surfaced from the underworld through dark magic, but it only

contains light magic. Suffice it to say, I am not surprised by its journey from you to Alea,

Liliana. Keep it safe.”

 Alea tucked it under her shirt, still unsure of the complete story. Liliana was thinking

more about what Mamá Lulita had said earlier about Techlotl and the cartel. The image

of the silver ring with the owl on it came into her mind.

 “Oh my god,” Liliana began, “Geraldo must be a part of Los Hermanos. I know he is.

I feel it. That explains why I felt like I was being suffocated when I saw that ring. Maybe

he is closer than I ever thought possible.”

 Julian placed a protective arm around Liliana and reassured her, “He has no idea you

are here, Liliana. And if he’s a part of that cartel, he’s probably not even here. Or maybe

he was one of those men who was killed. He wouldn’t come into the town. They have no

reason to come here.”

 Mamá Lulita slipped her hand into Liliana’s and said, “You are stronger now. He

cannot hurt you. It is time for us to drink some chamomile tea and rest. All of us have had

a long day.”

 Mamá Lulita shuffled into the kitchen to find the chamomile and put on the kettle.

“All will be as it should be,” she said to nobody in particular.

**Chapter 19**

**Passages**

*Perhaps this is where*

*I found myself*

*Or maybe I was fully aware*

*Of choosing to head left*

*Where right was the "way" to go*

*When I happened upon that cleft*

*Through my wanderings I see*

*That no path is perfect*

 El Búho headed straight to El Péndulo. He was not thrilled about facing Don Dario again, but there was really no choice. Rico insisted. He still had the image of Isabel lingering in his mind. He could see her eyes, not quite a golden color, looking into his, pleading with him to stay while inviting him into her bed. He shook his head to get her face and body out of his mind. He had to remain focused on this next task.

 The song, *Nunca Es Suficiente,* was playing in the car while his driver drove him through the city to the Polanco neighborhood.

*Nunca es suficiente para mí*

*Porque siempre quiero más de ti*

*Yo quisiera hacerte más feliz*

*Hoy, mañana, siempre, hasta el fin*

*(It's never enough for me*

*Because I always want more of you*

*I would like to make you happier*

*Today, tomorrow, always, until the end)*

 He’d seen this song performed years ago and it occurred to him that the singer, Natalia Lafourcade, had that same cropped hairstyle as Isabel. He smacked himself on the cheek. Everything was reminding him of Isabel. He told the driver to change the music.

 The driver finally dropped him off at 81 Alejandro Dumas, in front of the *cafebrería.* The greenery surrounding the entrance was especially verdant as he entered. He swept past the cashier with skeleton masks decorations on the counters. It was a bustling day at the bookstore. The swinging pendulum moved in circles as a child watched it, mesmerized. The shelves surrounding it contained books about Día de Los Muertos and posters of the classic *La Catrina* by the famous illustrator José Guadalupe Posada hung in the air. He moved through groups of people, literary trinkets and vases with marigolds set out for the upcoming celebration. Their musky pungency with a hint of ripe apples reached his nose, reminding him of that scent on Isabel’s pretty fingers. Abruptly he turned into the café section to grab a hot coffee to distract him. He had to stop thinking of her. It was dangerous to do so now. He needed to remain centered.

 “*Buenos Días*,” chirped the young cashier.

 “*Un cafecito*,” El Búho grumbled.

 “You sure you don’t want anything to go with it? *Pan dulce*?”

 “No. Just get me a coffee. Black.” El Búho had no time for extras at the moment.

 “Like your heart,” the cashier mumbled under his breath, fetching the coffee.

 El Búho sipped the dark coffee, a jolt of caffeine giving his mind a pleasant break from his task at hand. He headed up the stairs, looking for the velvet sofa where Don Dario usually sat. As he approached the space, he noticed Don Dario finishing up a conversation with a young goth couple dressed in all black. He wondered if they were making the same kind of deals with dark magic that he had once upon a time. The guy ran his tattooed hand through his long black hair before shaking Don Dario’s hand, then put his arm around his girlfriend as they walked in the opposite direction.

 Don Dario glanced over at El Búho and waved.

 “*Buenos tardes*, Don Dario.”

 “It’s been awhile, I knew you’d be back.” Don Dario moved closer and stuck out his hand to shake El Búho’s. He had a firm grip, as always.

 “What are you in need of today?” Don Dario asked.

 “My brother is requesting your help for protection,” El Búho stated.

 “Your brother? Then, he can come here and ask for himself,” Don Dario commented smugly, pivoting away as though looking for a book in the esoteric shelf.

 “No, I am to make the request, actually,” El Búho stated.

 Don Dario turned back to face him and stepped uncomfortably closer to El Búho. El Búho could feel the owl brand on his chest burning.

 “Well, what kind of protection is it that you need? As I recall, you already know some things about Techlotl.” Don Dario looked directly into El Búho’s eyes.

 “Is there a way to summon Techlotl to help combat another supernatural presence?” El Búho asked.

 “What kind of supernatural presence are we talking about?” Don Dario inquired, his eyebrows arched.

 “Six of our men were found massacred in the mountains near our lab. It could not be the result of humans. And their hearts were cut out.” El Búho stated.

 Don Dario’s pupils dilated and he looked off into the distance. He wandered back to the bookshelf and searched around for something. He returned to El Búho with a book on Aztec deities in his hand. He flipped to a page with a depiction of a beautiful Aztec woman with long black hair and painted red lips.

 “This is your culprit,” he pointed to the picture.

 “A woman?” El Búho asked incredulously.

 “Oh, this is no ordinary mortal. This is the butterfly goddess, Itzpapalotl, in human form. Those mountains are where her female warriors return to each year in the form of monarch butterflies. Right about now, in fact. She’s particularly strong at night and she protects them, but she had to have been summoned. You’re dealing with someone very powerful who knows how to do this,” Don Dario said.

 An elderly woman walked by, glancing strangely at Don Dario. He gave her a nasty stare and she crossed herself quickly, heading straight to the stairs to scurry away.

 “Okay, how do we protect our facility and our men out there?” El Búho whispered desperately.

 “You just have to get rid of whoever is summoning her. Or you simply summon Techlotl himself.” Don Dario said casually, as if he were talking about a menial task like washing dishes. He took the book from El Búho and returned it back to the shelf.

 “How would I find the person summoning her? Or summon Techlotl?” El Búho asked, not feeling like he was going to like the answers to these questions.

 “Oh, my friend,” Don Dario began, coyly glancing at El Búho’s chest, “You are already in debt to Techlotl. Remember the necklace? You can summon him, but you’d need that emerald, as he’ll want that. I can help you with the summoning part, but you’ll need to fetch the emerald first. Of course, as you recall, the love spell you once needed help with would be unbroken if you get it back. And he’d own your soul. It’s complicated.” Don Dario had a hint of a smile on his lips and seemed to enjoy this dilemma of El Búho’s.

 “So what choices do I have? I can find out who is summoning Itzpapalotl, which seems like a stretch, and get rid of him,” El Búho began.

 “Him? Ha! No man would dare summon her,” Don Dario interrupted.

 “Why?”

 “Because she is vicious to men, especially men who mess with her loved ones or territory.”

 “So it’s a woman. I have to find a particular woman who summoned her.” El Búho continued, “but that’s going to be hard to figure out!”

 Don Dario laughed coldly. “Exactly, just get the emerald back and I’ll come to summon Techlotl. Here are the words you must use when you have it.” He handed El Búho a small piece of paper. El Búho opened it up to find a phrase in Nahuatl.

 “What does this mean?” El Búho asked.

 “Nevermind what it means, just say the words and I’ll be there,” Don Dario sneered.

 El Búho tucked it carefully inside his wallet.

 “But I will belong to him. What does that entail?” El Búho tried to imagine what that could mean.

 “Oh, it’s not so bad. Techlotl may choose to have you as his servant in the Underworld when you die. He may not. He’s a fickle god. But you’ll only get my help to summon him once. You get one shot….but you’ll still have a problem. Once you take the emerald back, you reverse that spell you broke to begin with and you’re back to square one. But maybe that’s not so bad.” Don Dario ran through this scenario as if it were easy.

 El Búho thought about it some more. “What if I find the emerald and kill Liliana so I don’t fall back in love with her?”

 “Interesting strategy,” Don Dario looked genuinely impressed. “Quite a game of chess you’re setting up for yourself, very intricate with multiple moves. You’d be able to have exactly what you desire, but with a little blood on your hands. You just need to find her. How will you do that?”

 El Búho was wondering the same thing. He had an idea of how to find Liliana. He recalled the chef at the restaurant near the apartment where they had lived together years ago. He could start there.

 “I think I will try, at least,” El Búho told Don Dario.

 Don Dario smiled a knowing smile. “Good luck to you.”

 El Búho turned to mumble a thank you to Don Dario, but he had vanished. El Búho rubbed his eyes and searched the entire upstairs of the bookstore, but the *brujo* was no longer there, although the scent of jasmine still lingered.

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 Don Dario reappeared out of nowhere at his favorite *boulangerie* down the street from El Péndulo to enjoy a strawberry *macaron*. He had an affinity for shrewd people, for he was one, thinking back to a time when he himself imagined he could escape a similar dilemma. It was, after all, ironic. He had developed the ability to disappear and reappear whenever and wherever he liked, thanks to his long history with the dark arts, but certain situations he could not disappear from, no matter what. Over the many years he had walked the earth, he’d come to accept the fact that fate was the most exacting mistress he’d ever met.

**Chapter 20**

**Juana**

*I sometimes feel I drift between two worlds*

*one is*

*where time is not a binding entity*

*where cataclysmic waves are waiting to be traveled fearlessly*

*and the sky is fully present*

*broadened chances that aren’t hampered by clouds*

*heavy with water molecules*

*the other is some projected world*

*stifled by the densely packed*

*minute hands and man made dimensions of too much talking*

*but I choose the former*

*with streams and rocks and ants*

*who know better*

 Mamá Lulita watched Julian and Alea rush off and slowly pushed the heavy black stone *molcajete* aside after using the mortar and pestle to grind up herbs. She went into her healing garden to feel Juana’s spirit. She searched for the lavender that Juana had given to her just for her before she fell into her last bout with illness.

 Juana’s lungs were weak from years of respiratory irritations from the poisons that had been used in the fields, before the locals learned to keep their crops healthy with the natural way to balance the ecosystem using tobacco plants. The pneumonia she acquired was too much for her aging body to fight and she acquiesced to it. In the weeks before Juana passed, she had given Mamá Lulita seedlings from the hearty lavender strain that had spread throughout her garden, too. The truth was, everything Mamá Lulita knew about the plants she had learned from Juana when they were young women. As both Lulita and Juana were young widows, they had formed a close bond over the years, telling each other their secrets and continuing the rituals of the sisterhood that their mothers had taught them.

 Once upon a time they were younger, with firmer bodies and better eyesight. And Juana’s eyes had seen into the soul of a man who visited their village, seeking Juana’s counsel with a curse that had been set upon him from childhood.

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 They were in their late forties when a stranger from Mexico City visited Juana for advice. Her healing work, especially in the arena of love, was widely talked about throughout the region. Juana told Lulita about the tall, striking man with ice blue eyes who smelled of jasmine that had arrived seeking care.

 “Lulita, I’m going to need your help with this one. He has a lot of *susto*, more than anyone I’ve ever seen. In fact, I believe there is something beyond his grief and fright working against him. I believe he’s been cursed for a generation.”

 Lulita nodded her head and gathered her materials from her cottage and returned quickly. Juana and Lulita placed the man on the crimson *rebozo* that had been blessed by Father Maldonado. Lulita began by placing her hands at his feet while Juana swept his tall body with the rue and lavender from her garden. Juana chanted her prayers over his spirit as Lulita felt shocks moving through her hands. Juana was right. This man had blockages throughout his energetic field, but especially in the heart region, which felt like black smoke covering any remnant of love that resided there. Juana placed her hands over his chest, which was big and wide. Lulita closed her eyes and saw two large yellow eyes peering in as a grieving woman stood by his left side. She felt Juana’s hands join hers as they moved their hands in circles around his chest to release the heavy energy that was stuck in that spot. Suddenly, the two eyes materialized and with them appeared the heart shaped face of a barn owl. The owl spirit stood stubbornly in his spot.

 The message was, “He is in my realm. Leave.”

 Lulita heard Juana ask aloud, “Who are you?”

 The owl spirit answered, “I am Techlotl’s messenger. He cannot be released. His mother gave him to us. It is his path.”

 Juana continued to probe, “Why would a mother do this?”

 The owl spirit responded, “A mother will do whatever she must to protect her child. You know this, you are a mother. Techlotl wanted to take him, but she offered herself instead. He gifted her the exchange under the condition that her son would find his way, but through Techlotl himself.”

 Lulita felt ripples of darkness move through her hands and into her spine. She shivered with a chill that she could not escape.

 Juana drew in a deep breath and blew it into the man’s heart. The owl disappeared and the grieving mother appeared. Lulita felt the deep sadness in her bones.

 Juana spoke to the mother spirit, “Can you right this wrong against nature, the greatest mother of all?”

 The mother shook her head and covered her face in shame and sorrow.

 Then she peered out into the face of Juana and quietly pleaded, “Can you right it for me? You are a mother. You understand, do whatever you can.”

 Juana offered, “I will do what is permitted.”

 The mother spirit disappeared, and with it so did the heavy feeling of despair. Lulita moved her hands over the entirety of the man’s body as Juana shook a rattle over him, diluting the residual darkness surrounding him. The two women completed the healing and closed the sacred space, bringing the man back to a waking state. Lulita opened the windows, lighting the copal which sent a sweet smokiness permeating into the room. A breeze moved through, dissipating the scent while the chimes hanging by the kitchen window tinkled gently. Juana looked into the man’s eyes, as they were blinking open. He spoke.

 “I feel better than I did before I arrived. What happened?”

 Juana’s dark eyes gleamed as she answered him, “You do indeed have a family curse set upon you. I have done what I could to release what I have the power to do. Perhaps I can do more. You will need to rest further tonight. Can you do that?”

 The man had a handsome face and looked to be very close in age to Juana.

 He stared up at her with piercing blue eyes as he inquired, “Is there room for me to stay here to rest for the night?”

 Lulita glimpsed Juana’s face from the corner of her eyes. She saw Juana's facial expression change when she noticed something alluring on the man. Lulita couldn’t make out what it was and gave Juana a sideways stare. Juana looked over at Lulita directly. Lulita shrugged her shoulders, knowing Juana had already decided yes, they could read each other's minds by now. Lulita offered to keep young Marco and Marisol at her house for the night and gathered them. Lulita pulled Juana aside before leaving her house.

 “At least let Father Maldonado stay here, too,”

 “*Amiga,* I will be okay,” Juana replied, squeezing Lulita’s hand.

 Lulita knew it would not be proper for a widow to house a strange man for a night, but she also knew Juana didn’t worry about that. Juana was a powerful *curandera* and commanded respect from the community. Lulita quietly left with the children.

 Juana looked back at the stranger, continuing to scan an emerald hanging on the man’s neck. It flickered at her. It looked familiar. What’s more, it *felt* familiar to her. She would put this man up for the evening and stay up sorting out her plants, herbs and continue the healing. She’d needed to do this for the mother spirit.

 Her eyes met his as she ordered him, saying, “You may stay for one night. I will prepare the room for you while you wait outside in my garden. I will bring you a cleansing herbal tea. I expect you to stay in the room and rest after that.”

 The stranger nodded his head compliantly. “I will obey everything you ask of me, I feel lighter already. I know you have powerful medicine,” he said to Juana.

 He acknowledged all of her conditions.

 Juana added, “You have not told me your name.”

 “Oh, I thought I did,” he replied. “My name is Dario.”

**Chapter 21**

**Plant Magic**

*I heard the soft sound of those delicate chimes*

*And suddenly I was there*

*Those warm springtimes*

*Walking, walking in my garden fair*

*The rosemary, sticky with its scent*

*The artemesia, silvery and light*

*No plant I touched was discontent*

*The proud lavender, standing upright*

*In that garden, was I there?*

*Were those days carefree before?*

*I wondered that as I lay here*

*Time is a revolving door*

*Nature's fractals I have seen*

*In that garden where I stepped*

*The leaves outstretched and deeply green*

*A lovely place where I have wept*

 Juana turned off the whistling kettle and located the *cascara sagrada* in her dried herb collection on her kitchen shelves. She scooped some of it into a strainer and poured hot water over it into a large mug, while gazing out the window. She observed this stranger named Dario wandering in her garden, stroking the lavender and the rosemary that were growing tall in the late afternoon sun. She placed the mug on a tray with a glass of water and headed out into the garden.

 “Your garden is lush,” Dario said, his blue eyes seeing into her.

 “It is. I am in tune with my plants and I’ve learned better methods to keep pests away without hurting them. I’m trying to teach this to the nearby farmers,” Juana responded as she handed Dario the mug of hot tea.

 “It seems you know how to manage the dangerous irritations in life,” Dario stated, raising an eyebrow.

 He was fascinated by Juana. She was mysterious and powerful. He did feel much better after the *limpia*, but there was a lingering pain. For eight years he’d suffered the loss of his beloved, Berenise. Just when he thought he’d recovered from grieving her a year ago, there had been a visit with her. For, as Techlotl had promised, he had the opportunity to see her every seven years. Seeing her again had opened up a wound that had nearly closed. In a last ditch effort to heal his recently renewed heartbreak, he’d sought out the help of Juana, hoping she could relieve him of this curse.

 “Sip this slowly. It will continue to cleanse you,” Juana responded, quietly looking away from his intense gaze.

 She had it timed just right so that in a couple of hours he’d begin feeling the effects of the tea. It would ensure that he kept his hands to himself that night. She had a feeling about him as there was a hint of lust creeping into his aura. It was not uncommon. She knew he, like other men, mistakenly thought that romance with her would help relieve the heartsickness. It didn’t help that Juana used her powerful femininity to work her magic or that she contained an air of mystery about her. Or that she was unmarried. However, she was not unsatisfied in the love department.

 Father Maldonado, the young priest in the village, had arrived a few months ago. From the beginning, he’d been a great admirer of Juana and Lulita. He’d offered to bless their healing rooms within their homes and had been not only tolerant but also very accepting of their rituals, unlike that curmudgeon, Father Dominguez, who thankfully died peacefully in his sleep earlier that winter.

 Father Maldonado was a Jesuit, fresh out of the seminary and had been placed at the church to run things. He was modern, philosophical and accepting, as well as protective of his community and the land. The town grew to adore him, as did Juana. Even though there was a 14-year age difference between them, they shared many similarities. Father Maldonado was himself a gardener and expanded the tiny, neglected herb and plant garden by the church into a large, thriving oasis. He took up the cause of decreasing the chemical pesticides used in the surrounding valley after witnessing the related respiratory illnesses many of the locals experienced, including Juana.

 But one commonality that could not be denied was that Father Maldonado also contained a very powerful, healing energy that went beyond the bounds of any man-made religion. He and Juana shared many conversations and strategies on how to heal others in need. He found himself visiting her more often than others, but as they were both revered in the community, no one thought anything unusual of it. Only Lulita knew about their secret love and she kept it to herself. Lulita knew it would be best to alert him about this stranger staying in Juana’s house for the evening, as Father Maldonado would provide the protection Lulita sensed Juana may need.

 “Where did you get this?” Juana looked at Dario directly as she beheld the emerald peeking out from under his guayabera.

 “It’s a strange, long story, but suffice it to say it came from the Underworld,” Dario answered, returning a penetrating stare into Juana’s eyes. What was it about those dark eyes that seemed so familiar to him?

 “Who gave it to you?” Juana asked.

 “A woman I both raised and loved for a while on this earth. Her name was Berenise,” Dario replied, adding, “It holds no power for me, but perhaps it will for you.”

