

BORDERLINE MAGIC

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

THE COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Creative Writing)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

April 2020

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Borderline Magic

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Abstract

This thesis and novel celebrates Mexican culture, family, and tradition in a fantastical setting while also examining the ways in which first generation Mexican American immigrant children cope with external pressures to identify themselves. Drawing on my own hydridic Mexican and American identity, the novel asks whether or not two separate spheres of identities can merge, and can they allow us to exist in a new liminal space? Set in contemporary Mexico, *Borderline Magic* uses a magic/non-magic dynamic as a narrative device to look at the nature of identities and how they either dissuade or encourage us find our place among our families and communities.

Summary

Narrated by the young adult character, Lorena Santiago comes from a family of witches, and has seen mostly the dark side of using magic. She vowed to live as normal a life as possible.

However, when Lorena learns that the town drug lord Eric Constanzo is kidnapping witches and killing them for their magic, Lorena grows fearful that he may be after her next. Lorena is forced on the run in search of sanctuary, answers as to what happened, and what exactly her mother's role was in Constanzo's plan for her hometown of Matamoros, Mexico. Lorena's search drops her into a life full of magic, betrayal, secrets, and heartbreak. Through her journey to new towns, new friendships and found families, Lorena learns that magic is inexplicably tied to who she is. Instead of being fearful of it, she utilizes her talents to fight back.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Summary.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Dedication.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Method.....	3
i. Narrative Voice.....	3
ii. Magic.....	6
iii. Setting.....	10
Chapter 3: Influences.....	13
i. Rudolfo Anaya.....	13
ii. Elizabeth Acevedo.....	15
iii. Zoraida Cordova.....	16
iv. Sara Borjas.....	19
Conclusion.....	20
Chapter 4: <i>Borderline Magic</i>, a novel.....	22
Bibliography.....	284

Dedication

For my parents. You both have always believed I could conquer the things that scared me most.
You were right.

For Leo. Thank you for constantly reminding me that the tears and frustration would all be worth
it in the end. You were right.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This story started off as an ode to my culture. I grew up in Los Angeles to immigrant parents, immigrated from Mexico and El Salvador, respectively; we got together every weekend at my grandmother's house to eat tostadas and frijoles and arroz con pollo, where Spanish flew from mouth to mouth even when I couldn't understand a single word. So I start the novel in much the same way, with Lorena getting herself ready for school, with Spanish words, and with Mom working in the kitchen. This scene felt integral to start with because it establishes Lorena's sense of normal and is easily accessible to readers who may not be all too comfortable with fantasy stories. As the story progressed, I realized it was mirroring several of my own insecurities as it pertains to my identity. There are chunks of my youth where I wrote about young, white, able-bodied females living in their perfect two story house with an overbearing mother and her easy-going dad who readers never see again after the first two chapters. This protagonist usually goes on a coming-of-age adventure with their white friends and never once thinks about her family, only who they plan to kiss at the end of the story. While my thesis and novel mirrors a journey away from the home, the personality and characteristics I fine-tuned in the Santiago family speak truer to me and my experiences, therefore holding more weight than any story I've ever written.

In Alicia Elliot's essay, *On Seeing and Being Seen*, I realized this erasure of culture wasn't an exclusive experience for me; many Indigenous peoples deal with this perplexity—are the stories we write worthy of merit? Alicia states she spent years writing out her indigeneity, hoping her work will be critiqued on merit and not on the basis of her identity. Such was my struggle growing up knowing I wanted to be a writer. I didn't feel that my experiences would be well received, or that my version of a Mexican household would be "Mexican" enough for the community I am writing for. However, social and political climates shifted in the United States

in 2016 and suddenly the words filtering across the screens and spoken loudly in supermarkets were demanding anyone with brown skin to “go back to your country.” Animosity towards immigrants increased and their already dangerous fight for a better life got even harder to attain. Children of immigrant parents were put in cages (as detailed in BBC’s article “Why the US is Separating Migrant Children from their Parents”), immigrants seeking asylum were sent back to dangerous conditions left to fend for themselves (as discussed in “Human Rights Watch’s report, *Deported to Danger: United States Deportation Policies Expose Salvadorans to Death and Abuse*”), and all the while I sat behind a desk writing stories for white readers, devoid of my culture.

This new political climate lit a fuse beneath me, igniting a story I felt needed to be told.

Chapter 2: Method/Active Choices

i. Narrative Voice

When crafting this thesis/novel, it was important for me to generate a character voice that speaks to the respect and love I have for my Mexican culture, especially because of the years I spent avoiding it. Perhaps I feel a sense of duty to my culture for the years of neglect I've shown it by choosing not to partake in traditions like Dia de los Muertos or Dia de los Reyes Magos—traditions that my family grew up on, and actively choosing to participate in U.S. traditions like The Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving. Regardless, it felt integral to Lorena's character arch to show her respect for her culture in the midst of external struggles. This is shown through Lorena's hesitancy to use magic. At the start of the novel, Lorena shows herself not taking altar worship as seriously as her sister and mom would; Caro, Lorena's sister, tells her that her lack of interest in their altar worship will spark another argument between her and their mom, of which Caro says she would not defend her sister. That exchange paints, what I think, is a very familial problem showcasing a difference in priorities and how that dissonance can create tension within the family unit.