 He handed her the stone, then she led him back inside to the living room.

 “Why would you say so?” Juana inquired, looking closely at the dark green color, reminding her of the color of the oyamel leaves.

 She went into her bedroom and reappeared with a thin, long silver chain. She removed the emerald from the tattered velvet ribbon it had been hanging on and replaced it with the chain. Dario watched her nimble fingers work quickly. Light shone all around her, just as it had with his beloved.

 “I would say so, because you have light magic. As did Berenise,” he stated.

 Juana looked carefully at Dario. She could see dark magic surrounding him, the magic that had both saved him and cursed him. She pushed him gently back into the sofa, pressing her body close to his. She took his breath away and he lay back obediently, eager to feel her body against his.

 “I will heal you from this one sadness, but you must keep this emerald safe, for it does not belong to you. It belongs to someone who has not been born yet. The stone has its own journey to make. That is what it is telling me,” Juana whispered into his ear.

 “It speaks to you?” Dario was impressed and he reached a hand around to stroke her backside.

 “All things of the earth do,” she answered, taking his wrist and removing his hand from her body.

 Dario lay still on the sofa, underneath her weight, completely captivated by her. The scent of oranges and vanilla emanated from her neck. He looked into her dark eyes and almost felt he could love her like he did his Berenise. He reached up to move a lock of her black hair that was falling forward into her right eye. Her eyes were dark as night and twinkled like the stars. He wanted to stare deep into them for a long time, but Juana moved even closer to him. He shifted, feeling her breath warm on his face, her lips brushing his cheek as she spoke again, holding his wrists down with a supernatural strength in her hands. He pressed his body as deeply into hers as he could, wanting to make love to her. She was a *bruja bella* and he was under her spell.

 “I am the ancestor of Itzel, who summoned Itzpapalotl. They speak to you now through me.” Juana’s voice changed, sounding deeper than it did before, “You will never see Berenise again, she will truly be dead to you from now on, along with your grief over her. This emerald that hangs now on sacred silver is to be given to a stranger who will seek your aid to break a love spell, much like your own. He will ensure it makes its way to where it belongs. Make note: on the 2nd day of the 5th month 30 years from now. Do not lose it. Do not forget this instruction or all of your pain will return tenfold.”

 Dario closed his eyes and acknowledged compliantly. He was captivated by this compelling woman. He wished to take her, to lose himself deep within her sorcery. He looked up at her neck, so inviting and beautiful as her eyes were rolled upward. She released her clasp on his wrists and raised both arms skyward, straddling him as she wrapped her legs around him. Perhaps she matched him in her level of witchery. Again, he sensed something about her was deeply familiar to him, as if they’d met in another lifetime. He had a sudden desire to possess her and that thrilled him more than anything else. Just as he was about to wrap his arms around her, a young priest entered the home.

 “Juana, do you need my help?” the priest asked, looking at Dario intently, which gave Dario the sense of a sudden need to flee.

 “No, the bitter herbs will have their effect,” she answered, returning to herself as her lithe body moved easily away from a grasp that never materialized.

 She reached up to pull her hair back into a tight bun and turned to face Father Maldonado, who embraced her protectively. When she turned back to address Dario, she found that he had disappeared completely.

**Chapter 22**

**Treasures**

*You and I, we made such vagaries of the mind*

*We called ourselves by unrelated names*

*And wandered into an altered universe, where our ages*

*Were neither young nor old, nor anything in between*

*It was as if we were ageless,*

*Indeed we were*

*What many lives we have lived together*

*You and I*

 Alea was ready to sleep after the chamomile tea at Mamá Lulita’s. Julian walked her back to her room at the Inn. They kissed momentarily at the door of her room and she could have easily pulled him in to continue what they began in the meadow. However, it was clear they both needed rest, but her especially.

 “Goodnight, Julian,” Alea told him, pushing him playfully away from her.

 “Alea,” Julian pulled her close to him and kissed her again.

 Alea’s lips responded to his kisses, despite her exhaustion.

 “Okay, come in for just a little bit,” Alea whispered, leading Julian into her room by the hand.

 “Julian, I hope I can do whatever it is I need to do. I’m not even sure how this is going to play out,” Alea admitted, anxiously.

 “I think it will become apparent to you, like everything seems to as this unfolds. I will be there to help however I can,” Julian told her with an embrace.

 “Go to sleep, courageous Alea. I will be here for you in the morning. You call my name and I will always come, you know this. I am eternally yours. I’ll make you one of my signature breakfast dishes that I make in the restaurant I oversee in San Miguel de Allende.”

 “You work in San Miguel de Allende, too?” Alea tried to imagine what the restaurant in the quaint cobblestoned town of San Miguel looked like.

 “Yes, during the off season here. From April to October I am there in a trendy little café that caters to all of the Americans and French that live there. I created a popular breakfast item: cinnamon crepes with homemade strawberry compote and fresh cream. Heavenly,” he said, his lips brushing her ear.

 Alea mumbled a noise indicating that she approved of that breakfast choice. Julian nuzzled the top of her head and left her room quietly. Before she knew it, Alea had curled up in her bed and fell into a deep sleep.

 Alea dreamed that she wandered in the forest alone. The tree was not where she thought it was and a thick fog made it impossible to find her way to the path. She became lost, looking for the healing tree. Her heart beat rapidly. She searched for the emerald on her neck. It was not there, but she knew it was nearby, perhaps on the ground. She moved away leaves and picked up a fallen branch, using it to help her to scour the forest floor for it. Everything was moving slower and it was difficult to breathe, as if she were mired in quicksand. A heavy presence hung like the mist in the air. Suddenly, the hoots of an owl broke the silence and she could make out the figure of a beautiful barn owl. Its white, heart-shaped face came into focus. Alea stared into the golden-colored pair of eyes. It clutched the emerald in its talons as it spoke to her.

 “Techlotl has requested this treasure.”

 “But it is not his. It is from the temple of Itzpapalotl, it’s not his.” Alea told the owl boldly.

 “A woman who died suddenly fell to Tamanchoán, where Itzpapalotl rules and she did acquire the emerald there. However, she was sent to Mictlán, where Techlotl rules, and she took it with her. It belongs to Techlotl now,” the owl stated.

 “So there is a disagreement over ownership?” Alea asked. “I do not want to get in the middle of this. How did it even find its way to the earth realm?” Alea questioned.

 The owl swiveled its head nearly completely around, then turned back and fixed his gaze on Alea.

 “The woman’s beloved was allowed to visit her in Mictlán. She gave it to him. It is from the earth and to the earth it returned. But, Techlotl wants it back.”

 “If it is from the earth, that is where it truly belongs,” Alea stated firmly.

 “But who created the earth? It is a great bargaining tool, is it not? Techlotl loves his found treasures. El Búho is coming to get it for him,” the owl said.

 Before Alea could find out who El Búho was, the owl opened his expansive wings and flew up into the sky, some of his feathers dispersing and falling to the earth. One landed in the curls of her chestnut hair. The mist cleared and she began moving down the mountain trail to the village below, where she saw the people of the town sweeping the graves and placing marigolds and candles by their loved ones. Monarch butterflies flooded the town. She watched a stranger wandering through the graves. He was reaching into the air and capturing monarchs, squeezing them in his hands and discarding them on the ground. He approached Alea and asked her if she knew Liliana. She noticed he had a distinctive scar directly above his left eyebrow. He turned to look at her and she was filled with a sense of dread. The mountains behind him in the distance were suddenly yellow with dry grass, the trees vanished. Flames burst as people fled. Alea woke up suddenly, her heart racing.

 She felt for the emerald pendant. It was still there, on her neck. It gave her comfort from the dark mood of her dream. Still drowsy, dawn hadn’t broken quite yet. Lush green mountains appeared bluish-gray under a crescent moon with the morning star twinkling beneath it. She stared through the window at the star, which she knew was actually Venus. She thought about the stories of the goddess of love and beauty as she began to smell delightful aromas coming from the kitchen. Julian must have been up early preparing the breakfast items he had promised her before she fell asleep. Her phone buzzed. It was her mother.

 “Hi mom, you’re calling early,” Alea answered, her voice still thick from sleep.

 “I’m just checking on you, *mijita*.”

 Her mother’s familiar voice made her smile.

 “I’m good, mamá. I’ll be home soon. I just have some things I have to finish first. And, it’s so beautiful here right now,” she said, looking at the pink sky framing the mountain tops. “It must have been magical growing up with the monarch butterfly visits each November.”

 “It was magical. It’s why I study them and work hard to preserve them. They are an important part of my culture. Our culture, darling. I love you,” Marisol said.

 “I love you, too,” Alea told her, feeling closer to her mother than ever, despite their physical distance.

 “*Mija*,” Marisol began.

 Alea saw the sun beaming through the trees on the mountains now. There was much to do for the celebrations in the day ahead: cooking with Mamá Lulita, cleaning the graves and decorating them with flowers and ...going back to the mountain. But she could hear the concern in her mother’s voice.

 “Yes?” She asked softly.

 “Are you coming home soon?”

 “Very soon. I promise. I’m flying home later this week. I love you,” Alea responded and they said their goodbyes.

 Alea touched her left breast as she looked out of the window at the view she cherished. Her heart felt very heavy imagining it without the trees dotting the mountains and without the monarchs. She rubbed the emerald pendant between her fingers, thinking about Itzel. She imagined what it must have been like to be even younger than herself, facing the perils of that era. Was she, like Itzel, running from an insidious infliction? Would she be able to persevere? Did she have it in her?

 Then her phone buzzed again, she recognized the number.

 “Hello?”

 “Am I speaking to Alea Najar-Smith?” spoke a voice on the other line.

 “Yes.”

 “Hi, this is Mindy from Dr. Lockhart’s office. I am assuming you didn’t get the message? We need to schedule you for your follow up visit from your tests. The doctor is requesting we see you as soon as possible. Can you come in Monday?”

 Alea was still processing her dream and the reality of her situation. Was today Sunday?

 She responded, “You’re calling me on a Sunday?”

 “Yes, I have many calls to catch up on this weekend. Last week we were overloaded with patients. We hadn’t heard back from you and the doctor said you are a priority. Will you be available to come in tomorrow?”

 She sat still for a moment. The reality of her situation made her remember the fear that was still there, deep in her mind. She had doubts about herself. Was she just using this situation to escape what was inevitable back at home in Texas? She touched her breast and debated her decision.

 Julian tapped lightly on her door as she was caught with a choice to make. He brought in a tray of his signature crepes, the warm smell of cinnamon filling her room. He set down a cup of hot tea on her bedside table and took her free hand, kissing it. As he did, a feather fell from her hair. She looked at it, remembering the owl from her dream–or had it been a dream? There seemed to be a fine line between dimensions here. She gazed at Julian. She felt protected and safe with him. And nourished, as she glanced at the food on the tray. Was there enough time? Time was a strange concept to her lately. She’d sped through so many things in her life. She’d lived most of her adult life in a blur up until now: rushing through her college classes to complete a degree, finding her own place, getting a job, a half-hearted relationship with a guy she realized now she didn’t really love. Had she wasted time? Suddenly it was the most precious resource in her life. She wanted to press a pause button and slow everything down.

 She took a deep breath as she answered the woman from the doctor’s office, “I am out of the country, but I plan to be back no later than Wednesday. Is there a time I could come in on Thursday or Friday?”

 Alea had made her decision, for better or for worse. It was time to face some obstacles.

 The woman responded, “Of course. I will look at finding time in our schedule for Thursday and put the appointment time in your patient portal.”

 Alea thanked her and ended the call as Julian looked at her curiously.

 “What’s going on, *bonita*? Do you need to get back home sooner than Wednesday? I want you to do what’s best for you. The last thing I want is for anything to stand in the way of what you need. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you. Your health is what matters most. I will be here for you no matter what you decide.”

 “*Health is worth more than anything, more than oro*,” she could hear her grandmother’s words from long ago in her mind. At this moment, she could fully comprehend her grandmother’s message, sent to her from the past.

 The health of the land and nature was in as much danger as her own self, it seemed. Somehow, what was happening to her body paralleled what was occurring in the forest. It had its own uninvited invaders encroaching and threatening its ecosystem. She knew she was being called to bring equilibrium to it, and subsequently to herself.

 She reached over to touch Julian’s cheek and looked into his loving eyes, eyes that held her with deep affection.

 “You are a treasure to me, Julian,” she said, as she pulled him in for a kiss, tasting a hint of strawberry on his lips.

**Chapter 23**

**Finding Her**

*Life is not defined by a straight path*

*A neat and perfect bow fastened fascinates*

*Because of its obliqueness*

*Sharp angles and diagonal descent*

*Rising action leaning into soft, unexplored regions*

*Create curiosity for finding folded treasure*

*Hidden in the hugs of a line*

*Are Truths woven exactly*

*One degree more than its parallel below*

*Inviting you to unbind it*

 El Búho had his driver drop him off near his old stomping grounds from the days of Anna and Liliana in the Roma Norté neighborhood, with its hipster history. The neighborhood was built in the late 1800s for its wealthy citizens, so the streets and houses were built to mirror stylish European designs. Because of earthquakes, changing styles, and no urban planning, many modern structures came into play making it a unique mix of past and present styles. Liliana once told Geraldo that she favored it because the famous Beat poets from the 1960’s, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, lived here for a time searching for beauty and surreal inspiration in its storied, hallowed corners. Liliana had educated him in many ways during their short time together. He wandered past the market with its fresh produce and flowers, recalling the smells and sights he once knew intimately.

 He hadn’t spoken to his cousin Anna since they parted. After Liliana left abruptly, Anna wanted to move in with her new lover, Sebastian, and get out of their lease. Geraldo was fine with that, as the memories of Liliana lingered in his room. He could smell the floral and citrus scent of Chanel no. 5 perfume on his pillows and found her long hairs, like tendrils of her very being, on his clothes.

 Geraldo made a deal with the landlord and he and Anna went their separate ways. They were never that close to begin with, as her family was quite a bit more well off than his working class one.

 Their mothers were cousins, but in their family, they all just called each other cousins. Anna’s mother had reached out to his older brother Rico, asking if he knew if any twenty-somethings needed roommates at the hotel where they worked at the time. Rico had mentioned it to Geraldo, as he wanted his girlfriend at the time to move in, pushing Geraldo out of his place. Geraldo didn’t really know Anna all that well, but he figured it would be just fine as they kept different hours.

 They had met at big family gatherings every once in a blue moon, but she was 9 years younger than him. She’d always just been a kid to him. And she’d been raised very differently than himself. Her parents were very laissez faire, wealthy artists. Anna was a bit wild. Maybe her mother thought it would be good for an older, male cousin to keep things calm at the apartment. However, there was no taming a girl like Anna, or any of her friends. They were poets, musicians and creative types. Geraldo kept to himself and observed everything from the outside looking in. Besides, he was too busy getting involved in schemes with Rico to concern himself with them, anyhow.

 When he did spend time at the apartment, Gabriel had been the one to make him feel really included anyhow. Geraldo had never done well in school and had dropped out at 13 to work full time. And although Gabriel was Anna’s age, he just seemed older and more experienced than Anna. Even before Gabriel became Liliana, there was an attraction that drew Geraldo to him. Geraldo surprised himself, as he would sneak into Gabriel’s room to read simple lines from his poetry, which was a pleasant escape for him. It was sensual and painted pictures in his mind with words. It freed him from the grind he’d always just lived. He was attracted to Gabriel’s mind. And he found that fascinating and terrible all at once. As Gabriel became more and more in touch with who they really were and began transitioning into Liliana, Geraldo fell deeper in love with her. Liliana helped him feel things he didn’t know he felt.

 El Búho rounded the corner into the apartment building address where they'd once lived and walked the three blocks to the restaurant. So many memories were flooding his mind. He stepped into the cobalt blue tiled doorway and the smells from the kitchen brought back more visceral memories. The fresh bread reminded him of the way Liliana’s hair smelled when she got off of work. He could see them tumbling in his mattress on the floor in the corner of his room, pulling each other’s clothes off with abandon. And then there was that terrible night.

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 One rainy night Liliana came home from work, escaping the loud thunder reverberating from the sky and holed up in Geraldo’s room for the night with him. Anna wouldn’t be home until late the next day–she told Geraldo she was spending the night with a lover. While he had been waiting for Liliana, Geraldo drank several glasses of whiskey alone, but despite this, he couldn’t drink away the unquenching desire he had for her. When at last she arrived home, he was dying to fuck her, as he always was. Liliana’s body was slick with the rain as she peeled off her clothes, revealing her perfectly shaped breasts with peach colored nipples. Geraldo was hard immediately. Liliana grabbed him and placed her soft lips, wet from the rain on the tip of his penis, sliding her hot tongue up and down the length of it. Geraldo looked out the window at the heavy drops falling from the sky, which fell harder and harder as she stroked him until he shuddered with release, falling wearily on top of her and then returning the favor. In the middle of it, the rain suddenly halted, yet the lightning in the sky continued, illuminating the scene of their lovemaking eerily. That was the night he lost control of himself with her. He couldn’t stand the fact that he desired her so badly, even though she was not a complete woman. Was he really a man if someone like her could tempt him so easily? Letting his self-doubt overtake him, he shoved a pillow over her face, nearly extinguishing her completely. But she had fought back.

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 Shame crept up on Geraldo now. It was not a feeling he was familiar with as an adult, but something in the way that old memory was flooding back so realistically brought that buried emotion to the surface. He stuffed it back down as he came face-to-face with a pair of doe eyes.

 “Table for one?” a beautiful young woman inquired.

 “You know, Maria, I actually wanted to speak to the manager here, if possible,” El Búho responded, noticing her name embroidered onto her shirt.

 She smiled widely and told him she’d be right back. People were easy like that, thought El Búho. He’d learned in the hotel business training with Rico that dopamine and serotonin are released into a person’s brain when their name has just been said aloud, making people happy and sending unconscious signals of trust and sympathy to the brain. It’s how he was able to make so many negotiations in his life. An older man, about his age, appeared with Maria.

 “Hello there. I’m Enrique, the manager here. How may I be of help to you?”

 “Hi, Enrique. I’ve been told there is an outstanding chef who worked here and I wondered if he’s still here? I believe his name is Julian.”

 Enrique smiled affably and responded, “Oh yes! Julian was one of our best and brightest. He worked here for a few years and taught our new team his skills before he headed back to his hometown to spearhead a kitchen at a touristy place there.”

 El Búho could not believe his luck. Tracking down Liliana was proving to be easier than he thought.

 He inquired, “Which town?”

 Enrique scratched his head and furrowed his brow, replying, “You know, it seems like it was some place near the mountains. Oh yes, it’s a tourist spot because of the monarch butterflies. Some little town near those butterfly sanctuaries with a Nahuatl name. I think the inn is called Maravilla or Mirador or something like that. Say, would you like to try one of our new recipes by our current team? Are you a food reviewer or something like that?”

 El Búho was stunned. It was as if the gods were smiling upon him. This was just too perfect. There was a town, with the unique name of Xochitlalpan*,* right below the mountain where the lab facilities were. How could this be? How could that chef be right under his nose this whole time? And was it possible that he would know where Liliana was or that Liliana was with him now? It would be easy to pay Julian an innocent visit in that little town. He could pose as a tourist, visiting the monarch butterflies, but maybe not if Liliana was with him. How could he confirm if Liliana was with him or not?

 “Did you hear me, sir? Try one of our new recipes? Are you a food reviewer or something like that?” repeated Enrique.

 “Something like that,” El Búho responded, adding, “Oh, thank you, but I have an appointment.”