Even in Lorena's disinterest, she still talks about her culture and craft with a sense of respect; this I attempted to emulate in the diction. On page two, as Lorena is showcasing the herbs she bought from a local herbs shop, she talks about the bundle of herbs as the "finest herbs" and appreciates the use of "salt-soaked petals" that add good fortune to her offering. Even as Lorena interacts with the everyday mundane things like cereal, she is "mindful" of the aspects of the family craft that are always around, like the "jar of raven feathers" beside the cereal box, and the spice cabinet where bottles are labeled for ease of use when cooking or creating magical elixirs.

On page 66, Lorena's new companion, Ago, asks Lorena to show her 'magic' and I left that question broad because I wanted Lorena to take an opportunity to work out what that means to her. In her monologue during that scene, Lorena says she wishes she could show Ago there is "nature in [her] craft, not just magical powers," and lists off ways in which her practice functions without powers—using "poppy seed mixed with lemon balm" to cure simple aches and "rose water with black sea salt and carom seeds" fends off stomach pains. The care Lorena takes to point out these natural ways that her craft operates shows a level of respect for the craft, that at this point in the novel shows itself explicitly when it comes to making elixirs or utilizing nature around her. This is why Lorena feels a sense of duty to help save the sick girl that appears in the novel at page 71. Since mixing herbs to create elixirs feels the most natural, or the most safe to Lorena, she feels it is her duty to use that knowledge in a way that benefits others. Having this level of respect for the natural aspects of her craft allows me to emphasize a different side to magic than is typically read about or seen in modern media.

Growing up I devoured stories and television shows like *Sailor Moon*, for example, that glorified powers given by the moon and growing stronger through the power of friendship and love, all of which are values I grew up believing in. But those aspects of magic used in the show, of friendship and love, seemed better suited in my thesis/novel as motives for my characters to act. Lorena is fueled by the friendship Ago and she share over time, and the love that grows between Lorena and her long-lost cousin, Mia, and even a different type of love with a new coven that takes her in at her darkest times. Instead of powers derived from the moon, I felt it was important to ground their powers. So while the moon and seasons have an effect on their powers, it was important for me to show their powers stemming from their connection to the earth, whereas "evil" stems from people who take advantage of that sacred earthly connection.

Later in the novel it is revealed that Constanzo, the town's drug lord, has been forcing witches to give up their power, calling on dark energies tied to human sacrifice and black magic (define this) (pg. 197). This corruption of earthly connection causes the witches to get seriously ill and eventually die, having lost that integral earthly part of them. The contrast in diction when talking about Constanzo's type of black magic is another way I hoped to paint a more natural quality to Lorena's craft. By describing Constanzo's herbs as "dried" and the ink he paints evil symbols as "black" and "metallic," even down to the type of herb Lorena is forced to ingest, "verbena," - which comes from Europe - holds its own darker connotations when it comes to Lorena's native practice that Constanzo is trying to erase from her (pg. 201).

When thinking back on the questions posed earlier in the introduction about whether my work has merit and how writing about my culture fits into the literary world, I had to grapple with whether or not I would include Spanish in my work, and if I was going to include it, would it be italicized and/or would I provide a glossary? I decided to include Spanish as I saw it in my own experiences - intermingled with English, escaping out of mouths at whim and whenever the speaker saw fit. However, I made it a point that Lorena wouldn't speak too much Spanish in the novel. As seen through the piece, most of the Spanish is spoken by adult figures. This rings true to my experiences growing up, as I knew little Spanish to hold conversations, but I knew enough to understand what was being spoken. I hope the inclusion of both Spanish and English in the novel, and even in single sentences, shows the importance of native languages as part of identity and also mirrors the integration of two identities existing simultaneously.

That being said, I made the choice to not italicize or include a glossary for the Spanish in the novel. Italicizing a native language in my work felt like a way to 'other' the language when my aim is to be inclusive, not exclusive. As Daniel Jose Older states in his video titled, *Why We*

Don't Italicize Spanish, “the function of language is to communicate things clearly,” and the “function of grammar and rules around language are to facilitate that communication,” and by italicizing another language other than English, we are putting emphasis around this ‘other’ language. I hope by not emphasizing the Spanish in my work, it reads more seamlessly because, to a native speaker or to someone who grew up in a multilingual home, we wouldn’t notice when English becomes mixed with Spanish. We do not speak Spanish to emphasize the language, so my characters do not either.

In much the same vein, I decided not to include a glossary for the Spanish used in the text. I believe the Spanish words in the text are backed with enough context to understand what they mean, but I also think it is fair enough to ask those that read it to do the work themselves while also asking, would they be more willing to do the work if the text was written by a white person? It does not take long to look up a translation. Furthermore, not including a glossary allows me to maintain as authentic a voice as I can, staying true to my own Latinx roots and also my own confusion when I didn’t understand a particular word growing up. I understood them by learning, looking for context, and educating myself. I also understand that by including Spanish words and not offering a translation I am limiting, or deterring specific readers, but I would rather lose those readers than compromise the voice of my piece.

ii. Magic

There is a distinct memory I have of being a child with a severe cold and my grandmother taking an hour out of her day to rub a whole, straight-out-of-the-fridge egg across my face and over my forehead, whispering prayers to herself. She asked my mom to bring her a bowl, then she would crack the egg into it, careful about where she pointed the bowl. I remember asking her what she

was doing and what she saw in the bowl. She told me there was an evil spirit making me sick inside and the only way to get it out was to trap it in the egg, and, by shattering it, release it out into the world and direct it away from us. This was something my grandmother only ever did once for me and I wondered why she never did it again. But the belief she held for this ritual and its effects sparked a curiosity in me about my grandmother. Was she somehow magical? Did she have a great power that allowed her to command the evil inside me and demand it out? Did that mean I could be magical, too? It feels like that child-like wonder never truly left me, and so when it came to writing a story about a young bruja struggling in her identity who also happens to be magical, it felt both familiar and new.