 Enrique shrugged his shoulders and moved on. Maria was charming the next customer entering the restaurant as El Búho walked out of the door, giving her a wink. She was his type, but a little too young. But maybe she’d satisfy his urges for Isabel until he could get this whole emerald pendant situation straightened out. She might be good for that–a palate cleanser. Something to prove to him that he really did love pussy more than dick. He turned around to get her number and bumped into none other than Anna. Her hair was long and flowy, just like her clothes, but she looked more mature, which was not a bad thing.

 “Geraldo!” Anna cried out and threw her arms around him, which disoriented him.

 In all of the time that they’d lived together, he had just been a roommate in the background. He hugged her back, realizing she had a nice, svelte body. He’d never really noticed that before. She stepped back and took a look at him.

 “My, my, if you weren’t my cousin and I wasn’t engaged to Sebastian, I’d consider spending some time with you. How come I never noticed how roguish you were?” Anna murmured in a sultry voice, tossing her sandy blonde locks flirtatiously.

 What was with all of these women today? Offering up their pussies to him like he was a king. It was as if there were distractions intentionally set on his path to tempt him from his mission. Anna was not his type, but she was exuding sexual vibes and he was clearly a man.

 “Anna, what would your mother think of that?” Geraldo teased her, squeezing her waist.

 She leaned in and kissed his cheek, saying, “I doubt she’d care. She’s too busy entertaining her guests, you must remember that.”

 Geraldo nodded. Then she said something that gave him pause.

 “Hey, have you heard from Liliana? Wasn’t that weird how she just up and left us one day? Sebastian thought there may have been a guy in the picture. I really miss her, she was so much fun.”

 Geraldo shrugged his shoulders and said, “Well, I have no idea. Your guess is as good as mine. I wonder why Sebastian thought there was someone?”

 “Oh, he actually thought maybe Julian and Liliana had a thing you know because she always talked about him. And later he told me that his friend that worked here mentioned that Julian left right about the same time that Liliana disappeared…” Anna’s voice trailed off.

 All that El Búho heard was the part about Liliana possibly running off with Julian. It was clear at this point that he would need to send someone to lure her to him. He knew just the person for the job.

**Chapter 24**

**Taken**

*Her beauty won't capture what she needs*

*It will fade and leave her lonely, she should concede*

*But what you don't see is that she isn't trying*

*Nor looking, needing, vying or buying*

*She is a wayfarer here*

*A sightseer*

*Of all parts of life*

*Not a wife*

*Not a maid*

*Not afraid*

*Of what is next*

*Or who rejects*

*Her queendom*

*That is freedom*

 El Búho thought carefully about his plan, and Rodrigo was the perfect choice. It was early enough in the day to navigate an unusually calm Via Madero to slip into the Sears building. He took the escalators up to the 8th floor to reach the Finca Don Porfirio coffee shop with the best direct vista of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. It was his favorite view in all of the city and it was still rather empty as the cafe had just opened. He sipped his cappuccino and ate a *postre* made with *leche quemada*. He took in the elaborate view of the ornate Palacio de Bellas Artes, designed and constructed by Italian architect Adamo Boari in 1904. It was a dazzling marvel, created in both an Art Nouveau and a Neo-Classical style to flaunt the European designs that then-president Porfirio Díaz so favored. However, due to both its excessive weight and the spongy subsoil that was characteristic of all of the downtown area, it was sinking. A fading mass of gilded opulence. Some thought Porfirio Díaz was quite wasteful for his extravagance, but El Búho appreciated its grandiosity these days.

 Rodrigo approached with his usual swagger. Tall and broad shouldered, he sat down with a cappuccino and looked over at El Búho with his impish smile, the same one that had probably gotten him in trouble with Montserrat. Rodrigo would be Liliana’s type, he considered. He was handsome, rugged, well read and had that edginess that had attracted her to him, years ago.

 “So, what brings us together? What is it that you need me to do?” Rodrigo began, raising his forehead inquisitively, making the little hook shaped scar above his left brow move curiously.

 El Búho inhaled deeply and paused, downing the remaining cappuccino.

 “I have a proposition for you, Rodrigo. Very lucrative,” El Búho offered.

 “*Dime*,” Rodrigo said.

 “I need you to do two things and I know you can do it. I know you’re exactly the person for the job. It involves seducing a beautiful woman and bringing her to me,” El Búho said, matter of factly.

 “That sounds easy enough. Bring her to you here?” Rodrigo countered.

 “No, she’s in a little town. She’d never come to Mexico City. I’d need you to take her into the mountains,” El Búho said, taking out a map and pointing to the spot.

 Rodrigo nodded his head and took out a cigarette, offering one to El Búho, who shook his head no.

 “You’ll need to read up on this, too.” El Búho slid a book of poetry toward Rodrigo.

 Rodrigo smiled and chuckled. “Okay, I take it she likes vintage poetry?”

 El Búho nodded his head as Rodrigo flipped through the pages of *The Collected Poems of Oscar Wilde* and blew out a wisp of smoke.

 “How do I get her into the mountains?” Rodrigo asked.

 “First you’re going to need to find a chef at this place,” El Búho had searched the Maravilla Inn and found a picture of Julian on the website as the award-winning head chef of the restaurant. He slid a picture of it on his phone over to Rodrigo, who nodded his head.

 “This place is in this town below the mountains where the lab is?” Rodrigo asked, pointing back to the spot on the map.

 Rodrigo’s cousin was part of the *Los Hermanos* team in the mountains and he’d been out there himself a few times. But mostly, Rodrigo hung back and ran some local tasks in Mexico City for the cartel, along with getting rid of anyone who got in their way. He could be trusted because he owed El Búho.

 El Búho nodded his head, adding, “You’re going to go there under the guise of visiting as a tourist to see the butterflies. You find this woman, Liliana, who most likely works nearby or with Julian.”

 El Búho showed him a photo of Liliana. Rodrigo’s eyes lit up and he took a long drag off of his cigarette.

 “Wow. She’s…she’s…” Rodrigo began.

 El Búho felt relieved that a macho guy like Rodrigo was just as attracted to Liliana as he was.

 “Yes, she’s unusually stunning. Do not get involved with her, do not fall for her. She’s hard to capture, a definite challenge. But get her to this spot, you must. Just don’t let her get to you. Because…well, you’re going to need to kill her,” El Búho said matter-of-factly.

 Rodrigo nodded his head. He’d had to kill for the cartel before. He could be steely cold when he wanted to be. But he was also dashing and irresistible to the ladies.

 “Okay, *jefe*. So I go to this place. I’m a solo tourist. Maybe I’m scouting out the place for a girlfriend or my mother or something like that. I meet this Julian character. I locate this sexy Liliana. Somehow, I convince her to go alone up to the mountains with me. If I need to drug her, I’ve got supplies. And…I kill her up there and sneak off?” Rodrigo ran through his idea of the plan.

 “You will not kill her up there right away. You’re her type and I doubt you’ll need to drug her. But have it ready. You’ll bring her up to this spot by the lab in the mountains. There’s something I need from her before you kill her—make certain she is wearing an emerald necklace. This needs to happen fast. I need you to leave today, as in, now. I’ve already booked you a room at the Maravilla Inn. I’ll be in the mountains by tonight. As you know, there’s no signal up there. I’ll just be expecting you and Liliana no later than the day after tomorrow. Tonight or tomorrow if we’re lucky.”

 Rodrigo nodded his head. He knew El Búho was serious and more importantly, he knew it must happen. El Búho was ruthless. And Rodrigo did owe him his life. El Búho had saved his ass from Rico when he’d gotten into that situation over one of Rico’s girls, Montserrat. He’d managed to escape almost completely unscathed, save that tiny little scar.

**Chapter 25**

**Dirty Laundry**

*Unwashed towels*

*Sweat-soaked linens*

*All the grime hidden*

*In the stains*

*And the dirt*

*On my favorite skirt*

*Belies her purity*

*Our Lady of the Laundromat*

*Where you cannot get your money back*

*Even when the machine is broken*

*Your clothes all soaked in*

*A cathartic lather*

*And then, just like that*

*She snaps*

*And the cycle goes on*

*Cleaning the grit gone*

*The disappearing smudges*

*Relinquishing the grudges*

*Of yesterday's drudges*

 Liliana wiped down the tables in the dining room after the lunch groups had dissipated and got out a broom to sweep the crumbs into a pile. She gathered all of the dirty napkins and put them in a basket, along with some of the stained tablecloths. Her plan was to help Mamá Lulita with Día de Los Muertos celebrations in the afternoon after she’d completed her chores. She was on her way into the laundry area when a handsome man arrived at the entrance to the dining room.

 “Well, good afternoon,” he said, taking Liliana in with his smoldering eyes.

 Liliana felt a tingle in her stomach upon hearing his voice and turned on her charm, sauntering over to him.

 “Well, good afternoon to you, sir. How may I assist you? You must have just arrived,” Liliana said.

 He smiled like a cat who’d just swallowed a canary. It piqued her interest in him further as he looked around the dining room and spoke.

 “Yes, indeed, I just arrived. I’ve come to enjoy the festivities and check out this place for a future trip with my mother, who loves monarch butterflies.”

 “Oh, how charming. What a dear love you are to think of pleasing your mother. If she loves monarchs, she’d fall in love with this place and the tours that take people into the mountains. It’s simply magical to see them here,” Liliana responded, pointing out through the window into the garden a small scattering of orange and black monarchs sipping nectar. “But it’s entirely different and even more ethereal to see them by the millions roosting up in the mountain.”

 There was just a hint of a curved scar above his left eyebrow. A bolt of curiosity went through her. Something about that scar made her feel...strange, but at the same time enthralled.

 “Sounds delightful, what is your name, *amor*?” he asked, taking her hand in his and kissing it softly, sending flares of heat all through her body, temptation getting the better of her.

 “I’m Liliana. It’s wonderful to meet you, uh…” she said, blushing.

 “I’m Rodrigo,” he said, not taking his dark brown eyes off of her.

 Liliana’s body was responding to his chemistry. She hadn’t felt this stirred about a man since Geraldo, if she were to be completely honest with herself.

 “Rodrigo, may I help check you into your room and bring you a little food? There's some leftover *tacos al pastor* and some salad. I can put a plate together for you,” Liliana offered.

 “How kind of you. That sounds delicious, I’ve heard you have an amazing chef here,” he said, licking his lips. They looked like they would be fun to kiss, Liliana imagined.

 “Oh, you’ve heard of Julian? Yes, he’s very creative and skilled with everything he makes,” she answered, looking at him with a coquettish smile.

 “Well, dear, I am actually quite full from a big breakfast this morning, but you could do a different favor for me. I’ve heard I just missed the last tour for today into the mountains. Do you think it’s at all possible you could join me on a hike? I mean, if I’m not being too impertinent,” Rodrigo stared into her eyes as he let slip a book onto the floor.

 Liliana glanced down and looked at a familiar face on the cover. The distinctively sloped eyes with that watchful and reflective look stared back into hers.

 “*We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars,*” the two of them said in unison, as she picked up the book.

 Liliana laughed giddily. This was too good to be true. He was just her type and he liked poetry. And that he knew the classically flamboyant poet, Oscar Wilde, no less. Was this a sign? But there was something about him and that scar. What was it? Danger? What was he really seeking? She tried not to think too much about it. All the passion between Alea and Julian that was blossoming was making her feel the absence of it in her own life.

 “So I see you’re a fan of Mr. Wilde, too?” inquired Rodrigo. He was really working it with finesse.

 Liliana thought about her plans with Mamá Lulita to sweep the graves and decorate them with marigolds. She figured Mamá Lulita would understand if she put off helping her into the evening, after she finished up at the bar. Besides, she would most certainly be busy cooking all sorts of dishes with Julian, Alea and Father Maldonado.

 “Yes, I’d be happy to join you for a hike. But it will have to be a short one, if you are okay with that,” she answered.

 “That’s just perfect, Liliana,” Rodrigo said smoothly.

 “I just need to get some laundry started and then I can meet you back here. Give me thirty minutes or so?”

 “All that dirty laundry, Liliana. We all have it,” he teased her, then, “Of course. And…my key?”

 Liliana arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow at the dirty laundry comment. What exactly was he implying? But, he gave her a wink and blew her a kiss, making her stomach flip. She shook her head and got back into business mode, leading him over to the register at the bar and found the available room number with a coordinating key, handing it to him as she pointed to the sign that said *Rooms* with an arrow directing guests toward the white walled stairway with its large saltillo tiles.

 “You are on the second floor with a beautiful balcony view of *El Cacique*, the “chief” mountain that surrounds the property.”

 “How perfectly fitting, I’m in a rather commanding place with my business lately. Room 7. My lucky number. I’ll see you in 30 minutes, Liliana. Such a pleasure!” he remarked as he turned to go up the stairs to find his room.

 Liliana’s knees felt weak from his deep voice and sexy presence as she watched him disappear up the stairs. With the exception of a tryst several months ago with a German tourist who was flirting with her, her sex life had been lacking. And that guy hadn’t even lit her up like Rodrigo. He’d just been fulfilling a desire more than anything else.

 Rodrigo found his room and began to unpack all the necessary items with gloved hands. He ensured that the backpack he would bring with him into the mountains contained everything he brought for any circumstances he could encounter: the map, a flask with mezcal, his pistol with the silencer and a packet of China White, just in case. It was evident from the ease with which he’d found Liliana and how charmed she’d been that he would not need to use the gun or the drugs after all. It all seemed too easy, which pleased him greatly. The gods were smiling on him.

 But there was something unexpected happening with this plan. What was it? He thought for a minute. It was a genuine attraction he felt toward Liliana. She was even more beautiful than she’d been in that photo El Búho showed him. He took his phone out, pulled up the message sent with her picture in it and looked at it again. She looked a bit younger in the photo. There was something wiser, sadder in her eyes now. Whatever it was, he was attracted to it. Like she contained many hidden secrets, the same as him. These weren’t things you could see from just a picture. These were part of a person’s essence—things you could intuit, especially a man like Rodrigo, who made his living off of sensing and observing people carefully.

 He pushed aside these feelings to text El Búho:

 *Get to the mountains ASAP I’ve found her and she’s putty in my hands. We’ll be heading there within the next couple of hours.*

 El Búho texted him immediately back:

 *This is happening faster than expected, which isn’t a bad thing. I can’t get to the lab for at least another 3 hours. Please delay accordingly. And remember: I need her to be alive.*

Rodrigo returned with:

 *Of course, jefe. I’ll make it happen.*

El Búho wrote back:

 *Check to ensure she’s wearing a green emerald pendant. Looks like this.*

Rodrigo looked at the photo of a unique looking green stone on a silver chain. He closed his eyes and recalled all of the details of Liliana from their interactions moments earlier. He saw her pouty lips, her reddish-brown hair, the black flowy top she wore with an apron tied around her slender waist and silver bracelet that dangled at her right wrist. Rodrigo prided himself on remembering details consummately. He did not recall seeing that necklace on her. What in the actual hell? One other very important thing? How important was this, he wondered, so he texted back:

 *Is this necklace a deal breaker, jefe?*

Immediately the reply was:

 *She MUST be wearing the necklace. Ensure it. Remember I asked you to do two things?*

Rodrigo sighed and replied:

 *I’ve got it.*

Of course. Everything so far had been too easy. He was going to have to figure out if Liliana had this damn necklace. Rodrigo had an idea, as he grabbed the Oscar Wilde book. He headed down to the dining room to meet her. She looked glorious, even in her casual hiking clothes. Her long legs and slender curves were alluring.

 “You ready?” she smiled at him.

 “You know, I may be more tired than I realized, my dear. I wonder if we could just sit and have a coffee first. Is that okay?” Rodrigo asked her.

 “You do have to be careful with the high altitude here. I just put on a fresh pot. Let me grab two cups,” she replied as she headed back to the kitchen.

 Rodrigo watched her move with grace across the dining room. She returned with two blue and orange hand-painted ceramic mugs full of hot coffee. They sat down together at a corner table. She pulled out two clean yellow napkins and handed him one. Rodrigo brought out the book.

 “How about I read to you one of my favorite quotes from this?”

 Liliana nodded.

 “I especially like this line from The Nightingale and The Rose. It goes: *Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace.* I mean, have you ever seen an emerald or an opal up close? They are pretty precious,” Rodrigo set the trap.

 Liliana closed her eyes, answering, “I have indeed. I was given a very beautiful emerald, once upon a time. And love is more precious than emeralds. But this emerald, I think it was more precious than that love to me at the time.”

 Rodrigo was getting closer to what he wanted. He needed to handle this with care. He took a sip of the coffee and swallowed the dark, rich liquid. A tiny drop spilled onto the table and he wiped it up with the clean yellow napkin, staining it just a bit.

 “Sometimes these things happen. I bet that emerald looked radiant against your pretty skin. You have such a gorgeous neck,” Rodrigo said, reaching his hand out to touch the skin on the side of her neck. “Why don’t you still wear it?”

 Liliana blushed as sparks moved through her body with his touch.

 “You know what? I’ll go get it,” she said, sipping her coffee.

She went up to the third floor where Alea was staying and knocked softly on her door.

 “Just a minute!” A sliver of the door opened, revealing Alea’s flushed face, smiling

demurely. Liliana noticed the emerald glinting off of Alea’s neck.

 “Girl, can I have my necklace back for just a couple of hours?”

 “What’s going on?” Alea arched an eyebrow curiously.

 Liliana could hear the shower going in the bathroom.

 “I could ask you the same thing? Who’s in your shower? Let me guess…” Liliana

winked at Alea.

 Alea undid the necklace and placed it around Liliana’s neck.

 “Somehow I get the feeling this is about a love interest. Who could it be?” Alea teased

her.

 “Okay, there’s this hunky guy named Rodrigo who just checked in room number 7.

He wants me to take him on an abbreviated tour in the mountains. Can you let Mamá

Lulita know I’ll be back in a couple of hours?” Liliana grinned.

 The shower stopped. Alea blew Liliana a kiss.

 “I will, but get it back to me before tonight—I’ll need it, remember?!” Alea said as

she shut the door.

 Liliana smiled to herself as she skipped down the stairs and back to where Rodrigo

was waiting for her. He stood up and held his right arm out for hers, his eyes transfixed

on the emerald pendant that hung perfectly in the notch beneath Liliana’s neck.

**Chapter 26**

**Resurrection**

*A branch broke under his weight*

*I looked up and saw only the white tips*

*Of a grand wing span*

*The sun cleansing fetid remnants of forages*

*His eyes met with mine*

*As if to say,*

*Patience, my queen*

*Learn how to reprocess life*

*For I am the essence of*

*Resourcefulness and nobility*

*Not a living thing shall I take*

*Not a breath shall I steal*

*Not a neck shall I break*

*A strange and curious power lies*

*In turning death back into life*

 Julian and Alea held hands as they walked together to Mamá Lulita’s to help with the festivities for Día de Los Muertos and get the ancestors’ blessings before they went back to the healing tree in the mountain. A handful of monarch butterflies fluttered along their short path over, drifting here and there.

 “Julian?” Alea spoke his name suddenly.

 He glanced over at her, eyebrows raised. Her beautiful curls fell softly on her shoulders.

 “Liliana knows the trail up to the sanctuary pretty well, right?” she continued.

 “Pretty well. She hardly ever volunteers to go with guests into the mountain, but she’s been with me a handful of times. Why?” he replied.

 “Well, apparently some hot guy had just checked in and she was very excited to give him a short tour,” Alea continued.

 “Oh? By herself? Well, Liliana should be able to take care of herself. She’ll be good. I think we should enjoy this afternoon and evening celebrating with Mamá Lulita,” Julian said.

 He was probably right. They passed several families walking toward the cemetery with arms full of marigolds to decorate the graves and brooms to sweep away the leaves and dirt. The children were dancing behind them adorned with skeleton masks. The afternoon was cool and dry. There was a feeling of magic in the air. Alea relaxed her shoulders and decided to enjoy the afternoon with Julian. They noticed a group of vultures swooping down to gather around a dead animal. Julian commented on it.

 “Vultures are symbols of strength and struggle in this place, Alea. Not just death, although, as you can see, we view death very differently here. Vultures are necessary because they are decomposers, essentially. They aid in the circle of life.”

 Alea studied Julian’s profile. His thick, straight nose and full lips gave him a sultry look. She’d always loved it. He was so handsome and full of spiritual knowledge about the land around him. She kissed his cheek, savoring this moment.

 As they entered Mamá Lulita’s little house, the smell of cinnamon and chocolate hit their noses. She was making *mole en rojo*. It reminded Alea of her grandmother’s kitchen. Julian stepped in to help his grandmother stir the sauce and brought Alea in to assist as well. The three of them moved around one another in the tiny kitchen, bumping into each other here and there, while the chilis, walnuts and sesame seeds were added to the sauce. Mamá Lulita directed Alea to light the candles and add a bowl of the sauce to the *ofrenda* she had carefully created in the living room.

 Alea glided into the living room, admiring the flowers, sugar skulls and photos covering a corner table. One of the photos in particular captured her attention. It was the woman who she saw in her dream-vision. It was Julian’s mother and Mamá Lulita’s daughter. She touched the picture, remembering in great detail the way Julian’s eyes had the same shape and color as his mother when she saw her in that strange dream. She was deep in thought as she felt Julian’s strong arms wrapping around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. Leaning back against his body, together they took in all of the colorful decorations on the altar created by Mamá Lulita for this sacred occasion. The monarch butterflies had for hundreds of years symbolized the souls of ancestors returning to visit once a year.

 Mamá Lulita walked in slowly to join them. The three of them shared the memories and photos on display, Mamá Lulita whispering prayers to the deceased. Mamá Lulita glanced down at Alea’s neck.

 “Where is your necklace, Alea?”

 Alea touched her neck, remembering that Liliana had asked to use it.

 “Liliana has it.”

 Mamá Lulita frowned, replying, “So Liliana has it again? Where is she?”

 “Oh, she said she’d be coming here before sunset. She was taking a tourist on a short hike in the mountain…” Alea stopped, a very unsettling thought returning to her mind.

 “Oh? Alea, what is it?” Mamá Lulita held Alea’s hands in her own, urging her on.

 “Today is the day. I need to go to the healing tree, but somehow Liliana is tied to this task, as well. That tourist means to harm her…” The vision of the odd stranger asking about Liliana from her dream was suddenly clear as day in her mind.

 Julian looked at Alea’s panicked expression on her face.

 Mamá Lulita spoke, “Something isn’t right. I can feel it, too.”

 The image of that stranger squeezing monarch butterflies between his fingers in her dream would not leave her. Julian took her hands into his.

 “It’s time. We will find Liliana. She could not have gone far. She won’t have gone deep into the mountains yet,” he said.

 Mamá Lulita held up her hand. She finally spoke.

 “If Liliana has the necklace, it is because she needed it and you are to follow her to find it. Its protection is why she was guided to give it to you in the first place, Alea.”

 Alea thought about that. Mamá Lulita was right. She could see herself putting it around Liliana’s neck less than a couple of hours ago.

 “I need to get Iztpapalotl’s veil to take with me,” Alea remembered.

 “We’ll go get it and go straight to the mountain to find Liliana,” Julian added.

 “Everything okay, here?”

 They all turned at the sound of the steady voice of Father Maldonado, who had just entered Mamá Lulita’s house to join her in the preparations.

 Mamá Lulita gave him a look and responded, “The time is near, it seems.”

 Father Maldonado looked back at her knowingly. He gave Alea a blessing before she and Julian rushed out the door to grab the necessary items needed for their journey.Father Maldonado looked at Mamá Lulita cautiously as they watched Alea and Julian disappear down the garden path to the winding road.

 “Do you think they’ll make it in time, Lulita?” he asked.

 “I do, Mateo. Let’s have dinner and pray,” Lulita answered, as she moved into the kitchen to fetch plates for them.

 She spooned the mole sauce over the chicken and scooped a side of rice onto two plates and brought the food to the table. They sat together in silence for a moment before eating. Mateo prayed over the food.

 “Juana would have approved of the mole sauce, wouldn’t she?” Lulita asked afterwards, smiling.

 “She would have, indeed,” Mateo answered, remembering back to the first meal Juana had cooked for him.

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 When he was young and new to the community, he spotted her right away. There was no denying her presence. It was obvious people sought her out for her counsel and that he should become her ally. She had approached him to probe him for his views on protecting the forest. Once he made it clear to her that they were on the same page, she took a liking to him and invited him over for *pollo con mole*.

 He brought a loaf of warm bread he had baked himself for the occasion. Her young children were playing in the garden upon his arrival.

 “Father Maldonado?” little Marisol asked when she saw him, her dark eyes looking up at him curiously.

 He nodded as she handed him a bouquet of freshly picked rosemary and marigolds. Her older brother, Marco, observed cautiously from afar, shooting him wary looks. He was clearly suspicious of his mother’s visitors, male ones especially. Being the oldest and a boy, it made sense.

 He took the offering from Marisol’s diminutive hand as Juana stood in the doorway, her dark eyes meeting his before he quickly averted them downward. But before he had, he noted hers were filled with mystery.

 “*Niños*, go pay Mamá Lulita a visit while Father Maldonado and I have our meal. I will save you extras for dinner,” she ordered her children.

 They obeyed, skipping off to the house next door, Marisol looking back at Father Maldonado once more.

 “Come inside, Father. Let us enjoy what blessings we have,” she said, turning toward the door.

 “Your Marisol has a kind, yet independent soul,” he remarked as he followed Juana inside.

 “Oh, yes, she has great things in store for her here,” she responded, bringing him into her house. “But, I have the feeling she may have other ideas in mind. Perhaps it will be her daughter that is to complete a task. Time will tell.”

 Father Maldonado watched her as she moved with deftness inside her home. It was an extension of herself, filled with rich, inviting smells. The home was tidy and humble, yet there was an unambiguous force that commanded respect in it. The living room contained a single worn blue sofa that sat next to a small wooden table. On the table, he set a Virgin of Guadalupe tin *nicho* on top of a carefully placed lace doily. In the corner of the space was an alcove with a small bed, which he assumed was used for the many visitors who sought her assistance in healing.

 Juana led him into the kitchen where a small round table was set with a basket holding blue corn tortillas and a ceramic dish that contained *pollo en mole* and another one with rice. She took the fresh bread that he’d brought and sliced up several perfect pieces to add to their banquet of food.

 Father Maldonado blessed their food before they indulged in the savory meal that they ate in silence until Juana finished her meal. She cleared her throat and began to speak.

 “Father, I need you to know something about me and I am hoping you can accept it as it has been a heavy burden to not be able to share this with our former priest. I channel the spirit of the Divine Feminine in my practice and am part of a sisterhood that honors a certain ancient Butterfly Goddess, Itzpapalotl. We find we are able to relate her somehow to our Catholic faith. I’m hoping you may be accepting of this as it is part of our heritage in this land. I sensed you may be able to with your more contemporary understanding of the culture here.”

 Mateo was both surprised and delighted by her straightforwardness. He paused, moving his chair back, and looked at her, responding, “Juana, God works in unusual ways. I have seen so many paths in which the Holy Spirit moves through us to heal. And as for Itzpapalotl, I think that the Aztec deities are an innate part of our culture which was destroyed by the Spaniards. I learned much about this during my studies.”

 Although Juana knew that Father Maldonado was younger, more vibrant and seemed more open to this information, she did not expect this type of response so easily, but she had taken the risk to speak openly. Father Dominguez, who had recently departed, had been rigid and much more traditional in his practice. He’d been a bit jealous of and irritable with Juana and as such had created an invisible divide between them, forcing the women to hide their practices from the church. Finally, it seemed there was a religious leader who was willing to support and work with them. Together they could make great strides in keeping the forest protected, among other things, she considered. She could see he viewed her as a person in the community with leadership capability and knowledge of the people without being a threat to him. He displayed deference, which Father Dominguez never had. Juana sized up Father Maldonado carefully. His eyes met hers directly. They were dark bluish-green, clearly he had Spanish ancestry somewhere in his bloodline, not unlike her former husband. They were knowledgeable and wise eyes, despite his young age. He must have experienced some pain in his life to be this way.

 “I am very happy to hear you say these things, Father. Would you like a healing session from me after a cup of tea together? I can show you firsthand how I work to heal others. I think you would approve,” she offered.

 Mateo nodded his head. He had been visited by several *curanderas* in his childhood after a car accident sent him to the hospital, spending the better part of three months of recovery in a full body cast. The incident left him much changed, not just physically with a slight limp. During his confinement, he had a vision of Mary Magdalene. She came to him with wounds in the palms of her hands, pressing them into his, sending shockwaves through his system. He knew she had blessed him and ever after he was able to intuit when people, especially women, needed protection. He could shield them from harm simply by a look. He had a very powerful gaze that scared off potential assailants and sent men who wished to do women harm away without lifting a finger.

 His mother first became aware of his gift when they left a bustling market at dusk when a stranger approached her heading home on a deserted street. Young Mateo wrapped an arm around his mother’s waist and looked directly at him. The man suddenly dropped a knife he’d been concealing and went running in the opposite direction. His mother consulted a favored *curandera*, who revealed to her that her son indeed had a direct channel to Saint Mary Magdalene, the Apostle to the Apostles and patron saint of women. She proclaimed that he was a holy man sent to protect traumatized women. Something about Juana reminded Mateo of Mary in that vivid vision of his from long ago. He was curious to know more about her. She was unique. Her dark eyes flashed as she set a kettle of water to boil for tea.

 After tea and a walk in her garden, Juana cleared the air in her living room with the sweet, smokey scent of copal. She led Mateo to the bed that was in the alcove in the living room. It was covered in a red rebozo with the Virgin Mary praying on it, gold threads glimmering off of the material. He lay still on it as she gently brushed his body with branches of the fresh rue she had cut from her garden, whispering prayers and placing her soft hands on the soles of his feet, first. Electricity moved upward from his feet into the top of his head with her touch. It was both sensual and spiritual at once, which was not something he expected. His eyes flew open, wondering if she noticed his aroused state, but she continued her prayers, moving her hands to rest on his chest near his heart without batting an eye. Her hands were warm like the sunshine. They brought a calming sensation to his heart and he discovered a peacefulness he hadn’t felt before in that moment. She continued to move them gently all around him for a long period of time. The strangest thing was that he swore he could feel many sets of hands on different parts of his body. When her hands were at his head, he felt another pair at his feet. He quit trying to decipher how this was possible and eventually was lulled into a light sleep state.

 “Father, it’s time to open your eyes now,” her voice brought him back, as she stepped away from him.

 Mateo looked up and saw her, the light from the afternoon sun streaming in from the window behind the sofa. It surrounded her like a halo.

 “Juana, you are most definitely a healer and I can see how your gift helps others,” he said, as she helped him slowly sit up.

 His head felt light and he saw stars momentarily. She touched his shoulder and it sent more sparks through his body. Her eyes met his with a smoldering look, eyes as smoky as the copal incense that she had used to clear the space. As she pinched rosemary leaves and brushed her scented fingers over his palms, he inspected her face closely. She was older than him, old enough to be a young aunt or a much older sister, if he’d had one. During his youth he had spent so much time focused on his religious studies so that he’d never had the time to be interested romantically in a woman. It had been easy for him to take his vows of celibacy. All of his life he’d been on a spiritual trajectory in the church, as dictated by the prophecies during his childhood. There was an irrefutable draw toward her that was a foreign to him, but at the same time, pure. She spoke, as if she could read his mind.

 “Father, it is not unusual to feel like you do. You are, after all, human. Just as you have suffered on this earth, you can enjoy the pleasures of it, too.”

 Mateo had not revealed his childhood accident to her, yet she had an all-knowing sense of him.

 “This is not untrue, Juana. You are a wise and strong-minded woman. You remind me of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. We studied her in the seminary,” Mateo commented.

 “I know a little about her, as all good Mexicans do. She was a poet and a nun and even knew and wrote some works in Nahuatl,” Juana said, smiling.

 “And she was brilliant and did things her own way, much to the chagrin of the powers that be,” Mateo added, his eyes shining.

 “I’m not afraid to do things my own way. I come from a long line of women who are so,” she said as she moved back into the kitchen to clean the dishes from their meal.

 Mateo followed into the kitchen to join her. She poured coarse salt into the cast iron pan that she had used to make the *pollo en mole.* She began to scrub the pan, the salt rubbing against stubborn spots, that finally yielded to reveal a clean surface. She rubbed oil into the pan, her slender fingers glistening. She made the cleaning process very sensuous to Mateo. Her brown arms flexed as she lifted the heavy pan to place it gently on the counter. The back of her neck faced him as her dark hair was pulled up into a tight bun on her head. It looked like it needed to be kissed.

 “You may kiss me, if you like,” she said, without turning to face him.

 Mateo stepped closer to her and leaned his nose into the spot on her neck he’d been admiring. He inhaled her skin, which had the faint scent of tangerines.

 He pressed his lips softly on that coveted spot and whispered, “I’ve never known a love like this. Maybe I made the wrong decision.”

 Juana turned around and held his face in her angelic hands, “I am no ordinary woman. You are no ordinary man. A love like this happens in such circumstances. But you did not make a mistake in answering your spiritual calling. God works in mysterious ways, as you yourself have said. Our community needs you. We can share this love in our own way. After all, I am a woman who does things single-mindedly, like Sor Juana.”

 It was his first kiss of many secret ones that he would share with her throughout their lives.

**Chapter 27**

**Mountains To Climb**

*A ghostly and constant companion*

*Walks with me down the thorny paths*

*Through the bend in the cool river*

*Atop the snow-capped mountain*

*In the evergreens, along the babbling brook*

*In the star-studded velvet skies in the deep of night*

*Beyond the pale, violet clouds at dawn*

*She holds fast to my whole being*

*She breathes in unison with my breath*

*Only to release me here when my days are done*

*She is the past, the present and the future*

*Mingled into one glorious existence*

 Liliana felt strong as she climbed higher on the path with Rodrigo following along behind her. She had a renewed sense of strength, all of a sudden. Perhaps it was the fresh air up higher, where she hadn’t explored in awhile. The green pendant sent an uplifting charge throughout her body and she touched it, reflecting on how she seemed to know she needed it for this venture.

 Rodrigo had texted El Búho to let him know he’d located the emerald pendant and was heading up the mountain with Liliana before they left the Inn. The response had been one word: YES.

 Although the trail was steep, he stepped with buoyancy, positive that everything was unfolding so easily for him. The gods were definitely on his side. This could not have been an easier job and he was glad to do it, as this would surely place him back in good favor with Rico. He watched Liliana move through the forest with poise and grace as they climbed higher and higher, admiring her shapely legs. Rodrigo was not certain he’d be able to deliver this woman into death. There was something about her, beyond her physical beauty. She contained both a certain childlike curiosity and a female artfulness that was reeling him in more than he felt at ease with, given he did not fall in love easily. He tried not to think about it and focused on getting into the right area in the mountain. He had to slow Liliana down a bit, though. El Búho wouldn’t be there for at least another hour. He called out to her.

 “Liliana, let’s stop and have a little refreshment, here, shall we?”

 Liliana turned to look at him.

 She smiled and nodded her head, responding, “Sure.”

 They made their way into a spot near a large rock with a dilapidated fence behind it. They sat against the broken wooden planks that looked like teeth missing in a child’s smile. Rodrigo offered his hand to Liliana as she sat down on the cool earth. She looked up at his handsome face. He seemed to be thinking about something and wasn’t paying attention as he nearly tripped over the gnarly roots of a vine, catching himself on the rock.

 “Rodrigo!” she called.

 Something in the way he looked at her–what was it? A wicked gleam? She’d caught him off guard and it alerted Liliana’s second sight. He moved towards her, that tiny scar above his eyebrow catching her eye again. The pendant on her neck had been warm during their ascent, but she had been too distracted to notice it before. The heat returned, as if warning her that she was in the presence of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. She closed her eyes and drew in her breath. Immediately Geraldo’s name came into her mind. It was clear he had something to do with Geraldo. She took a deep breath, centering herself.

 “So, would you like some mezcal?” Rodrigo asked Liliana, producing a flask from his backpack.

 Liliana avoided the drink with, “No thank you, dear. It will give me a headache.”

 Rodrigo looked disappointed.

 “Oh, but, please, have some for yourself. Go ahead, drink some,” Liliana purred.

 He returned the flask to his backpack, shaking his head no. She was certain there was more than just mezcal in the flask. Slowly, she took deep breaths to remain calm. She thought about a realistic excuse to get them back down to the village.

 “Oh, I just remembered!” Liliana started. “I’m supposed to be back at the church for a special prayer service with Father Maldonado. They are expecting me. We better head back.”

 Rodrigo inched closer to Liliana. Her skin smelled warm, like cinnamon, and it intoxicated him. Maybe he could have a little fun with her before he handed her over to El Búho. He placed his thumb on her bottom lip. He’d wanted to do that since they met, anticipating its velvety softness and he was not disappointed.

 “Perhaps we can have our own prayer service here. Isn’t there a poem I can find about that in my book?” he offered, air quoting the words “prayer service”.

 Liliana stared at one of the branches of a tall tree behind him that extended toward her like an index finger. She knew they wouldn’t be heading back now. It was up to her to use her charm to outwit him. She moved closer to him and placed a hand on his bicep, channeling her charisma.

 “*And your eyes, they were green and grey Like an April day, But lit into amethyst When I stooped and kissed; And your mouth, it would never smile For a long, long while, Then it rippled all over with laughter Five minutes after….*are you not familiar with that one by Mr. Wilde?” asked Liliana, reciting from Roses and Rue, blinking her big eyes at Rodrigo.

 He was utterly captivated by her and would have a bit of fun, he decided. Her skin glowed with an otherworldly beauty. Why did it have to be such a charming woman that he’d been sent to capture? This talk of kissing, her cushiony bottom lip….he was dying to kiss her. He leaned his face close to hers. Like a wild rabbit, she jumped to her feet, springing quickly with her long legs behind one of the fence pickets.

 “What are you doing, silly?” Rodrigo asked, surprised at Liliana’s burst of energy.

 Was she playing hard to get with him? What a tease. This could be fun, he thought.

 “*I remember I never could catch you, For no one could match you, You had wonderful, luminous, fleet, Little wings to your feet,”* Liliana continued the last lines from the poem as she moved swiftly farther away from the picket and deeper into the grove of trees.

 A group of monarch butterflies swept past her, feather light, yet powerful in their delicate presence. What would be the best way to make her way down the mountain? Or maybe she should keep moving up? Was Rodrigo as knowledgeable about the mountain and as acclimated as her to the altitude? It didn’t seem like he was. If indeed he was not, she’d have the advantage. She could strategically move up into the sea of trees, wear him down and hopefully lose him, zigzagging her way back down again.

 “Oh, you like to play games, do you? I enjoy that, too!” Rodrigo genuinely was turned on by Liliana’s playfulness.

 He got excited imagining the hunt, like a wildcat in the forest. One of her eyes peaked through a hole in a picket, looking at him. He stood up to move closer. Then she vanished. He turned around to grab his backpack before pursuing her, a mistake he would later regret, as every second counted when it came to chasing this light-footed creature.