Writing a story of witches and magic comes with its own stigmas, however. In the fifteenth century, women became the central focus of many witch-hunts for being “inherently weak (physically, mentally, and spiritually) and [were] susceptible to the devil’s machinations,” (Saxena and Zimmerman, 12). The term was projected towards women who stood outside of societal norms, like living alone, or having too many cats, or being too beautiful and therefore too promiscuous. Not only was this a way to alienate women from the community, but it was also a way to ‘other’ indigenous groups. Alicia Elliot references *Diane Purkiss’s The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, in her essay and states, “European colonists widely considered Indigenous peoples to be devil worshippers.” Priests viewed witches as enemies of Christ and mandated that these people needed to be eradicated.

The witches in my novel do experience animosity for what they are, but are also respected for their power. Even Constanzo, the ‘villain’ of my story, does not seek to eradicate them or harm them with the intention of ridding the earth of them. His motives stem out of a crazed obsession with their abilities and the Saint the witches pray and owe their powers to.

Belief systems have always perplexed me in the way people hold on to them, how they lead their lives based on them, and yet everyone sees these beliefs a little differently. One person's interpretation is different from another's, and I tried to show that duality in my thesis/novel with the use of witches, worship, and the evil-doers. Though I do not name the particular religion that my main character and her family partake in, it is heavily influenced by different religions I was surrounded by as a child. Pulling from Catholicism, I utilize the power of prayer and the worshipping of one singular figure. I also pull from the belief of Santa Muerte. The Catholic church, even to this day, continues to denounce the worship of this figure of death, but as the idolization of Santa Muerte grows, Mexicans believe this is a way for them to reclaim the Day of the Dead (Tucker). This divide between Catholic beliefs and the Mexican people's beliefs in Santa Muerte is something I utilized in my novel; the worshipping of Santa Muerte is an exclusive practice only performed by witches in *Borderline Magic*. The appearance of Santa Muerte in Mexico is somewhat of a newer phenomenon. However, its roots stem from multiple places overseas (Andrews). It is believed that as Europeans traveled and colonized the Americas, religions mixed together to preserve native beliefs and practices under the guise of being Christian in nature. Followers of the Yoruba religion were forced to worship in secret, under the guise of having accepted Christianity, as Christianity reached the New World. The Yoruba religion was a heavily spiritual religion with ritual practices involving dancing, singing, ritual healing, and the interaction with Orishas. Orishas are spirits that represent specific ideas or phenomena of the natural world, similar to saints in Catholicism. Speaking to the Orishas required offerings, which took the form of food and animal sacrifices. Then one must enter a trance state and allow themselves to be possessed by the Orisha. As a way to preserve the

Yoruba religion over time, it fused together with Christian practices and gave birth to several different practices.

In my thesis/novel, I tried not to portray the worship of the saint of death as something bad because, despite its stigma that only criminals and drug traffickers worship Santa Muerte, there is nothing inherently bad when it comes to what Santa Muerte stands for. Despite the name, Santa Muerte advocates that death is not the end, but a start to a new cycle (Andrews). To label the worship of Santa Muerte as a cult also does it a disservice because the word ‘cult’ carries a negative connotation. I avoid that word entirely in my thesis. Ways in which I tried to defuse this stigma of Santa Muerte in my novel is with the diction and by grounding my character’s practice in the earth, the use of natural herbs, and praying to a saint for guidance.

Even active abilities in the book, like Lorena’s sister who is stated to have an affinity for wind, meaning she can tap into the air around her to create winds, shift wind directions, cause storms, etc., is one of the powers witches in the novel can have. Lorena, my main protagonist, is gifted with the power of fire that gets revealed on page 109, and there are also witches in the novel who don’t exhibit any physical or active magical powers. The idea that some people are fighters (witches with their active powers) and others are fighters in different ways (witches with no active powers) was important to portray in my thesis/novel because I hope to show that anyone can be special, magic powers or not.

The big question regarding magic is what does it allow me, as the writer, to explore and what does it allow the reader to understand? I hope this novel is an exploration of what magic means to me and helps me understand that “magic” does not necessarily mean what eleven-year-old me thought it meant. It does not just mean girls in tiny skirts calling on the mythical powers of planets, or waving a wand around and learning to use a broomstick. Magic can mean the

power we find inside ourselves to love others and to love ourselves; it can mean inner strength and determination, especially when faced with trauma. Magic can mean “any [person] who understands [they] have power even when the world insists [they] don’t,” (Saxena and Zimmerman, 14). Magic is what is around us every day.

iii. Setting

My mother’s family was born in Jalisco, Mexico, and today it is considered the “Mother Country” for many Mexican Americans (Schmal). It is the birthplace to most of Mexico’s culture: from mariachi to birria (Mexican stew) to tequila and ranchera music. My grandmother recounts it to me in stories of landscape: dirt, weeds, flowers, colour. She remembers the colour of dresses and flowers and fiestas, but has trouble remembering who was there. As her vivid portraits of Tenamaxtlan, Jalisco stayed with me, I knew I wanted to center my thesis/novel in a place booming with life, culture, and colour. Then I came across an article detailing a gruesome part of Mexico’s history.

Matamoros, Mexico, is a large city lying on the border between Mexico and Brownsville, Texas. It was there, near Calle Obregon, that trouble struck a group of students visiting the area during spring break. After a few nights of drinking and bar hopping along Calle Obregon, Mark Kilroy went missing. It was weeks later, during an operation to rid drug dealers from the border town, that investigators wound up in a small ranch in Santa Elena, not far from the border, and behind the pounds of marijuana, found several plots of unmarked graves of several missing persons. Guy Garcia’s article goes into detail on the state of the bodies once they were uncovered. Signs were pointing to a town local by the name of Adolfo de Jesus Constanzo, a man who his gang affiliates referred to as “El Padrino,” or The Godfather. According to

testimonies, Constanzo performed these human sacrifices because he believed it would make their gang “invincible and protect their drug business from the police,” (Garcia). It was discovered that Constanzo had an accomplice, Sara Aldertree, who attended school in Texas and would lure students back to Mexico where Constanzo and his gang awaited them. Through all the gory details and the questioning, Constanzo was confirmed to be involved in a very extreme version of Santeria, being obsessed with Santa Muerte, wanting so badly to become like the patron saint of death. He believed by performing human sacrifices in Santa Muerte’s name, she would grant him protection and invincibility. Members of Constanzo’s gang claimed he became so crazed that he thought he himself was a deity similar to that of Santa Muerte.

This dark blemish on Mexico’s history, however, didn’t sound like the Mexico detailed to be from my grandmother’s stories. But both of these truths exist. So when it came to writing this thesis, I hoped to convey a setting that, although it has its dark moments, it can also be a place where hope lives. This I tried to show in the people my main character encounters, from the priest who offers to pray over Lorena on page 52, to Ago’s acceptance of Lorena’s circumstances and her witch heritage on page 68, and again with the community Lorena engages with when she is at her lowest point that decides to take her in on page 121. In the end, although evil can lurk at any corner of Lorena’s home, she realizes there are good people worth fighting for in her life, and accepts the magic around her as a way to maintain a peaceful home for her long-lost cousin, her friend Ago, and the coven Lorena fights beside.

In many ways, I tried to reflect how the setting can function as both a place of good and a place of evil, using specific word choice such as “crystal blue” skies, “smooth adobe” that can also switch to “black ink” marking the shops and “chipped chunks of adobe” that tarnish the once beautiful buildings (pg. 5-6). I tried to add another reflective layer, much like with the use

of language in the thesis, that reflects two identities existing simultaneously. While a place may have a dark past, it also serves as my main character's source of magic. I think in this way, setting/place functions as its own character, taking on the same complexities a person does.

By the end of the novel, Lorena has 'sacrificed' herself in certain ways to ensure that her loved ones are safe in Matamoros. She accepts both her magic and the two additional celestial powers that she apparently is a potential host for, and in doing so, finally has enough power to defeat the 'villains' (pg. 226). By accepting the additional powers, however, Lorena realizes no single person can handle such immense energy. On page 230, she realizes that by having accepted these powers, her body will start to deteriorate. The last line told from Lorena's point of view affirms what she had spent the entire novel struggling to accept – you can't run from who you are. In this case, magic is who Lorena is. She was born into it and taught in its practice, and although it took her family from her, it also helped her find the family she ends the story with. She states, "I believe Santa Muerte has a plan and if this is how my life is supposed to pan out, that's okay...So long as my family is with me, I know I'll be okay." (pg. 231)

Chapter 3: Influences

i. Rudolfo Anaya

When I was growing up, Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* first put into perspective why culture is so important when it comes to young adult literature. The novel follows a young child, Antonio, as Ultima, the town curandera or spiritual healer, comes to stay with his family for the summer. In the novel, the town shows direct animosity towards Ultima for her practices, claiming that she's a bruja and has ties with the devil. However, people from the same community go to her for her healing practice, and then, turning on her when the town gathers to shun her, also juxtaposes the hate. It displays an interesting interaction around what society deems 'okay' to practice, when it can benefit the majority, and when it deems the practice too harmful. The novel aims to show how everyone's moral compasses are shaped by social interactions. As the reader, we see how Antonio goes through his own journey to formulate his own opinion about Ultima. Throughout the novel, the question of whether or not Ultima's practice was in fact witchcraft is never answered, and I appreciated the ambiguity when it came to that because it allowed me to step into Antonio's shoes and formulate my own independent thought.

The story of spiritual healing and the prosecution of Ultima stuck with me through the years, and shows itself in my thesis/novel by utilizing a similar sentiment in the townsfolk of Matamoros, Mexico. The town is very split, with some people going to the witches for elixirs and remedies, while others fear them and wish to see them gone. Intermixed among them are those that fear them. I tried to touch on all three groups in my thesis. In doing so, I hope to portray Lorena and her family as resilient forces – aware of the animosity and fear, and striving to overcome it, or, in Lorena's case, allow it to fuel her guilt.