 Liliana took off sprinting with her long, strong legs, her adrenaline pumping. She knew she was a very good athlete, despite the fact that she denied any masculine aspect of herself growing up. Once she had to escape a group of boys who were after her on a dark night while walking home as a teenager. They had been cat calling her, teasing her for acting too girlish and it turned dangerous. There were four of them and just one of her and they had knives on them, which they proudly displayed. But they had underestimated her strength and the fact that although she was willowy, she was a good head taller than even the tallest among them and her legs were very strong. She had easily outrun them. She summoned that strength now and bolted through the sacred oyamel and oaks. Dappled sunlight filtered through the towering trees as she wound her way along the sinuous trail, finally leaving it to maneuver through vines and thick brush, whispering prayers to Itzpapalotl. The green emerald felt reassuring on her neck. She could hear the crack of branches breaking behind her, although she couldn’t estimate how far away Rodrigo was, for she did not dare stop to check. She raced, half flying, up higher into the mountain, keeping her footing steady despite the rocky terrain. She knew one of the trails wasn’t too far off from where she roamed, but it would be better to stay clear of it as the abundance of trees provided better coverage.

 Rodrigo was angry at himself for thinking he could have a little fun with Liliana. He thought about the fact that when he spied those long, athletic legs he should have known she had the advantage instead of how sexy they were. He was very fit, but she was faster and had gotten a head start by playing with him, like a cat with a toy. He stopped to catch his breath, the altitude also getting to him. He listened for signs of her. He was getting disoriented in the woods and pulled out his compass.

 Liliana kept moving for what seemed like an hour. Her body was wearing down and she realized she didn’t have any food or water on her, which was a big mistake. She stood still, her heart pounding. The small scratches the branches had made on her exposed arms in her race through the forest started to sting. It was quiet, except for the occasional sound of the fluttering of wings from the monarchs. She took a moment to catch her breath, rubbing the emerald between her thumb and forefinger, praying for protection. Suddenly, the sound of footsteps approaching from behind her made her heart jump. A hand went up around her mouth and she felt the build of a familiar body push against hers.

 She knew exactly who it was as he spoke slowly in her ear, “Gabriel, I’ve been looking for you. You have to have known I’d find you one of these days. The past always catches up to the future.”

 **Chapter 28**

**Trapped**

*Why didn’t you say anything?*

*What froze your tongue?*

*was it fear, sucking your mouth*

*stuck, in the murky muck*

*struck, like backs of our*

*ancestral sisters*

*we have struggled*

*to return to ourselves*

*to remunerate our homecoming*

*tumbling from centuries*

*of tongues tied through the ages*

 Liliana struggled to free herself of Geraldo, but he was much too strong and she was exhausted from running. His free hand came around to grab the pendant from her neck and yank it off of her, but stopped himself, remembering it kept the love spell broken. The silver chain dug into the back of her neck when he jerked it, making her skin burn. She blinked back tears.

 “Where is he?” Geraldo growled in her ear.

 It was Rodrigo’s job to finish her. That was the plan. He had saved Rodrigo’s ass and assumed he’d been the perfect man for the job. He could hear his brother scolding him again.

 “You mean the guy you sent to trap me?” Liliana asked angrily.

 Geraldo snickered cruelly. She felt his stomach moving with laughter against her back. “Rodrigo is as good as dead as soon as I find him. How did he lose you? You must have put him under one of your spells,” Geraldo snarled in her ear.

 He had become even darker than she recalled, if that was possible. She allowed herself to become limp and heavy in his grasp, making it more difficult for him to hold onto her.

 “Why did you send him after me?” Liliana asked.

 “Shut up!” Geraldo commanded her, heaving her deadweight body against his.

 He couldn’t bear to look at her and kept his eyes off of her face, but there was that hint of familiar electricity he felt as her body was up against his.

 “Use your legs!” he ordered her.

 He tied her hands behind her back and dragged her to a spot in the woods where she could hear the distinct sound of men’s voices. He fastened her to a tree, continuing to avoid eye contact with her, but Liliana was a powerful muse. She always had been. She looked up at him and he glanced into her beautiful amber eyes. They held him, as they had before, and his heart leapt. How was this possible? The pendant was on her. It was supposed to keep the spell at bay. He tried to conjure up the image of Isabel, in her blue pantsuit, but could not, only feeling the embers of a fire that was not quite vanquished with Liliana. He turned his back to her and set off toward the sounds of the men in the distance.

 “At least bring me water. I’m so thirsty,” she begged him.

 “I’ll consider it,” he bellowed as he hastily turned back around to tie a dirty bandana around her mouth to keep her quiet.

 The bandana reeked of cigarettes and grease, tasting bitter to her lips. She resisted the urge to gag and took slow, deep breaths through her nose as she heard his footsteps move away from her. She closed her eyes and took another deep inhale, trying to remain calm. The fact that he would possibly return with water for her made her think he would let her live, although she couldn’t be certain what his intent truly was.

 Liliana had flashbacks to their relationship. How he very carefully and methodically let her into his world. How he’d fallen for her just as hard as she’d fallen for him. Yet, his heart was twisted. She remembered that dreadful night when he nearly suffocated her to death and all of the many moments when he’d lost control with her. She blinked back tears. Why had she felt sorry for him? She recounted the quiet, intimate moments they’d shared lying in bed together after they’d spent hours in heated moments of bliss. He had shown her another side of himself. The broken child he’d once been. How he’d suffered at the hands of an abusive father and an emotionally distant mother. Perhaps she shared a similar trauma. For although her father had never touched a hair on her head growing up, he had never accepted her, was ashamed of her and had rejected her. And her mother was definitely emotionally distant. Neither of them had been wholly loved by their parents.

 But, unlike Geraldo, Liliana had not allowed for this kernel of neglect to blossom into hatred and violence. Who knows why some people could overcome such hostility from their childhoods while some could never. The only thing Liliana knew was that poetry had saved her from the beginning. And the subsequent support she’d found in others had helped her climb out of a hole of despondency. She mistakenly thought her love could somehow save Geraldo.

 The sounds of rustling nearby and heavy breathing brought Liliana back to the present. She remained calm, summoning up her courage as she felt the dampish soil pressing under her legs, making her feel like the moss growing on volcanic rock nearby. Her arms ached and the abrasions from her skin rubbing against the bark of the tree burned. She felt the presence of someone approaching, knowing it was Rodrigo. He stood in front of her, looking at her with a mixture of animosity and dangerous hunger.

 “You are *mala*, Liliana. I should have known better than to think I could beat you at that game you started,” Rodrigo began, his chest heaving, pausing to catch his breath. “Yet, here I am.”

 Liliana just looked up at him because she could not speak with the bandana tightened around her mouth.

 “Who tied you to this tree?” Rodrigo barked.

 Liliana attempted to speak, but it resulted in indistinct mumbling, which was her goal.

 “I’ll remove this, but don’t do anything funny,” Rodrigo snarled as he bent over and began to loosen the knot behind her head.

 He knew that he was not allowed to kill her yet, but she didn’t know that. He needed to know if El Búho had found her, because who else would have tied her here?

 A wave of relief rushed over Liliana as she licked her dry lips. Rodrigo glared at her and moved closer, standing directly in front of her in a menacing manner. She looked up at him. He looked monstrous with his broad shoulders, made even broader from the angle in which she regarded him. The tiny scar above his left eyebrow seemed to glower at her.

 “Speak!” he ordered her.

 Liliana felt the emerald, nestled in the space below her throat. Her mouth was a parched desert. Her arms were bruised from being tied behind her back. The muscles in her legs were spent. A tear formed in her right eye, though she willed it back in desperation. She couldn’t afford to waste any moisture. She was dry as a bone and remained silent.

 Rodrigo was both furious and aroused by Liliana. Those eyes looking up at him made him hard. If she wasn’t going to speak with those sultry lips, there were other things he could have her do with them. He’d considered that act from the moment he first noticed her pillowy lips. He rubbed the hardness stretching the material across the crotch of his pants. Liliana’s eyes widened in fear.

 “Let me moisten that pretty mouth for you, Liliana. You were asking for this earlier, weren’t you?” Rodrigo rasped, as he began to unzip his pants, releasing the full length of his sex.

 Liliana squeezed her eyes shut, willing him to disappear. She’d made a grave error, engaging with him earlier that day, a mistake she wished she had been more savvy about not making. It had just been so long since she’d made a connection with someone and she missed this aspect of her life so much lately. Her need for intimacy had made her a perfect target for him. She could hear him breathing heavily and prepared herself for the worst, praying that the earth would swallow him whole. As if the sacred forest responded to her wish, a shot rang out. The loud thump of a body landing on the ground in front of her made her eyes fly open. She peered in front of her to view Rodrigo’s body slumped just inches from her feet. A pool of blood was forming quickly underneath his head as his cold eyes looked right into hers. She sat frozen, in silence for what seemed like several minutes, unable to move. Then, she let out a high pitched scream, trying to wiggle herself free in a panic. Her heart raced as she glimpsed Geraldo, pistol in hand, beside Rodrigo’s dead body. Geraldo reached around her neck to unfasten the necklace.

**Chapter 29**

**Destroying Angel**

*Energy equals mass*

*Even when that mass is deathly quiet*

*The resistance used or wound up tight*

*Every particle just pushed and changed*

*Like wood in a pyre*

*Energy equals you and me*

*And random thoughts on a blank page*

*Stars and those tiny spores*

*That got captured*

*Like sharp words that got*

*Stuck in your heart*

*Never to part*

*So that you may feel*

*All that is real*

*Again*

 On their way back to the Maravilla Inn to get the veil, Alea and Julian passed by a dead animal in the road. The vultures had taken a break and left the scene. All but one. It looked at Alea with a frightful stare as they moved quickly past it. Alea sped up her pace, so much so that Julian was half running, half walking to keep up with her.

 Alea felt a strange sensation in her stomach. Something was not right and time was not on their side. This seemed to be the theme of her life lately. It was becoming exceedingly clear to her that there was a finite amount of time that further isolated her from the simple existence she once knew. How had she taken so much for granted before? Her health, this place, her grandmother. She glanced at her watch, impossibly wishing she could go back and do some things differently in her life. Ditched Rob earlier, or better yet, never have dated him in the first place. Visited her grandmother one more time as a young adult. Learned more from her about her mother and their past. Find her purpose without so many agonizing decisions. There was now an invisible line of demarcation that would forever distinguish her life before and after the cancer diagnosis and there was no turning back, regardless of how much she wished it were possible. There was no choice but to keep moving forward, into the unknown.

 “I’m not sure if we’ll find her right away, Julian. Something tells me it’s more complicated than we realize. But somehow she is connected to saving the monarchs. Mamá Lulita is right. Liliana has an extra level of protection because of that emerald. Itzpapalotl’s treasure works to protect light beings. And Liliana is definitely one. Maybe she was supposed to have it for this very purpose today. We shall see,” Alea stated with a knowing wisdom that she hadn’t arrived with just days ago.

 Julian watched her in awe. She was not the same timid Alea who he noticed fidgeting in the garden after the funeral. Something inside her had changed.

 When they arrived at the start of the dirt trail, they were prepared for whatever may come their way. They climbed with ease now up the path, winding through the familiar trees and vines, the rocky path giving way to the pine strewn one the farther up they went. At a break in the trees, Alea looked out into the tangerine-colored sky and the valley below, dotted with faint lights. Night was coming, when Itzpapalotl would be strongest. They continued up and around the curved path where the edge of the mountain seemed close as they approached the healing tree. As they were nearing the giant oyamel, Alea’s body jumped with fright at the sound of a gunshot in the distance. She and Julian froze. They’d be hiking for some time with no traces of Liliana. Julian pointed to the right, indicating that they needed to move off of the trail, leading her into a thick grove of trees. It was getting darker as the day was drawing to a close, but they pressed onward, Julian ahead of Alea, guiding her to the place where he believed the shot was fired. Then there was the unmistakable sound of Liliana screaming.

 “Julian, we are moving so far off of the trail. I hope we are able to get to her quickly,” Alea whispered raggedly, increasingly worried the farther they moved among the giant trees in the dense forest.

 “I know this forest, we are heading in the right direction. Liliana has her own powers of persuasion and she is very shrewd. I believe she is okay. I am afraid this is the direction we must continue, but you’ve got Itzpapalotl’s veil. Have it ready,” Julian cautioned as he moved branches aside for Alea to pass through.

 They continued moving up, staying close to the forest floor, moist and cool. Julian stopped by one of the tree trunks and took out his knife and a handkerchief. He cut a bright white capped mushroom growing out of the soil near the base of the tree and placed it in a tiny leather pouch he tucked into his front shirt pocket. Then he handed her the knife.

 “What are you doing?” Alea asked him.

 “Keep the knife in case you need it. Nature has remedies for all kinds of situations. Just taking advantage to gather more of it. I’ve got some already ground up in a packet,” Julian spoke, holding up a tiny plastic bag with a powdery substance in it.

 “How is it poisonous? Obviously not to the touch?” Alea inquired, sliding the knife into her back pocket.

 “No, it must be consumed. My grandmother taught me how to distinguish among the different species in the forest,” Julian answered as he continued to lead them up farther.

 “What is it called?” Alea whisper-called to him as she followed behind.

 “Amanita verna. Destroying Angel,” Julian turned and said as they trudged ahead.

 Interesting name, Alea thought. She wondered how effective a weapon it could be if it must be consumed. Before she could think anything more, the sound of a voice rang out, again, just yards away. It was Liliana. Julian moved back against a tree and signaled to Alea, who covered herself with the veil and moved toward the sounds.

 Alea was prepared to find the stranger who abducted Liliana, but saw that he was on the ground and looked dead. Now there was another man, holding something in his hand. It was the necklace and Liliana was tied to a tree. She looked small and vulnerable in his presence, not like the tall, confident woman Alea knew her to be. She heard Liliana pleading with him, tears streaming down her beautiful cheeks.

 “Take it, I don’t care, Geraldo. What could it possibly do for you? Just leave me be. All I ever wanted was to love you, nothing more, but you are impossible to love because you have only bitterness in your heart. I know that now.”

 Geraldo’s white shirt was stained with dirt and ripped open, revealing a raised pink scar in the shape of an owl on his chest. His face had a look of indignant hollowness.

 Alea instinctively moved closer to Liliana, still covered in Iztpapalotl’s veil, only inches away from Geraldo. She could sense his black, lonely aura and saw a flash above his head of the white owl who had appeared in her dream. A loud thunderbolt from the sky shook the ground, sending a crack into the earth. At that moment, Alea watched in horror as Geraldo pointed his pistol at Liliana.

 “It’s time I end this for once and for all,” Geraldo said between clenched teeth.

 Julian emerged from behind the trees where he was hidden and knocked Geraldo to the ground. The emerald went flying out of his hand.

 Alea scrambled on the ground, searching for it as Geraldo and Julian tussled, the veil slipping off of her. Liliana looked both relieved and shocked at the sudden turn of events.

 “Over there, to the left of my foot!” Liliana hoarsely whispered, as she directed Alea. As Alea groped the earth for the emerald, a gunshot went off in the middle of Julian and Geraldo’s skirmish. She turned around to check Julian’s state. He was rising up from his knees, but did not appear to be shot.

 Her hand grazed something. She recognized it by its shape. It was the emerald necklace. There were footsteps now heading away from her. She could make out Geraldo as he ran off into the forest followed by Julian close behind him.

 She turned on her knee to free Liliana's hands and worked quickly to loosen the cords wrapped around her body. Geraldo had set them tight around Liliana’s tall frame, squeezing her flesh. Alea fished around in her pocket to find the knife Julian had given her, as if he knew she’d need it for this very purpose. She sliced the rope where it lay taut against the trunk of the tree and then carefully freed her hands. She surveyed the area for Julian again, gathering the veil that lay on the ground as she and Liliana headed in the direction of a light that flashed in the distance to search for her beloved.

 As they neared the spot, Alea could hear the voice of Julian speaking calmly to Geraldo.

 “I was never her lover. I was just her friend.”

 “Then why did you bring her here? What was in it for you?” Geraldo shouted at Julian, his face clouded with jealousy.

 Alea could see that Julian had his hands zip-tied behind his back. There was a deep cut on his cheek that oozed blood and his right eye was swollen shut. Her heart raced with the urge to stop the bleeding and tend to his wounds. She forced herself to stay centered.

 “Nothing. Which apparently you cannot understand. There was nothing in it for me. I just cared about her wellbeing. She’s special. You obviously knew that. Why are you holding me here? I can’t do anything for you,” Julian protested.

 “I believe you two are in love. She will come after you to find you. Is she the one who summoned the goddess? She’ll come to find you and I’ll kill her and get that necklace back. It must be done,” Geraldo spoke evenly, intent on his goal.

 Julian’s one open eye glared at Geraldo, “You have the story completely wrong.”

 Geraldo grunted and shouted hoarsely, “Shut up! I know what I’ve been told.”

 Alea flinched at the sound of Geraldo’s broad hand hitting Julian’s face. She was filled with a deep anger, welling up inside her, yet she knew she needed to summon restraint to handle the situation with care.

 Geraldo was losing his confidence. What would he do without the emerald? Had Don Dario tricked him? Why would he have done so? He was not sure about anything anymore. He’d felt drawn to Liliana when he saw her luminous eyes, yet he was not supposed to be under her spell with that necklace on her. Nothing was making sense or working out the way he’d expected it to and it left him feeling misled. He called out to his men, asking for mezcal.

 Covering herself with the veil, Alea moved cautiously toward Julian while Liliana remained in hiding. Geraldo was breathing heavily as Alea approached the scene. He turned toward a man delivering him a mug and as he did so, she slipped her fingers into Julian’s front shirt pocket, where she felt the packet of what she knew to be the ground toxin.

 She whispered into Julian’s ear, “Destroying Angel has its purpose, as does everything in nature.”

 The edges of Julian’s beautiful lips curved upward, lips that she had kissed many times in the last few days and lips she desperately wanted to kiss again. It was clear he knew she had made it to the camp incognito. Geraldo was focused on the man who had handed him the mug, giving Alea a chance to deposit the powder into it.

 “I have plenty of mezcal for you,” the man spoke, holding a bottle in the air.

 “What are you doing here, *güey*?” Geraldo exclaimed.

 “Rico wanted me to be here, just in case,” Ocho responded, straightening his shirt and standing just a bit taller.

 Under normal circumstances, Geraldo would be disturbed by such a decision, but they were far from being in an ordinary situation. Geraldo held out his mug for a pour and Ocho obliged him. He took a long swig of the drink, then wrinkled his nose.

 “Is something off with this mezcal, Ocho?” Geraldo asked.

 Ocho poured himself a cupful, sniffed it and swallowed.

 “I don’t think so. Perhaps just a little bitter. It’s from a new agave variety. Can’t handle it?” Ocho teased him.

 Geraldo shook his head, “Nah, hit me with another pour. It’s going to be a long night, Ocho. I know we’ve had our differences, but let’s bury them with a toast. Drink with me.”

 Ocho relaxed his shoulders. He poured another for them both as the two of them clanked their mugs together, proclaiming, “*¡Por Los Hermanos!*” then wandered off to take a piss.

 Geraldo’s thoughts were spinning in his mind. Ocho had always been his rival, but he just didn’t care anymore. Things were not turning out the way he had planned. Might as well set aside this tension. Ocho had no ties to the dark magic that Geraldo had. He’d wait out the return of Liliana with the necklace and have the advantage still. Only he had the ability to call Don Dario, who would summon Techlotl. It required sacrifice, but it would make him the ultimate martyr in his brother’s eyes and he’d have that respect he’d always longed for that he’d never gotten from their father.

 One thing that he desperately needed to know was what went on between Julian and Liliana. He couldn’t resist the urge to intimidate Julian further. He debated if he truly needed him as bait for Liliana. The thought of this man, Julian, touching Liliana the way he had, kissing her beautiful mouth, laying next to her and listening to her speaking…he couldn’t stand it. The image of Rodrigo towering over Liliana and ready to force himself into her mouth was still fresh in his mind. If he couldn’t have her, no man could have her. Those devilish feelings he thought he’d rid himself of were back. He situated himself close to Julian and began to question him again.

 “Just answer me this. Were you with her when she worked at the restaurant in Mexico City? Did you sleep with her?”

 Julian begrudgingly glanced up again at this relentless man, completely obsessed with Liliana, as if she were an object to store on a shelf. As if she were a possession to own. He shook his head no.

 “I want to know everything you know about Liliana. I want to know what she’s been doing here with you,” Geraldo demanded.

**Chapter 30**

**Timing is Everything**

*Within you there is a light*

*It has a certain miraculous quality that gives it momentum*

*To traverse the stars*

*To change the course of any path*

*Simply by beaming*

*To act upon anything beyond itself*

*Creating dynamic evolution*

*You can find it in the strangest moments*

*Of the highest highs*

*Or the lowest lows*

 Julian knew he needed to bide his time to allow for the effects of the mushroom to

take place, so he took his time recounting in detail his story of Liliana. He spoke slowly

and with long pauses to Geraldo.

 “Liliana was beloved at the restaurant. She made the best tips and always had the

customers eating out of the palm of her hands. We became good friends because she

helped me with my dishes. She would report to me the comments from each customer

every night and it helped me to perfect my cuisine. One night, she suggested we go to a

beautiful restaurant near the Zócalo called Azul Historico. We dressed up and walked

into the open air courtyard with lit up trees and had the best *cochinita pibil*. She was very

charming and flirted with the chef. She even coaxed him into giving me his recipe, which

I took ideas from to make my own. I watched her work her magic on people. She spoke

about her poetry nights at her place with Anna…”

 “She was an incorrigible flirt,” Geraldo interrupted, puffing out a sigh.

“But I never attended any of them. I was very focused on my career. I did not have

time for anything else. And besides, I had my own love at the time, Christina. She was a

painter who came to the restaurant with a group of friends one rainy night. She walked in

with her giant portfolio that she had wrapped up in a plastic garbage sack. Her hair was

dark and cut short, like a boy’s. It showed off her pretty face. Liliana noticed I took a

liking to her and brought me to the table to introduce me to her. She even got her number

for me. Christina was as passionate about her art as I was about my dishes.”

Julian felt something akin to a pinch on his arm. He’d nearly forgotten Alea was right

there, listening to everything. Despite the danger he was in, he giggled at the absurdity of

his situation.

 Geraldo looked at him and spoke, “What’s so funny? Go on…get back to Liliana.”

“Yes, Liliana. Well, she was a wonderful friend to me. She listened to my stories of

Christina and helped me woo her with poetry suggestions. You may remember, Liliana

had a library full of poetry books. When I couldn’t think of ideas for romantic dates with

Christina, it was Liliana who suggested places to take her, like the trajineras of

Xochimilco. I wasn’t from the city, but she knew it well. I took Christina there one

Sunday afternoon. We floated on the canals, feeling like ancient Aztec citizens, listening

to the mariachis sing to us. Liliana knew that Christina loved art and books, so one day

she told me to take her to El Pendúlo bookstore in Polanco. I’ll never forget walking

down that tree-lined street hand in hand with Christina…” Julian was biding his time.

 “El Pendúlo?” Geraldo perked up. “Did Liliana know Don Dario?”

 She’d never mentioned that place before, yet it seemed like a place she would have

clearly enjoyed. He was intrigued.

 “Liliana knew all the bookstores in the city, but that one was her favorite. Don Dario?

Never heard that name. You’ve been to El Pendúlo?” Julian couldn’t imagine someone

like Geraldo going to such a bourgeois place.

 “I’ve been there twice,” Geraldo grunted.

 “Well, Liliana practically grew up in a bookstore, so naturally she knew all the best

ones in the city. She was not just a fellow co-worker, she was a trusted friend. Christina

eventually left Mexico City for Rhode Island School of Design about the same time I

decided to take my skills to the restaurant at the Inn. And during that time of abrupt

change in my life, there was something happening in Liliana’s, too,” Julian paused.

Geraldo was completely engrossed in the story. He lifted his eyebrows and nodded his

head.

 “Yes, what?” Geraldo asked, slurring his words.

 “Well, you know what it was,” Julian answered.

 Geraldo felt dizzy, otherwise he would have lost his patience with Julian teasing him

like this.

 “Please go on,” Geraldo begged.

 “Liliana came to work one morning. She had obviously been crying. She had a black

eye and bruises on her arm. And I offered to help her get away from her situation. So I

asked her to join me on my journey, where I knew she would be accepted and protected.

Because she was with me,” Julian finished his story.

 Geraldo felt satisfied with the knowledge that Julian had not fucked his Liliana.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt a burning shame for what had occurred, but he

was not feeling well enough to explain how Liliana merited such consequences from him.

She both angered and titillated him. If only she had been better behaved, Geraldo thought

to himself before asking another question.

 “And then?”

 “And then a week later she left with me. I wasn’t sure she’d actually do it, but she did.

I was proud of her for having the courage,” Julian added, making eye contact with

Geraldo.

 “Courage to do what? Come here and flirt with tourists?” Geraldo grumbled.

 “Liliana is a healer. She has demonstrated a capacity to heal,” Julian said.

 Geraldo guffawed at the idea of Liliana being some sort of pious healer. The hint of

bitterness in his drink that he had first noticed seemed to have subsided. He felt what he

thought to be just effects of the alcohol as he zigzagged listlessly to a tree to relieve

himself. He slapped his face to stay sober after he zipped up his pants.

Alea took this moment to slip her hand out of the veil to give Julian’s shoulder a

squeeze. She wanted him to know she was still there for him. Unfortunately, Geraldo

turned back to face Julian at that moment. Despite the tainted mezcal, he was still alert.

Out of instinct, Geraldo grabbed the bodiless wrist, the veil sliding completely off of

Alea.

 “What kind of *pinché brujeria* is this?”

An arm materialized along with the body of a young woman, her eyes round as

saucers with fear. Something glinted from her neck.

 “Who are YOU? Give me the necklace!” he commanded her.

 Alea had no choice. As she unfastened it, she heard a branch break where Liliana

remained hidden.

 “Ocho!” Geraldo called out, signaling for him to sweep the area.

 Ocho ran in the direction of Liliana as Geraldo pushed Alea to the ground. She fell

next to Julian, breaking her fall with her hands. Julian’s face reddened with anger. Ocho

returned with Liliana, who struggled to free herself from his grasp, but he was much

stronger, tossing her to the ground next to Alea. The three of them sat quietly defeated as

Geraldo took out the piece of paper he’d been given in El Pendúlo and called out in

Nahuatl: “*Eztli yoh*!”

 A tall figure appeared from seemingly nowhere, the sweet scent of some type of

flower in the air. Alea recognized it as jasmine. Don Dario, taking the emerald from

Geraldo, raised it high, speaking in a deep, full-throated voice that resounded loudly

all around them.

 “We summon the dark lord!” The voice of Don Dario echoed throughout the forest.

The ground began to shake, bringing everyone’s attention to a fissure in the earth that

expanded, making everything and everyone unsteady. Geraldo looked shocked at what

was emerging from the center of the opening on the ground just a few feet away from

him. Although Don Dario had told him the tales of the mighty Techlotl, he was not

prepared for the omnipotent presence of this god. The feathered head of a macabre face

appeared first, followed by massive shoulders painted with turquoise markings. Finally,

the full body of a giant creature manifested wearing a red loincloth made of skulls and

crossbones and below his heavy legs looked as if they were made of stone.

 “Why have I been summoned?” the creature’s voice boomed, echoing loudly.

Geraldo felt unsteady. Was it the alcohol or the presence of this god? He couldn’t tell.

 “WHY HAVE I BEEN SUMMONED?” he bellowed once more, looking from human

to human.

 “Techlotl, we seek your protection,” said Don Dario, who seemed unfazed, offered the

god the emerald.

 Techlotl snatched it, holding it in his jaguar paws.

 Geraldo looked on in awe but what happened next was something he could never have

imagined. The young woman whose wrist he had grasped now raised herself up from the

ground. She was tall, with waves of dark curls falling past her shoulders. She had seemed

very ordinary to him, but there was nothing ordinary about what she was doing now.

Liliana stood up to join her in chanting words that held no meaning to him:

 “*Todas somos hijas de estrellas, estrellas están llenas de nuestro sagrado misterio. Le*

*llamamos Itzpapalotl, protege a las monarcas*.”

 From above them, the skies opened up and the whooshing sound of giant wings sent

the trunks of nearby trees bending impossibly beyond the bounds of nature. The air

picked up as black and orange monarch wings fluttered all around Alea and Liliana. As

the number of butterflies grew, their rustling wings murmured like an angel’s chorus.

Through the flurry of butterfly wings, Alea could make out the form of the Butterfly

Goddess. Liliana gasped at the sight of Itzpapalotl, who screeched loudly as Techlotl

stomped his massive foot, making the earth shake.

 “Why are you here?” Techlotl’s voice bellowed again, fixing his gaze on Itzpapalotl.

 Geraldo wondered how an attractive, but otherwise unremarkable young woman could

possibly be so powerful to summon a goddess when he’d had to call in the help of a dark

sorcerer. Techlotl moved close to the wall of monarchs surrounding Alea and Liliana. His

claws extended, he swiped at Alea in rage for summoning Itzpapalotl. A vicious scratch

landed on her breast as she winced in pain.

 “Now I have you!” he shouted.

 Alea gathered her strength and summoned her courage.

 “Never!” her voice rang out in the forest.

 Incensed by this mortal’s brazenness, Techlotl raised his paw to strike harder, but

before he could, a harrowing voice came from behind him.

 “Leave her be! She has my protection. She comes from a long line of women who

have worshiped me for centuries. Give the emerald back. It does not belong to you, it

surfaced from the depths of the earth and found its way to me through her ancestor,

where it was placed in my temple in my underworld, not yours!”

 Itzpapalotl knocked Techlotl to the ground with one of her flint-tipped wings, the

force sending him to his knees. The ground beneath them all quaked.

Techlotl searched for Don Dario, but the old brujo had disappeared.

 “This mortal owed it to me! It’s mine!” Techlotl cried out, now referring to Geraldo,

who was backing further and further away from the scene. Techlotl beat his jaguar arm

on the forest floor, like a suffering overgrown beast child throwing a tantrum.

 “You cannot have something that was never yours, fool,” Itzpapalotl chided loudly,

the skulls around her neck clacking together as she howled into the sky.

 From the stars descended a fleet of female warriors. Alea recognized them as the

Tzitzimimeh. They screeched loudly as they surrounded Techlotl, who was now filled

with anger at his obvious defeat. He turned to look for Geraldo, like a blind worm, but

Geraldo had scurried away.

 He roared loudly and cursed him, “You can run, but you will not escape me, Búho!

You belong to me!” his voice echoing into the darkened forest.

 “You see that he is no loyal subject of yours, Techlotl. This forest is my domain and

so are all of the creatures in it. Leave it be, now,” Itzpapalotl commanded, a bolt of

lightning striking him.

 Techlotl’s body lit up with electricity, the emerald necklace went flying from him

through the whirlwind of butterflies surrounding Liliana and Alea. It landed back in

Alea’s hand.

 With that, Techlotl seeped back into the gap in the earth, which closed up behind him

as the Tzitzimimeh swiftly ascended back into the star-studded night. The butterfly

fortress guarding Alea and Liliana flickered back into nearby hanging colonies on the

neighboring trees.

 Alea looked up at Itzpapalotl and knelt down, preparing to give the emerald necklace

back to her.

 “No, you are to keep it, for it will continue to provide you further protection. You

came, just as instructed. You trusted in your fate.”

Alea kept her head bowed as she felt the sting of Techlotl’s scratch on her breast.

“Help me untie Julian!” Alea whispered to Liliana, who was staring into the night

black eyes of Itzpapalotl.

 Itzpapalotl had transformed into her human form, right before their very eyes. Gone

were her terrifying wings and skull necklace. She was beautiful with a head full of

Lustrous black hair, her skin shimmered under the light of the moon and her lips were

two ripe cherries. She looked at Liliana with such ardor and rushed to her, picking up her

slender fingers in her hands, pressing one of them at a time into her mouth, continuing,

“There is but one moment embedded in my soul, creating a tether leading me back

through eternity—it was when I lost you.”

 Itzpapalotl raised Liliana up to standing and everywhere she touched Liliana glowed

like the stars in the sky.

 “I remember us,” Liliana breathed, mesmerized by Itzpapalotl as they embraced one

another.

 “You found your way back to this world, somehow, Xochipilli. Or shall I call you

Xochiquetzal? Oh, you were always one and the same, darling,” Itzpapalotl cooed to her

beloved. “I thought you were gone forever when Tlaloc flooded the earth. I had lost all

hope, and wept bitter tears. I fell from the heavens to the depths of darkness into a grief

that I could not climb out of, my long lost love.”

 “I did not know who I was. I did not understand the weight of my burden until this

moment. I’ve been wandering lost on this earth and nothing made me feel as if I belonged

to it. It was when I heard Mamá Lulita’s full recounting of your legend that it first struck

a chord in me of something quite familiar…” Liliana’s voice trailed off as her lover

kissed her lips, their bodies melting into one another.

 Liliana pulled away to continue, “But it wasn’t until I saw your eyes that it all came

flooding back. Now it makes so much sense—the poetry, my sexuality, my gift of sight,

everything.”

 “You will never be alone or unsafe again, my love. I promise you this, now that I have

found you, you will be shielded from any harm. You were made for love and beauty.

Poetry and games are your weapons. Once upon a time you forgot this and look what

happened! You ended up gone for centuries. Don’t dare do that again! I couldn’t bear to

lose you twice!” Itzpapalotl tipped Liliana’s chin up to plant another kiss on her soft lips.

“You will be kept safe here on earth until you are ready to return back into my realm,”

Itzpapalotl promised her, giving her one last earthly kiss.

 Suddenly, the skies opened up and the sound of thousands upon thousands of delicate

wings filled the air, as Itzpapalotl disappeared into the night sky.

 While Liliana was reflecting on such an extraordinary revelation, Alea was freeing

Julian and in another part of the forest, not very far off, someone was getting his

comeuppance.

 Geraldo had fled the awful scene and found Ocho at the camp where the lab was still

operating. It would not be fair if Ocho was left in control of everything. He needed to kill

him but he felt ill. When he at last laid his eyes on Ocho, his body appeared to be

flickering, like flames in a fire. He shook his head and rubbed his eyes, stepping closer to

him, the features of his face slowly running together, as though it were becoming liquid.

 “Something isn’t right,” he commented.

 “Yeah, something isn’t right. We heard all kinds of noises over there. What the fuck is

going on?” Ocho asked.

 Geraldo’s head began to thump wildly. He clutched it and sat down, calling out to

Ocho, “I don’t feel so good, can you bring me water?”

 The sound of an owl hooting nearby drew his attention to an ominous presence. He

slowly turned his head into the direction of a tree. Techlotl appeared beside it with a

satisfied look on his face.

 “Well, here we are, finally, El Búho. It is time to come with me,” he said in a calm

and even tone.

 There was no showy display of summoning, for he had not been summoned. There

was no howling or angry screeching because he was just here to escort Geraldo to his

underworld. Ocho thought he was in a dreamstate as he moved back, crossing himself

and running to warn the other men.

 Before acquiescing completely, Geraldo asked Techlotl one final question, “Why

me?”

 “You had your one shot to summon me with the help of Don Dario, but truthfully, you

were mine from the moment you were branded. You chose me. I did not choose you. It

was just a matter of time. Timing is everything.”

 Geraldo was in no state to resist. His soul was leaving his body as he sank down into

the earth. His life did not flash before his eyes, as he’d always heard would be the case

and he was grateful for that, for his life had not been a particularly good one. It had been

difficult, full of struggles and schemes, always hustling and running from his demons.

Perhaps this Underworld would prove to be a better place to exist. The mystical owl

perched in the tree above took flight. Its great wings expanded as it soared off into the

night, flashing yellow eyes at Geraldo before departing.

**Chapter 31**

**Full Circle**

*Equidistant*

*Perfect movement forward*

*Sliding Downward*

*Then Upward*

*Each point containing*

*Its own perfect perspective*

*Of Existence*

*All around us*

*Vectors teaching us*

*A fraction of a change*

*Moves the course*

*Flowing round, flowering*

*Each dying end*

*Turning back to life*

 “That was crazy! Geraldo was a real piece of work. A complete narcissist! I hope Techlotl found him!” Julian exhaled as he rubbed his wrists and stretched his arms.

 “Julian, you were so patient and steady. It was killing me to stand by and just watch you,” Alea softly grazed her lips on his wounded cheek.

 “You did exactly what you needed to do–it was perfect. Such courage, Alea,” Julian remarked as she searched in her pocket for a kleenex to clean the blood from his face.

 “So…this Christina…I’ll have to hear more about her one day…” Alea playfully added, smiling at Julian.

 “Yes, one day,” Julian responded, then pulled Alea closer to him.

 The sounds of the other men’s voices nearby were getting louder in the distance. They were shouting now. Alea touched the emerald hanging at the base of her neck as Liliana hugged her. The three of them readied themselves to leave. Before they had time to think more about it, footsteps approached. Alea dropped the kleenex she’d been using to wipe away the blood on Julian’s face to search for the veil on the ground, but not soon enough. A bright light beamed on them.

 “Hands up!” a loud voice yelled, echoing in the air.

 They obeyed. Alea could make out the outline of two men, pointing guns at them.

 “What happened here?” the short, stocky one demanded.

 Alea was at a loss for what to do. She stood frozen in her spot. She could sense Julian was deliberating what to say when they heard the other man speak.

 “We don’t have time for explanations. Rico is going to blow his top. Just kill them.”

 Alea braced herself for the end. Would she join her grandmother? She could feel the beads of the rosary that once belonged to her grandmother, tucked away in her front pocket.

 More steps approached from their left, heavy like horse hooves. To her surprise, the two men suddenly dropped their weapons and began to back away from the scene. Out of the corner of her eye, Alea made out the familiar shape of Father Maldonado on horseback. He had his eyes fixed on the men. His stare held them in a strange stupor. The men were unable to move from their spot. Mamá Lulita followed right behind him with Chief Muñoz, handcuffs at the ready.

 Chief Muñoz dismounted and called out to the men, “Hands in the air, no moving!” as he charged forward to arrest them.

 Father Maldonado helped Mamá Lulita off of her horse. She embraced her grandson.

 “I knew you would make it just in time! All is as it should be,” she proclaimed, kissing Julian’s uninjured cheek.

 Father Maldonado put a reassuring arm around Alea.

 “Your grandmother led me to you here. Her presence still calls from the forest,” he said.

 It was comforting to hear those words and Alea leaned into his strength. He possessed an inner fortitude that seemed to defy his age. In the distance, they heard other officers making more arrests.

 Chief Muñoz spoke evenly, “We were able to get help from the National Guard to take *Los Hermanos* down. They will not be tampering with the forest anymore nor threatening our sanctuary.”

 Alea looked up at the stars, which appeared to beam brighter than she’d ever seen them. She heard the words, “*Hijas de Estrellas*.”

 Father Maldonado spoke gently, “It’s time to get back to Mamá Lulita’s house now. Itzpapalotl has spoken and you have done your part. All has been righted in her world for the first time in many centuries. The oyamel are safe again and now, so are the creatures they house, including our precious monarchs. Nature is back in balance.”

 They made their way back to the trail, Father Maldonado letting Alea and Julian use his horse as he led them all. They descended the mountain to Mamá Lulita’s place quietly and slowly as the smell of pine surrounded them. Alea leaned against Julian as Father Maldonado’s horse moved skillfully down the trail. She wanted to keep this memory forever in her mind. The cool air of the forest, the sounds of frogs chirping and even the dust kicking up from the forest floor were all things she wanted to remember from this night.