Unlike Rudolfo's novel, I answer right at the start whether my characters are really witches, but I do integrate their use of natural magic, too.

The character of Agostina in my novel allows me to work out how tolerance looks like in my thesis, because while Ago accepts Lorena, there's a moment of tension on page 81 that hints at their differing religions and the different beliefs steering their moral compasses. In this moment of tension on page 81, it is implied that Ago's beliefs are steering her towards helping people at all costs, while Lorena's belief is about accepting the things she cannot control, and accepting that Santa Muerte's power is absolute. If that means Lorena has to allow the sick child on page 71 to die, then that is something my main character has to wrestle with throughout the second act of the novel. Much like how Rudolfo Anaya examines moral independence in *Bless Me, Ultima*, my thesis scratches the surface of religion, in how it plays a part in determining morals and identity. For Lorena, her magic is a gift from Santa Muerte, and Santa Muerte is a saint of death that acts as her 'god,' so in my novel, it is inexplicably tied to her identity. On page 78, while Lorena is fighting against the hold Santa Muerte has on the sick child, Santa Muerte warns Lorena that trying to command the saint of death will only result in consequences. As a result, the sick child dies after Lorena attempts to cure her. The reason for the death is human (her father gives her too much of Lorena's curing aid and it kills the child), but I tried to imply that Santa Muerte's reach on events is somewhat pre-determined. Similar to saying that certain points in history are fixed events, meaning they happen regardless of what tries to prevent it from happening, because it's just meant to happen.

Through the course of my thesis, I try to examine how Lorena's moral compass shifts and changes as her journey goes on, from being hunted by drug dealers, trapped in a cage beside a drug-stuffed body, to learning to control her new fire abilities – all these events signify a shift in

Lorena and bring her one step closer to figuring out how she fits into the magic/witch world.

This is similar to Rudolfo Anaya's journey of moral independence with the main protagonist of *Bless Me, Ultima*.

ii. Elizabeth Acevedo

When I opened *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo I cried on the first page. Her words were visceral, cutting deep into the bone with her talks of Dominican hair and Dominican body, with objectification and compliance. Acevedo's novel focused on Xiomara Batista, a slam poet at heart who used words to help her understand the world. She keeps her poetry a secret from her mother for a majority of the novel, struggling to find her place in her mom's heavily religious household. A huge fight breaks out when Xio's mom finds out Xio has been attending a slam poetry club at school instead of going to bible study, but once Xio finds her voice, she refuses to keep quiet any longer. The story spoke so closely to my own life, reflecting my struggles with my art and my family, and with familial and religious expectations that were placed on me at a young age. Acevedo's story reaffirmed to me that there is value in talking and, most importantly, celebrating culture and the things that make us different. I tried to emulate that idea across the span of my novel by use of setting, the foods my main character eats, and her religion.

Food and smells play a huge part of my novel/thesis. Growing up, gathering around the table for dinner or preparing food in the kitchen was how loved ones came together; it was my favourite part of growing up and it is how my grandma shows her love the most. When me or a guest steps foot into her house, grandma immediately wants to know if you've eaten and if you haven't, she'll reassure you that there are frioles in the fridge and tortillas in the press.

Writing the beginning of my novel, I tried to showcase that with the scene on page 20 where my main character and her family are in the middle of an argument that essentially gets put on pause when it is time for dinner.

Smells are also an important feature of my thesis/novel as they were something I had growing up, too. I can tell certain family members from their smells, especially my grandma who almost always smells of roses. In my novel, smells are also attributed to witches who do great magic. Lorena's mom, Xiomara, smells of roses. Caro, Lorena's sister, smells of hazel wood. It is later revealed that Lorena's magical scent smells like roses and firewood (pg. 113).

Reading *The Poet X*, and seeing how food and religion play a part in forming the character of Xiomara, instilled in me a desire to write about how those attributes have shaped me as a person, and as a writer. I hope that when other Latinx youth read my novel, they will also feel seen between the pages and identify some of their cuisines and demeanors displayed by my characters.

iii. Zoraida Cordova

Labyrinth Lost centers around young teen bruja, Alex, as she navigates contemporary Brooklyn trying to live a normal life. Like the main protagonist of my thesis/novel, Alex does not want to live a life of magic, and makes an attempt to get rid of it. In a ceremony she believes will rid her of her magic, Alex accidentally makes her entire family of witches disappear and spends the rest of the novel trying to find them in a fantastical land between the living and the dead. Cordova's young adult novel, *Labyrinth Lost*, is an influence that can appear to mirror my own thesis. We have similar protagonists, unhappy with a culture and practice brought up by the family. Both works value family and understand how, even through rough times, family is always there.

However, the definitions of ‘family’ differ slightly, where my thesis shows a found-family situation, but the sentiment is the same.

While the two may look similar, ideas are always executed differently. The journey I take my protagonist on is vastly different from Alex in *Labyrinth Lost*. I don’t lead my main character through a fantastical land; the land Lorena navigates is tangible, and oftentimes familiar. It was important for me to keep my story as rooted in reality as I could, despite its fantastical elements. In *Labyrinth Lost*, Alex faces on her journey other-worldly, winged, fanged creatures. In my thesis/novel, Lorena does encounter sinister shadows that she fights on page 172 while she and a few members of the coven are on their way to confront Constanzo: those are described as snake-like shadows with glowing, yellow eyes.

Our similar journeys of self-discovery also meet different end games. Alex discovers that she is considered an Enchantress, or someone that can manifest her thoughts into reality. This is considered a rare talent in Cordova’s novel. The choice to make Lorena a ‘chosen-one’ in my novel was my way of paying homage to the past influences that involved magic. Things like *Sailor Moon*, *Charmed*, *Harry Potter*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were places I saw a chosen-one trope and how effective it could be in garnering readers and/or viewers. A show like *Charmed* pulling in 7.7 million viewers on its first episode. Writing a story about someone different or ‘chosen’ can often be the most compelling way to tell a fantasy story. So, after enjoying the way Cordova wrote Alex’s type of ‘special,’ I amped up the ‘special’ factor in my thesis and made Lorena a host for one of the three types of celestial powers used in the creation of the universe (pg. 136).

I tried to create a deep, moral conflict within my protagonist, as she sees how magic has taken her family from her and how she even thinks of using magic to get revenge for them. The

small factor of seeing how magic is not inherently good or evil is something that was missing for me in Cordova's work and one I felt was important to include in my own. As Lorena befriends Ago shortly after losing her family, I think it is a small reminder to Lorena that good people in this world exist. Ago helps Lorena see how her magic can be used to help the good people of this world. Lorena's struggle leads her to a place where she can fully accept her magic, to understand that magic can exist outside the confines of 'good versus evil,' (pg. 230).

If there is anything in my novel I may come to regret writing, it would be that I forced Lorena to go on this journey without her family. I kill off her mom and sister by chapter 5 and the chapters before were some of the most exciting scenes to write because it showcased a Mexican family in their home, cooking their food, a mom yelling in Spanish. That all felt true to my experience. Lorena's mother was her teacher, her caretaker, her nurturer, even if sometimes she was none of those things. But, much like Cordova's *Labyrinth Lost* where Alex's family disappears instead of her magic, my main character's hero's journey can only happen when she has nothing left. Lorena's views of magic are tied to her family: what she has seen her mother and sister do, and what her mother agrees to do for Constanzo, they're both reasons why Lorena doesn't like magic. So in order for Lorena to gain perspective, those reasons need to be taken away.

iv. Sara Borjas

Sara Borjas is a Chicana poet and educator from Fresno, California. Her recent collection of poetry, *Heart Like a Window, Mouth like a Cliff*, highlights two things for me: one, the importance of writing a personal cultural experience and, two, how to integrate landscape with culture.

The first highlight seems obvious, but I think as a writer of colour, I often place the burden of writing for an entire group of people on my shoulders. Reading Sara Borjas's collection put into perspective that the best way to be respectful of a culture and a group is to write as close to a personal experience as I can. The feeling of not belonging—or struggling to find oneself—among a culture comes across in her poem, “My Name Disappears from the Script”, as she writes:

“I, unnamable duty of Xicanisma. I,
converted Xicana who learns her Hebrew name
does not make her white, even though
Hall & Oates croon its two syllables
the delicate way they do. I design”

Her desire to name her identity, and even convey her confusion over said identity, comes across. I can empathize with that struggle.

Borjas has another poem in the collection titled, “Pocha Café”, and the poem takes time to call out all the traditions and qualities of a Chicana, including the ways in which Chicanas try to partake in the “authentic” Mexican culture. The term itself, Pocha, is a word used by Mexicans to describe Chicanos and those who have left Mexico. The root of the word comes from a Spanish term, pocho, meaning something that has gone bad or becomes discoloured.

Borjas's poem tells a story of how personal experiences can reach a broader audience, like myself, who may identify similarly to a word like 'Pocha,' and find comfort in her words.

In her poem, "I Know the Name of the Desert," I begin to see how she weaves together ideas and landscape. Since the collection is split up into three sections, I get the sense that part one is dedicated to the landscape she had growing up. In this particular poem, Borjas relates the landscape to what she sees in her mother, and that for the narrator, the two are interconnected, writing:

"There is a desert inside my mother's iris, a flesh-colored truck
rambling through miles of packed dirt, where my grandmother

is leaving my grandfather, driving away with all his kids.

Dirt rises and falls along a road in El Paso, sand freckles
underneath tires, eight small hands wring like rags."

As the poem continues, Borjas describes her mother as having a "wide canyon mouth," and "cheeks like hot, empty plains," reiterating the image of landscape being tied to the mother's identity. The use of imagery to identify her mother grounds the collection for me. I enjoy the claim that we eventually see ourselves embedded in the places we come from. That is to say, the places we come from end up being extensions of who we are.

Conclusion

I hope to emulate similar sentiments in my novel by use of language, setting, and word choice to show that personal experiences with culture and family are inexplicably tied to identity. It is how Lorena comes to accept and identify within the bruja world at the end of my novel. Family is with Lorena at the start and at the end of the novel, even if at the ending it is a found-family. The people and land around us nurture the core of who we are.

Chapter 4: *Borderline Magic*, a novel

1

Something is burning inside the house.

“Mom!” I yell, nose crinkling at the dense smell of burning flowers.

“Ay voy, ay voy,” she yells back, her heavy footfall rushing down the hall. I picture her beneath the smoke detector, black, frizzy hair falling in thin wisps from her bun, frantically waving her dishtowel at the noise. Mom could never stand the sound of fire alarms.

I tie my hair into the same style, slicking on a light layer of hair gel.