 When they finally arrived at Mamá Lulita’s place, Liliana prepared tea and called out to the four directions.

 “So, what exactly are you? It seems you are a deity in human form, Liliana,” said Alea, incredulously inspecting her friend.

 “Aren’t we all, really?” Liliana said, smiling to herself, adding, “Itzpapalotl reminded me of who I was. There’s more for me to do here on earth. I have you and Julian to thank for finding me, keeping me safe and guiding me to Her. She set everything in motion for the forest to be protected, but it could not have happened without you, Alea. You were the key, you know that.”

 “We all know this,” Father Maldonado agreed. “Juana told me you would be the one to change things here. She was sad she couldn’t be here to see it happen. But she told me to stay close and keep you in my protection if she could not.”

 Alea felt the sting from Techlotl's scratch on her breast. Liliana reached over and lay her hand over it. A warm sensation washed all over her, entering her through the wound.

 “Thank you for your bravery, Alea.” Liliana whispered, closing up Alea’s injured skin.

 “You’ve become an even more powerful healer, Liliana,” Alea remarked.

 “I have and I know I have more work to do here on earth for others like me,” Liliana said.

 It was just before dawn as Mamá Lulita lit the candles on her *ofrenda* and they all recounted stories of loved ones who had passed before while eating the leftover *pollo con mole rojo* that Mamá Lulita had saved for them. The food filled their bellies and the tea seemed to lull them all into a very tranquil state.

 Mamá Lulita set to work cleaning Julian’s cuts and scrapes and put an ice pack over his black eye while Father Maldonado continued his blessings.

 Alea’s phone buzzed.

 “Mom?”

 “Alea? I had a strange dream about you. You were up in the forest, surrounded by butterflies. My mother was there. She told me you were brave. She told me you were like the *monarcas*, with an inner compass to guide you. I woke up and just needed to check on you. Are you coming home soon?”

 It was comforting to hear her mother’s voice, though it was also a reminder that she still had another battle to face at home.

 “I’ll be back the day after tomorrow. My appointment with the doctor is on Thursday. Everything is fine. It’s been an interesting night, to say the least, I have much to tell you, mamá,” Alea informed her.

 “Día De Los Muertos is like that. It’s the thinning of the veil between the two worlds, my mother always told me. Maybe that’s why she was there with you, *mija*. I’m so happy you’re coming home soon. Your dad and I will pick you up at the airport. Send us your flight details. *Te quiero siempre*.”

 “*Te quiero, mamá*. I’ll see you soon.”

 Alea looked at Julian who knew it was time to escort her back to her room at the Inn. When they got there, he gently undressed her and she, him. They slid into bed together and lay next to one another in the dark. Dawn would arrive soon.

 “You are unlike anyone I’ve ever known,” he whispered into her ear. “I’m not going to lose you.”

 “Julian,” Alea said, her heart both full and sad at the same time.

 “What?” he pressed his lips against her shoulder.

 “Just Julian,” Alea said, pausing, then adding, “I cannot predict the future. I have no idea what will happen to me once I get back to Texas. You know we can’t be together. I need to do this next part of my life alone.”

 Julian placed his finger against her lips as he kissed her neck.

 “Why? That makes no sense. I will always be here for you, *bonita.* It’s what I was born to do, you know that. I’ll find a way to come to Texas to be with you through whatever comes next,” he whispered tenderly.

 Alea pulled away with moist eyes, shaking her head no. She knew that what lay ahead for her in Texas must be faced without him. In the depths of Julian’s dark eyes, Alea could see the future endeavors that would come to pass for him. Life moved on, full steam ahead, regardless of her illness, for everything and everyone else. She loved him enough to not want to deter him in any way. As always, their intimacy was such that he could read her thoughts.

 “Shhh…let’s not think about that now. If this is our last time together, I want to savor it,” he breathed into the space outside of her heart, right between her breasts. A tear slipped from his eye.

 Alea shivered as his warm lips gently planted kisses all over her body, his tears mingled with the kisses. He paused.

 “One day I’ll have my own restaurant in Austin. I’ll find a way to be with you, you can count on that, Alea. I will create a menu with all of the dishes I’ve made for you while you’ve been here: the Chiles en Nogada, Chilaquiles, Huevos Moltelenos, Hongos Saltados, Pollo en Mole Rojo, Cinnamon Crepes with Strawberry Compote and Fresh Cream…I will call the place, *Casa de Alea*. And there will be a giant monarch butterfly on the door and your portrait will hang by the kitchen so that I can see you everyday,” he whispered to her, his hands reaching out, creating the outline of his imagined future place. She wiped the tears off of his cheeks. Her heart felt like it would explode inside her chest.

 “I believe you, Julian,” she said as she kissed his beautiful lips, sliding him inside of her as they moved their bodies gently together, careful to avoid the bruised spots.

 They didn’t sleep for the remaining time they had together. The sky turned pink and the sun began to rise. Alea watched a beam of morning light shine around Julian as he took out a piece of paper folded in half. It was slightly crumpled, but he tried his best to smooth it out with his hands before passing it to her.

 “I’ve been meaning to give you this, Alea.”

 Alea took it, looking at it curiously.

 “Did you write something for me?” she asked demurely.

 “No, *mi amor*. But I think it could have been written for you,” he opened her free hand, kissing right into the center of her palm.

 “Should I read it now?” she asked.

 “You decide.”

 Alea gently set it on the bedside table, saving it for another time. For now, there were more embraces to be had, as she didn’t know if they would share such moments again. But there was deep sadness in those eyes she loved so much.

 “Alea, I won’t let you go through anything scary alone, you know that, don’t you?”

 “Julian, I won’t let you let your dreams wither away because of me.”

 “Please let me follow you, Alea,” he implored her.

 “Julian.”

 “That’s right, just say my name and I’ll be there for you.”’

 “Maybe I will summon you. But it won’t be right away. Please trust me.”

 “Alea.”

 “Yes?”

 “Just Alea.”

**Chapter 32**

**Indomitable**

*One day they may come back to you*

*Have you prepared yourself anew?*

*Have you gone on your own pilgrimage?*

*Have you faced your very own umbrage?*

*For when these lessons return to know*

*The breadth and depth of your adagio*

*This is when all is revealed*

*The stalwart strength in your shield*

*The gentle bend that did not break*

*Regardless of the commanding quake*

*You will then come to find*

*That in the midst of all that time*

*The stumbles and the thorns helped form*

*A compelling foundation to transform*

*Your healing home inside of you*

*A precious place of highest value*

*It never stops until you end*

*The effort put forth to transcend*

*Each new lesson to teach you more*

*That is what a healing house is for*

 It was a cool, fall day in Austin, Texas. The leaves danced erratically in the air from the strong gusts of wind. A cold front had blown in from the night before. It had been a stormy night, the moon almost completely full. The lightning was especially intense with loud claps of thunder that had distressed Itzel. Itzel wouldn’t leave Alea’s side during the night and had jumped into her bed with her, leaving black hairs all over her sheets that Alea tried to remove unsuccessfully in the morning.

 “Come on, girl. Now I’ve got to wash all the bedding, thanks to you!” she lovingly chided her loyal companion.

 Itzel looked at her mistress with one innocent ice blue eye and one dark brown one, leaning into Alea’s leg as she gathered the sheets and other laundry that needed washing. Itzel went with Alea wherever she went and it had been that way for a year and a half now.

 Alea found the large black German Shepherd mix at a local shelter at the suggestion of her therapist and also her best friend, Kiki. Alea’s father urged her to utilize the resources available to her after her battle with cancer. As usual, her father was right. Dr. Jordan had vast experience as a therapist who helped clients navigate the emotional toll of cancer and also provided support with post-cancer PTSD. And although the people at the shelter were delighted that Alea chose to adopt the loner dog who was undernourished and twice abandoned, in reality it was Alea who was in need of rescuing. Alea named the dog after her ancestor who had survived her own harrowing past. Itzel had given Alea a renewed purpose to get out of bed and a reason to leave her apartment and to return to work.

 Alea removed her oversized shirt with the words *Plant Mama* on it that served as her pajamas and touched the scar above her left breast, where the port had been put in for the chemotherapy. It wasn’t the angry, raised connected red line that it had once been. It had simmered down into a soft pink ellipsis that didn’t call as much attention to itself. She pulled on a clean, black sweatshirt and some yoga pants and quickly brushed through her hair, which finally reached her shoulders once again. At the clinic they had told her it may not grow back the same color or texture after the chemotherapy, so she wasn’t sure what to expect. It had come back a lighter shade of brown, but it was still wavy and vibrant, much to her relief.

 She and Itzel headed through the large pecan trees lining the path to the laundry facilities in her apartment complex. She crossed her fingers that there would be an open washing machine available. It was a Saturday, but it was early yet, so perhaps she’d be in luck. On her way, a flurry of black and orange butterfly wings stopped her dead in her tracks. They surrounded her, transporting her to another time and place altogether. A place she’d nearly forgotten following a very tumultuous time in her life. They took her breath away as she remembered being at the top of a mountain in Mexico, far away from here, in a different body, in a different time. Before the surgeries and the chemotherapy, there had been those incredible moments, suspended like an insect in amber. Moments that stretched on for what had seemed like decades, but they’d only taken place in a matter of days, not years. She had not thought of that experience in a long time. Too much had happened when she returned. Maybe she’d talk about it to Dr. Jordan at her next therapy session.

 “There are so many butterflies out today! Must have been swept in with the storm on their journey through Texas,” called out an elderly neighbor who regularly sat out on her porch with her plants and her cats. She’d chatted with Alea about her rosemary plant in passing before.

 Alea forced a polite smile and a quick wave. Grateful to have the excuse of laundry to continue moving, she wasn’t in the mood to chat at the moment. All those memories stirred up a certain someone she’d lost touch with over the years. Blinking back tears, she could still picture those almond-shaped eyes and that thick, straight hair. He had texted and called several times when she was first back home, but it was all too much for her. She was weak and sick from the chemotherapy and surgeries at the time. She asked her mother to send a message via her Tío Marco to Julian that she was okay, but needed time to heal and he had respected that.

 “Julian,” she whispered his name out loud to the sky.

 Her heart skipped a beat thinking about him, but she focused on getting to the washing machines before they were taken. She managed to get two loads started and decided to do some journaling in the quiet recreation area by the facilities instead of going back to her apartment right away. The last time she’d left the clothes too long and returned to find her wet clothes sitting outside of the washer.

 Itzel plopped herself on the tile by Alea’s feet. Alea took out a leatherbound journal her parents had given her with the word *Gratitude* on the cover. When she first received it, she’d balked at the idea. It seemed trite and vapid. It was an overused word, like “blessed” and she had not been in a very grateful state of mind at the time. How could she be? She’d sacrificed a lot of herself and still, she suffered much in return. Bad things happened to good people. Happy endings weren’t real, in her point of view. However, at the time Dr. Jordan had prodded her by giving her an assignment to write something she was grateful for everyday, even if it was just one word. She reluctantly opened it up and wrote in it. She glanced back at that first entry, written exactly a year before:

 *October 15th*

 *Today I don’t have to clean up dog shit.*

 Short and sweet, it made Alea laugh out loud now. She had forgotten how long it had taken her to train Itzel, who the former owners had given up on, sadly. Itzel had also been awful with other dogs. But with time and a lot of visits with Cocoa, Kiki’s dog, Itzel had overcome her bad habits. So much had happened in a year. Alea had been recently promoted at the lab to a head position and she’d finally gained the self-confidence to start doing more outside of her work.

 “Hey, I know that laugh!”

 Alea turned to the familiar voice of Kiki, her blonde hair pulled up in a messy bun and her large, black glasses framing her oval face.

 “What are you up to tonight, girl? I have free tickets to an art opening with music and food tastings at Canopy. Want to join me?” Kiki asked, leaning down to give Itzel a scratch on the back.

 “I don’t know. You know I’m a homebody and I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night because the storm kept us up.”

 “Come on, we can just go for a little bit. I’ll even finish up your laundry for you if you want to go back to bed. It didn’t keep me or Cocoa up–she can sleep through anything, like an old man. Let’s go have some fun tonight!” Kiki offered, her sweet, pretty mouth curving up into a mischievous smile.

 Kiki had definitely been helpful in the getting-out-there department as well as the helping-train-Itzel arena. She was a natural extrovert as an event coordinator. Alea considered the offer. It was a sweet deal and she did like the art galleries at Canopy. She could hear her mother’s voice in her head saying, “*Mija*, go out and enjoy your life. You are alive, still. Go live!”

 “Well, I can’t turn down a chance to catch up on my sleep, even if it will be on a bed with no sheets. But I don’t even think I have anything to wear. I haven’t been to an event like that in so long,” Alea mused out loud.

 “I have all kinds of dresses from a fancy clothing swap soiree that a ton of rich ladies donated to last weekend. Lots of goodies in your size. No excuses. I’ll finish your laundry and meet you at your place with some fun choices!” Kiki exclaimed.

 Alea nodded her head. Dr. Jordan would be proud of her for choosing to get out and she knew she could count on Kiki to have her back if she wanted to leave early. She went back to her apartment, got cozy in her sheet-less bed with a spare blanket from the closet and wrote in her journal:

*October 15th*

*Today, on my way to do laundry I saw all these monarch butterflies. They made me happy, thinking about the fact that they still have a place to go in the mountains of Mexico. They also made me think about him. I hope he is doing well, wherever he is. Kiki is doing my laundry and I’m getting caught up on my sleep…and I’m going out tonight. Hopefully I’ll be grateful about that tomorrow. I’m going to be open-minded about it.*

 Would she be happy about that decision tomorrow? It was nerve-racking to picture herself going out. She wavered about making an excuse and picked up her phone to text Kiki that maybe her throat hurt or some such story, but set it back down again. Dr. Jordan always advised whenever negative thoughts took over to check the simple things first: was she tired or hungry? Alea yawned. She knew she was in need of more sleep. Spying a relatively new fantasy novel she’d recently acquired, she pulled it from the stack of books by her bed.

 It began, “*Under the dim light of the moon, she stood at the edge of a path. Though darkness surrounded her, there existed an undeniable opportunity for something lighter, as foretold by the wizened soothsayer. She only had to steel herself with the courage inside her to proceed, for the unknown held secrets yet to be revealed. Nothing could stop her from her destiny, not the demons that haunted her, nor the monsters that she must slay. She was indomitable*…”

 She couldn’t read past the word “indomitable”. Her eyelids grew heavy and she gave in to sleep. Soon she was dreaming that she was surrounded by monarch butterflies high up in the mountains of her grandmother’s native land. She felt her grandmother take her hand. It was warm and she smelled like tangerines and spices. She guided her to the field at the top of the mountain where the butterflies were abundant. The whole sky was buzzing with joyful energy when her grandmother released her hand, beaming as she gestured for Alea to continue walking alone. Alea stepped delicately to avoid the monarchs that had fallen, but still fluttered with life on the ground. One beat its wings rapidly, lifting itself off of the earth and eventually fluttering away. She gazed at it, feeling both exhausted and amazed for the resilient creature that refused to die just yet. Then she heard Julian’s voice echoing from afar. Words written on a piece of paper he’d given her the last morning they were together sounded through the air:

*I can not walk*

*I can not see*

*Further than what*

*Is in front of me*

*I lay on my back*

*yet I do not cry*

*Transported in space by the butterflies.*

*Above my bed*

*Another sky*

*With the wings you sent*

*Within my sight*

*All pain dissolves*

*In another light*

*Transported thru*

*Time*

*By the butterfly*

 She woke up feeling peaceful, immediately searching for that paper. The one and only time she had looked at it was on the plane back to Austin, years ago. Rummaging through a vintage brass and jade box her grandmother had given her that she kept under her bed, she found the note. A pair of monarch butterfly wings fell from it as she unfolded it. She recognized Julian’s neatly slanted handwriting of the words by Patti Smith. Back then she had looked it up online, recognizing the cobalt blue wall with the poem on it that resided at the Casa Azul in Coyoacán. She had visited Frida’s house-turned-museum once before and remembered seeing the inspiration for Patti Smith’s poem: the butterfly collection that Frida Kahlo’s friend Isamu Noguchi hung on the ceiling of her night bed. He gave her something beautiful to distract her from her pain, just as Julian had done for her. She sighed, remembering that strange period of time in Mexico before she returned to Texas for her cancer treatment. In hindsight, it was almost as if her grandmother had intentionally left a challenging task for her in order to prime her for surviving cancer.

 “*Abuela*,” Alea said aloud as she stepped out on her porch to pinch some mint leaves from the potted plant to make herself a cup of tea, “*Gracias para todo*.”

 Alea prepared a bath for herself. Lowering herself into it, she had a flashback to a time at the Maravilla Inn when Liliana brought her a cup of tea and gave her the emerald necklace. Maybe she would wear the necklace tonight. She smiled at the memory, writing it into the last page left in her journal before letting it drop to the bathroom floor with the pen.

 “I’ll have to get a new journal,” she said to herself, “I guess there’s more to be written, huh, *abuela*?”

 Alea leaned back in the water and relaxed her shoulders. Her skin was silky as she ran her soapy fingers up and down her arms. She splashed her face and touched her lips and that’s when thoughts returned to Julian’s lips on hers. A tingle zipped up and down her spine. She shook her head, as if this could rid her of those memories. She was curious about him every now and then, but also knew it was for his own good that she’d stopped answering his texts after she had returned. She truly cared for him and didn’t want to rob him of the time he had to follow his dreams. It would have been selfish of her to take that from him. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind, she had told herself. And besides, she had been in no place to think about a relationship during her treatment or even after it. She washed her hair slowly, remembering when she had shaved it all off before starting the chemotherapy. She thought she could be the one ultimately in control of losing any part of herself, but that wasn’t the case. Soon after the chemotherapy began, the tiny brown spikes of hair still remaining on her head fell like splinters onto the floor one day. That had truly been the hardest part; letting the healthy parts of herself go in order to kill the cancer. Reaching over the edge of the tub, she retrieved the pen and opened up the last page of her journal, squeezing in, “I have my hair almost back to where it was before the cancer.” A drop of water slid from her hand to the page, blurring out the word “cancer.” She rinsed and toweled off, stepping out of the tub to an animated Itzel, who had come in to check on her mistress.

 “Yes, we can go on a quick walk, girl,” Alea bent down to kiss the top of Itzel’s head.

 When they stepped outside, the gusty wind had slowed to a sleepy breeze. The sun shone and she was filled with a sense of hope. It was a sensation she hadn’t felt in awhile.

 Kiki showed up at her door before too long with a basket full of folded laundry and four different dresses to try on. Alea realized she was committed now to going out, no excuses. She almost felt…what was it, excitement? Kiki put on a playlist of upbeat music to set the mood, dancing around Alea as she slipped on the first dress, a black one with stripes. It was too short for her liking, though Kiki thought it showed off her legs nicely. The next one was too baggy and the other one was too tight, making her feel like a stuffed sausage. Her hips often got in the way of unforgiving material. She sighed.

 “I don’t know, Kiki. Maybe this is a sign,” Alea felt resigned.

 “Come on, there’s still one more,” Kiki said, handing Alea a silk dress in a deep green color.

 Alea doubted it would fit, but tried it on, nonetheless. She was surprised to find that it hugged her body perfectly.

 “Your tits look amazing!” Kiki exclaimed as Alea finished zipping it up.

 It cinched in at her waist, emphasizing her curves. She peered at herself in the mirror.

 “Yeah, it’s taken some getting used to, but I’m okay with them now,” Alea smiled at her silhouette.

 Her reconstructed left breast matched her right one pretty damn good. The scar from the surgery, like the one from her chemotherapy port, had settled down into an inconspicuous pink curve under her breast. She did look pretty good in the dress. She pulled out a tarnished silver chain with the emerald pendant and put it on. It matched the dress perfectly.