“I wish you wouldn’t use that stuff. It leaves your hair all gunky and nasty,” my sister’s voice creeps in from the door. I hadn’t heard her open it.

I roll my eyes. “It works,” I say.

Caro leans her hip against the doorframe, shrugs. “Mom wants me to remind you about your offering.”

I nod, reaching for the small bag on my nightstand. I drop the thin bag into Caro’s open hand.

“Seriously?” she says. “You know mom’s going to be pissed off.”

“Not pissed off. Just disappointed,” I say. I grab my backpack from the floor and stuff a textbook into it.

Caro sighs exaggeratedly. “Come on, Lorena. Of all months? You couldn’t do something different? If not for Santa Muerte then at least for Mom? She’s looking forward to this.”

“And she’s the only one,” I mutter.

“Not this again,” Caro groans.

I bend forward to tie my shoes and sigh. I'm anticipating the same reaction from Mom, not because this is what I always place on our ofrenda, but because it's what I'm choosing to put on the ofrenda *this* month.

August marks the start of my ascension. There's nothing special about the timing, other than the fact I'll be eighteen in another month. But at some point, it's expected that I join the coven and be recognized in the eyes of other witches around Mexico. When explaining it to my best friend, I tell her it's very similar to having a Quinceañera, where girls partake in a ceremony that recognizes them as women in the eyes of the church. There's a huge party afterward and part of me wonders if I'd feel more inclined to accept the ascension if it resulted in a grand party with ball gowns and tiaras.

I grimace at the image. On second thought, perhaps not.

Caro tosses the bundle of incense around in her hand, eyeing it skeptically.

"Hey, careful with that. Gloria sold me the finest herbs this time around," I say.

Caro extends a look to me.

I shrug. "I told her it was a special occasion."

It's a true enough statement. Gloria's Místico shop was having a huge sale on herbs and salt-soaked flower petals. Adding the salt-soaked flowers to my bundle was impulsive but I figured I'd need the extra luck this month. Gloria gave me a hefty discount when I said it was for a special offering. I imagine if I told her it was for my ascension offering, she'd have given it to me for free. Or made me do something else entirely.

"Whatever," Caro relents, moving out of my room. "I'll put it on the ofrenda but I'm not helping you this time if Mom chews you out for it."

"Noted," I say following her out.

As I pass the bathroom in the hall, I pause for a moment. My stomach twinges at the memory of this weekend, of being bent over the toilet heaving my guts out. Food poisoning is what my mom said it was and she fed me elixirs all weekend to help. I fell asleep in a hot sweat on the bathroom floor one of those days. But today I'm finally feeling better.

I at least managed to put on a clean shirt.

I find the source of the floral scent when I walk into the kitchen. Mom is hunched over the stove, plumes of steam rising up into her face. "Morning," I call. I reach for the box of cereal above the fridge, mindful of the jar of raven feathers beside it.

"Morning, Mamita," says mom, stirring the rose water. The steam makes the mascara on her lashes smudge at the corners. "Can you hand me the carom seeds?"

I open the spice cabinet and sift through her herbs and spices, pushing aside the A and B labeled bottles until I spot the carom seeds.

"How are you feeling?" Mom asks.

I hand her the bottle before sitting at the table. I pop a spoonful of cereal into my mouth. "I haven't thrown up yet and excessive amounts of fecal matter aren't bursting out of my ass, so I think I'm okay."

Mom turns up the heat on the stove when she adds in the carom seeds and places a lid over the pot. Sweat collects at her temple and her brows pinch forward. "I hate when you use that lenguaje."

"Sorry," I mumble around mouthfuls of cornflakes. I wipe the milk sitting at the corner of my mouth, suddenly unsure if she's referring to my use of fecal matter or the word ass.

Caro saunters into the kitchen, grabbing the cereal box next to me. She pours herself a bowl before stopping at the open fridge, holding a white carton in her hands. “Seriously?” She gives it a shake. “You couldn’t tell me it was empty before I put all that cereal into my bowl.”

I shrug. “Didn’t notice, sorry,” I smile, sickeningly sweet.

Caro’s grip on the carton tightens and I think she’s about to throw it at my head. I set my cereal down in case intense milk carton warfare is about to happen.

“Muchachas,” Mom scolds. “Lorena, pick some up on your way home.”

I tilt my head. “I was going to,” I lie.

Caro throws the carton in the trash and waves her hand out. A chill spreads through the room making my hairs stand on end. I watch as Caro’s cereal bowl floats through the air and lands in the sink with a soft clatter. I rub a hand over my arm, shoving the hairs down. It always reacts like this when Caro uses her magic, like it can never get used to her energy.

I place mine in the sink as well and give mom a kiss on the cheek. “I gotta go,” I say.

“Espérate!” mom calls, following me to the front door.

“Mom, I think I’m okay. I don’t need to take anymore,” I say, eyeing the cup in her hands.

“Of course you feel okay now because it’s working. What did I tell you?” Mom shoves the cup into my hands.

Warm liquid sloshes over the edge and runs along my thumb. I nod.

“Three days,” we say together.

I chug back the tea. Third day down.

My lips pucker over the tangy taste on my tongue but it's followed immediately by the sweetness of rose and something else much sweeter. Maybe honey? I give mom back the cup.

"Okay, I'll see you later. Bye, mom."

"I love you," she says.