 “Wow! That necklace is beautiful. I have a silver polishing cloth to shine it up for you,” Kiki offered.

 “Perfect. It looks like we are going to this event, then. And this is exactly what I will wear!” Alea's mouth broke out into an involuntary smile hearing a familiar tune coming on.

 “Ooooh, I love this song! And it’s a full moon tonight!” Kiki cried out, hugging Alea.

 “Dance with me!” Alea returned, starting to move to the song, *Lobo Hombre en Paris* by La Unión.

 Kiki laughed, twirling Alea around and dipping her when the “auuu” part came on.

 “What exactly is happening in this song, anyhow?” Kiki asked, as she continued to dance with Alea.

 “Oh, it’s an 80’s new wave hit from Spain. My mom used to listen to it all the time. It’s about this werewolf, Dennis, who wanders the dark streets of Paris and follows couples to secret places, observing them under the light of a full moon….”

 “Ooooh, very twisty and magical! Alea, you are surrounded by this kind of stuff!” Kiki exclaimed, fluttering her fingers around Alea and giggling.

 There was a confidence about herself that Alea hadn’t felt in a long time as she smiled generously, moving her body to the beat of the music with Kiki. When the song ended, she busied herself with a little make up in her bathroom while Kiki went to fetch the polishing cloth. She applied plum colored lipstick and shimmery eyeshadow on the lids of her eyes, which made her large brown eyes pop. A shine serum gave her curls a playful luster, just reaching the tops of her shoulders. When Kiki returned she was dumbstruck.

 “Girl, you are radiant! Look at you!” She took Alea by the shoulders and placed her back in front of the bathroom mirror.

 Alea inspected herself while Kiki polished up the necklace and then placed it on her neck. The emerald sparkled brilliantly.

 “I do look good, don’t I?” Alea smiled again at herself in the mirror, realizing she had not smiled at herself in a very long time.

 “You are stunning.” Kiki confirmed. “Let’s get a photo for the event.” She took out her phone to capture a sexy pout from the both of them, something that Alea wasn’t really into, but she humored her best friend.

 “Let’s go break some hearts!” Kiki exclaimed, pinching Alea on her ass, eliciting a squeal from her best friend.

 Alea surprised herself. When they arrived at Canopy on Springdale Road, she was not nervous. Maybe it was exactly the right time for her to come out of her shell. Dr. Jordan had told her she’d know when the ideal time would be. It had been awhile since she had felt like mingling in public again, without hiding behind her therapy appointments or her fantasy books or the many plants that covered her porch.

 They arrived at the two story compound with multiple art studios. The event was taking place downstairs, beginning in the outdoor area before the entrance and snaking into the first big gallery on the right. Alea knew she looked good. Many heads turned as she walked up with Kiki, who smiled playfully and huskily breathed between her teeth, “Girl, every guy here that isn’t gay is drooling over you. I think you may just get laid tonight.”

 Alea snorted at Kiki’s comment. It had been awhile. There was a work friend’s cousin named José who took her out about eight months ago, but she knew she wasn’t ready for dating back then and was honest with him about her feelings so that was a one off, but she had enjoyed a nice dinner at Casa Columbia on the east side and a little bit of fun with him, regardless. Dr. Jordan had told her it was good progress that she stepped out of her comfort zone at least to practice getting back out there again. Other than that and a few random, desperate booty calls from Rob (that she found both annoying and pitiful and had let him know as much), she’d been in a dry spell.

 Kiki made her rounds at the event in her effervescent style, making small talk with many of the guests as Alea wandered around, taking in the artwork on the walls. There were two artists' work on display and one of them appealed to her strongly. They were portraits of different women and men at cafés painted in an impressionistic style. She was inspecting one in particular of a lady whose face reminded her of Liliana when a server came by with appetizers and champagne.

 “Are the artists present?” Alea asked as she took a glass.

 “Yes, that one over there, she’s the one who painted the piece you’re admiring,” he pointed to an attractive petite woman about her age with short, dark hair. She was wearing a red kimono with orange flowers on it as she moved through the room daintily, speaking to different guests interested in her work.

 Alea watched her and wanted to ask her about her work, but the woman was engrossed in a conversation, moving her hands rapidly as she pointed out a particular corner on a canvas to an elegant couple. Alea figured she was probably trying to make a sale, so she headed to a different room with delicious smells coming from it. As she entered the space, the emerald on her neck warmed against her skin. A familiar set of eyes took her in from one of the tables that had hors d'oeuvres covering it. She glanced up to see a pair of the brightest, darkest eyes she’d ever seen meet hers as a shiver went up her spine.

 “Alea?” Julian smiled, as he approached her, wearing his chef apron.

 “Julian? What…what are you doing here?” Alea’s heart was beating so loudly, she was glad the music had begun playing nearby so he couldn’t hear it. She froze in her spot, feeling a combination of embarrassment, surprise and excitement.

 “I’m here with my friend, Christina. She’s become quite the successful artist these days. After she finished Rhode Island School of Design, she spent a year painting in Paris. We reconnected when I traveled there last year for a chef tour and I’ve had the good luck of catering for some of her wealthy patrons that helped me move here to Austin a few months ago. I’ve just landed enough investment money from them to start my own restaurant here,” he said, his eyes sparkling. “I can’t believe it’s you! I knew if I made it here I’d eventually find you…I know you needed time after you returned to Texas. But I tried texting you again when I got here recently…” his voice trailed off and he looked away.

 She could see the sadness in those dark pools of tenderness. She felt a stab of guilt, but also something else…what was it? Another shiver made her tremble inside. She’d given up on the idea of them ever meeting again, but, maybe she really hadn’t given up the idea. Maybe she had summoned him after all. Another tingle went up her spine. No, he just mentioned that girl, Christina, she told herself. She averted her eyes, then looked up at him suddenly.

 “Wait, you tried texting me recently?” Alea pulled her phone out and scrolled through a handful of texts. There was nothing from Julian.

 “Yes, look,” Julian opened his phone, handing it to her.

 On his phone there were three texts sent to her over the last couple of months. She looked at the number under her name and shook her head.

 “Oh Julian! That number isn’t mine anymore. I cracked my old phone and ended up getting a new number–long story, but that’s why I didn’t get your messages!”

 He smacked the palm of his hand on his forehead and grinned at the missed connection. Her heart sped up at the idea of him still trying to reach her after all this time. But then she paused.

 “Wait, but Christina? Is that the girlfriend you dated? The one Liliana helped you connect with when you worked at the restaurant in Mexico City?”

 Julian nodded his head. Alea’s heart was heavy as she smiled weakly at him. She’d missed the texts from him and he’d probably abandoned any hope in seeing her again, so he must have hooked up with Christina. Well, good for him, it was best he had found someone new…or old, actually. She did feel she owed him an explanation for what happened when she returned from Mexico. They’d been childhood friends, beyond everything else.

 “Yeah, there’s a lot we have to catch up on, Julian. I owe you an apology. Cancer changed so much for me after Mexico…but there’s no excuse for ignoring you back then, I had my uncle let you know…I just…” Alea stopped and averted her eyes again.

 She looked down at her feet, noticing a chip in her nail polish on her left big toe that peaked out of the top of the heels she was wearing. How could she explain to Julian that she couldn't bear to keep him in her orbit when she didn’t know if she’d live or not? She didn’t think that would have been fair to him. And then afterwards, she’d fallen into such a deep depression, she had lost contact with many people. She’d avoided social media and gone into full hermit mode, with the exception of Kiki, her family and the occasional meetings with other cancer survivors through the clinic. Her body had changed and she had suffered greatly. It had been a lonely journey. Everything that had occurred in Mexico from before had seemed like a long ago fever dream at the time. She cared about Julian and wanted him to go on and live his life with his health and vitality. And clearly he had. He’d made his dream of starting his own restaurant come true as she knew he would and it appeared he and Christina were back together. She tried to muster up feelings of happiness for him. She needed to be happy for him. This was, after all, what she had wanted for him. How was she to know back then that she’d actually survive her hardships and one day be ready to live her life again? Or that he’d end up here of all places?

 “*Bonita*,” Julian tipped her chin up toward his face, “You don’t need to explain anything to me. You know you and I share our own unspoken language. We always have. I knew you needed your own space, but I also wanted you to know I was here for you no matter what. You remember we are eternally bonded? I was just waiting for you to summon me. I told you I’d find a way to get to Texas and I did!”

 His eyes searched hers, seering into them deeply with that same look from that fateful day they ascended the mountain together. A flush of heat rose to Alea’s cheeks, remembering. Long ago, in a different time and place.

 “Alea!!” the familiar sound of Liliana’s sultry voice interrupted them.

 She approached, along with an equally svelte blonde. Liliana took one look at Alea and Julian, smiled joyously and then blurted out, “Well, why don’t you just make out already, you two!!”

 The blonde woman’s lips curved into a beautiful smile as she laughed and arched an eyebrow, asking Liliana in Spanish if this was Alea.

 “Yes, Anna, this is the famous Alea you’ve heard all about from me. Alea, meet Anna, my former roommate and beauty extraordinaire. We reconnected when she showed up at one of Christina’s art openings in Mexico City! She’s become quite the fan girl and has followed us around ever since. We still do poetry readings here and there, like in the old days, but with champagne and brie now!”

 Alea embraced the statuesque woman, recalling her role in Liliana’s transformation story.

 “*Mucho gusto*,” Alea said as Liliana slid in for her own embrace.

 “I never expected to see you here in Austin! Girl, you look amazing!!” Alea exclaimed as she hugged Liliana, her signature long, flowing auburn hair smelling like Chanel No. 5.

 Liliana gave Alea a hearty squeeze, whispering into her ear, “Sweet girl, what are you waiting for? Kiss him, he’s been waiting for you all this time…”

 Alea felt warmth flooding her neck and her face, pulling away from Liliana’s embrace. Julian looked from one of them to the other, his eyes shining. Familiar flutters moved playfully below Alea’s belly, desire stirring inside her. But wasn’t he here with Christina?

 “There you are!” The voice came from the pretty woman in the red kimono as she wrapped her arm around Liliana’s waist.

 “This is Alea, my darling,” Liliana said, as she leaned down and kissed the woman sensuously on the lips. “Alea, this is my girlfriend, Christina.”

 Christina looked carefully at Alea, sizing her up with a twinkle in her eye.

 “Ahhhh! You are the one I’ve been commissioned to do a portrait of for Julian’s restaurant!! I was going to paint you from one of the many pictures he has of you on his phone. But now I can actually have you sit for me. Is that okay with you? You know the restaurant is going to be called *Casa de Alea*,” Christina said cheerfully.

 Julian looked down at Alea, “Will you let her paint your portrait for my restaurant? Do you remember me telling you about that?”

 Alea giggled at herself, realizing her mistake—Julian and Christina were clearly not an item after all.

 “Oh my goodness! Her portrait! I need to hear all about this!” Kiki walked up to the conversation, catching the last part.

 She tossed her blonde ponytail as she looked from person to person, taking everything in.

 “Alea, is this...wait, is this Julian?” Kiki asked inquisitively. He matched the description from Alea’s stories, the photo in her phone she’d sent her from Mexico and there was no mistaking that look in her best friend’s eye.

 Alea nodded her head, her eyes still on Julian.

 “I’ve heard so much about you! I’m her best friend, Kiki,” she stuck her hand out for Julian.

 Julian smiled, shaking her hand.

 “A pleasure to meet you. A friend of Alea’s is a friend of mine,” he said kindly.

 “Alea! You look *divina, mija*!” Marisol and Jay walked up to the group, hand in hand.

 “What is this? My coming out party? Why are you two here?” Alea quipped as she hugged her mother, who looked equally as beautiful, dressed in a gold colored cocktail dress, showing off her bronze colored skin.

 “Must be the magical spell you cast to bring us all together, Alea,” her father said, winking at her, his green eyes gleaming.

 *Lobo Hombre En Paris* started playing on the speakers. Marisol began swaying as she quipped, “We were invited by one of my students. We’re still hip and cool, *mija*.”

 Marisol tossed her hair playfully. Alea covered her mouth up to keep a laugh from escaping. Kiki shot her an amused look, grinning broadly.

 Julian stepped up to her parents, “Good evening Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Would you care to taste some of the samples of the food I’ll be featuring on the menu at Casa de Alea?”

 Jay grinned, shaking Julian’s hand and replied, “Absolutely! Julian, what an amazing accomplishment. Congratulations on this endeavor. You’ll have to fill us in on how this all came about.”

 Marisol leaned into Jay, smiling at Julian and added, “I may be biased, but I love the name of your restaurant.”

 Kiki, keen in her social jujitsu, interjected, “Let me take you both over to the table before all the samples disappear! The *chiles en nogada* are a hit!”

 Before Julian had a chance to respond, Kiki led Marisol and Jay away, Marisol glancing back at her daughter, who was beaming in a way she had not seen in her since…well since she’d seen her with Julian at the Maravilla Inn.

 Julian turned back to take in Alea without distractions. She was not the same unsure woman he had walked with into the mountains after her grandmother’s memorial. She had changed. Her eyes were deep amber wells of wisdom and strength and her lips, curved just slightly upward, carried more secrets he wished to unlock. He leaned down to softly press his lips on hers, pulling her hips in close to his body as the lyrics from the song played.

“*La Luna llena sobre París*

*Ha transformado en hombre a Denis”*

 “Ha! Look at the moon, Alea! You are a *bruja bella*…” Julian pointed to a brilliant full moon, which Alea glimpsed through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

 “Julian, you know, I’d love to show you my place and introduce you to Itzel,” Alea said as her lips brushed against his ear, his skin hot against hers.

 “I would love to see your place and meet…wait, what? Itzel? But how?”

 The emerald pendant around her neck got caught in his shirt as they pulled away from one another, which made them giggle.

 “Itzel is my dog. I bet she’d love you,” Alea said, her eyes sparkling at him.

 “I’d love to meet her. I’m free in two hours if you’re not too tired. I’d love to take you somewhere cozy for a drink first…ever been to Justine’s? As close to Paris as we can get tonight. They are open late and one of my chef friends can make a special dish for us there if you’re also hungry by then. You know I love to keep you well fed.”

 “I love Justine’s! Haven’t been in awhile. Let me be sure to give you my new number. And…yes, I remember that about you. I’m game.”

 Alea caught a whiff of jasmine in the air. It was at once familiar and troubling, like a shadow on a sunny day. Where had she smelled it before? But the prospect of seeing Julian later that night drove the thought from her mind.

 From the entrance of the gallery, under the light of the very full moon, a tall man with a pair of piercing blue eyes watched the two lovers’ exchange over dark-colored glasses. Then he was gone.

**Recipes**

Julian’s Pollo Con Mole Rojo

*Ingredients:*

*3 dried chili ancho*

*Sunflower oil*

*¼ cup of fresh orange juice*

*1 cinnamon stick*

*1 tsp allspice*

*⅓ cup raw almonds*

*⅓ cup raw walnuts*

*1 cup chopped white onions*

*¼ cup chopped garlic*

*1 bar (7 oz) dark, unsweetened chocolate (the best is Maria Tepoztlan brand)*

*¼ cup dried mangoes (or apricots)*

*1 7 oz can of crushed chipotle peppers in adobo sauce*

*9 oz of crushed tomatoes*

*24 fl oz of chicken stock*

*salt*

*6 chicken thighs (boneless/skinless) or breasts*

*Cotija cheese, chopped onions and chopped cilantro to top*

Instructions

-Heat about ⅓ cup of sunflower oil in a saucepan. Remove seeds from the dried chili anchos and let them soften in the pan, flavoring the oil.

-Add onions and garlic to the heat, allowing the onions to become translucent.

-Add more oil as needed and the walnuts and almonds, stirring around for a bit. Do not overheat (low-medium heat)

-Add in orange juice, cinnamon stick, allspice and break the chocolate into pieces into the mix.

-Once the chocolate pieces have melted, add in the dried mangoes or apricots

-Remove the sauce from heat and remove the cinnamon stick. Put the sauce in a blender to blend thoroughly.

-Return the blended concoction to a large pot (or crockpot/instapot) and heat up on medium, adding in: crushed tomatoes, crushed chipotle peppers and chicken stock. Stir.

Your mole rojo sauce is ready!

At this point you can bake the chicken thighs (or breasts-whatever your preference) separately (lightly salted/peppered) and then cover them with the sauce…or you can add the chicken to the sauce and cover it, cooking it low and slow until the chicken falls apart.

Sprinkle with cotija cheese, onions and cilantro (unless you have the misfortune of not being a cilantro lover)

Serve with warm corn tortillas and a Maravilla cocktail or a warm cup of chamomile tea.

Be careful, you may end up meeting Itzpapalotl or the love of your life after consuming……

Maravilla Cocktail

*Ingredients:*

*Chamoy*

*Coarse salt*

*Tajin*

*Mezcal*

*Grapefruit*

*Orange*

*Lime*

*Agave nectar*

*Fresh mint leaves*

Instructions

-Rim a cobalt blue glass with chamoy, then coat it with salt and tajin (put the salt and tajin combination on a plate and press the lip of the glass on it)

-In a metal shaker filled with ice, add a capful (or two) of mezcal into a shaker filled with ice, adding in fresh squeezed grapefruit juice, orange juice and lime juice.

-Add a drop (or two-depending on how sweet you like it) of agave nectar

-Add in a sprig of mint leaves

Enjoy with your favorite book, movie or lover!

**Aztec Deities and Places Mentioned in the Book**

**Coatlicue:** Both creator and destroyer, she is the mother of the gods and mortals. She is a multifaceted being who also appears as the fearsome goddess of childbirth, **Cihuacóatl** (“Snake Woman”)

**Itzpapalotl**: Butterfly goddess

**Techlotl:** lesser gold of the underworld, represented by owls

**Tonatiuhichan:** highest heaven

**Tlillan-Tlapallan:** middle heaven

**Xochipilli**: the god of pleasure, music and homosexuality

**Xochiquetzal**: the goddess of romance, beauty, and sex, (Xochipili’s twin)

**Toci:** the grandmother goddess of healing

**Tonatiuh**: one of the sun gods and eagle warrior

**Tlaloc**: the god of rain

**Tamoanchan:** the underground paradise where Itzpapalotl and the Tzitzimimeh reside

**Cuauhnahuac:** the sacred cave where the Creator God **Ehecatl** made the first man and woman.

**Tzitzimimeh**: Protectresses of the divine feminine, they were considered female warriors who had died in childbirth. They were worshiped by midwives. Itzpapalotl was their leader and ruled Tamoanchan. They were especially active at night and during solar eclipses.

**TIME and PLACE**

 The Aztecs divided their concept of time into five ages, each ruled over by a different sun. The fourth age came to a violent end when the sun, **Chalchiuhtlicue**, cried tears of blood for **52** years. **Chalchiuhtlicue** inadvertently destroyed the heavens, but in the aftermath, **Tezcatlipoca** and **Quetzalcoatl** put the sky back. However, **Tezcatlipoca** created the Milky Way, which he then turned into the god **Mixcoatl**.

 52 is a sacred number for the Aztecs. The Aztec Emperor Motecuhzoma was 52 in 1519, when Cortez arrived. That was part of the reason he expected disaster; he thought **Quetzalcoatl** was returning.

 In 1978 the **Templo Mayor** was discovered accidentally when workmen uncovered a huge, eight-ton sculpted stone disk depicting the scattered limbs of the Aztec moon goddess **Coyolxauhqui**. A presidential decree gave permission for the coincidentally named archaeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma to uncover what his team could of the temple. The Catholic cathedral that stands in the Zócalo was built on top of what had been the Templo Mayor. If you have never visited, I highly recommend it. You may feel the powerful sensations of a place full of mystery and magic, as I have.