I glance past her in time to catch Caro's glare. But it's not directed at me. She glares at the cup in mom's hand.

It's been a year since Caro dropped out of school to work with mom full time, and while I've grown used to making this walk into Matamoros alone, disappointment lingers in the back of my head. Caro should be with me, finishing up school, going to prom, and thinking of college. But for Caro, witchcraft is everything. So instead she's helping mom concoct potions and elixirs for her clients. I don't pay too close attention to mom's clientele but Caro says there are more government officials dropping by than I'd think. I never ask which ones, though.

I shove my ear buds in and sift through my music player, ignoring the thoughts of mom's clientele. I walk on nothing but dirt road and kick rocks as I go, waiting for the first touch of green to peak around the bend. When it does, the skies clear into crystal blue. I hear the faint chime of bells in the distance and spot Gloria's Mistico shop sitting pleasantly at the corner.

I find comfort in having Gloria's shop be the first stop into town. It means not travelling too far into Matamoros when mom sends me on supply runs, but more so, I like the vibe of Gloria's. Peach and bergamot emanate from her shop doors.

I poke my head in. "Buen día, Gloria!"

"Lorena!" she greets. She brushes her black hair back and motions me in.

"I'm on my way to school," I protest.

“Un momento. I have something for you,” she says, her red lips stretching out into a beautiful smile. I imagine for a moment Gloria in her younger years. The remnants of her beauty remains, and the wrinkles around her eyes and lips don’t take away from it.

As I walk into the shop, I notice Gloria’s bare feet trotting along the carpeted floor. She places a bundle of incense down and moves behind a set of floor-length beads.

I pick up the clear quartz on her counter and run my thumb along its smoothed-out edges.

“Yes!” she suddenly cheers, reappearing through the beads. “Take that, too! Pero this is what I wanted to give you.” Gloria unwraps the cloth in her hands. She carefully reveals a skull made of sugar. The light reflects off the sharp sugared edges.

I take the calavera from her. “Thank you, Gloria.”

She grabs a wooden box from behind her counter. “I already spent all last night blessing it so all it needs is your blood,” she says, hastily.

I pause. “My blood?” I ask.

“Si, mija. Tu madre told me it was your ascension month,” Gloria says. Then she strikes my arm, hard. “You should have said so yesterday!”

I chuckle nervously. “Yeah, I guess I forgot.”

“Just don’t forget – blood from your dominant hand,” Gloria instructs. She takes back the sugar skull and puts into the wooden box. She hands it to me and closes her hand around mine, the one holding the clear quartz. She bows her head for a moment and I watch her lips move soundlessly. Suddenly, she rears up and tsks. She grabs another quartz from the counter. “Better take two,” she says. “Your energy is off today.”

I’m not sure what she’s implying by saying I need to be extra cleansed of negativity but I take the second quartz anyway. “Gracias, Gloria.”

She cups my cheeks. “This is so exciting!” Gloria takes a deep breath and moves back, her bangles and bracelets clattering as she moves her hands to her face. “May Santa Muerte bless you,” she says.

I watch her eyes glaze over. “Okay,” I say, finding my cue to leave. “Bye, Gloria!”

Her tearful goodbye follows me out of the shop and back onto the main road.

I run a hand along the side of Gloria’s building. The adobe is mostly smooth, save for a few tiny cracks along the clay molding. I continue to follow the brightly-coloured paper mache cutouts hanging from roof to roof. Reds and blues and oranges wave at me as I pass below them. This is what I love most about Matamoros – the comfort, the vibrancy. It’s in every crack of red clay building, in the paper mache flower designs, in the cobblestone walkways and people that flock along to the morning birds.

The shops and apartment buildings suddenly break off. Black paint marks the once-beautiful red clay, tarnishing it in worse ways than chipped chunks of adobe.

Like with most beautiful places, there’s a not-so-beautiful side, too.

I pull the straps of my backpack tighter. I’m aware that my boots are too loud against the cobblestone, but I keep my eyes forward. I’ve learned to walk this path alone since Izzy got herself a free first period, but each time leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I shrug it off and push my shoulders back. Matamoros High isn’t much farther.

I suddenly hear a loud and sick thud. I try not to turn my head. But curiosity gets the best of me. There’s a small alleyway across the road, a small space covered by torn pieces of tents. It’s just another homeless man, I tell myself, or a drunk just starting to come to.

But three figures emerge from the tent. Two of them have shaved heads and I notice something etched on the side of their heads. They drag the third man out from the tent and throw him onto the street.

“Come on,” one of them says. “You either have it or you don’t, old man.”

The old man shivers despite the warm and humid air. He reaches toward the men, grabbing at their ankles, frantic and desperate. “Por favor,” he pleads. “I can get some I just need a little more time.” He tries to smile. I can see the stained yellow teeth from across the way.

One man kicks the homeless man away. The other draws a blade.

I take a step forward. I need to do something.

The man turns his head to look at me, probably noticing my movement.

I notice the letter C branded on the side of his head. I hold my breath.

These are Eric Constanzo’s men.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I give the homeless man one fleeting look, and walk away.

But I’m not fast enough. In a matter of seconds I hear the sharp tearing of flesh and a gurgled scream. I grit my teeth and tell myself not to look.

Eric Constanzo became a known name in Matamoros, Mexico two years ago. No one seems to know who he was before he became Constanzo. But in the short span of two years, he somehow managed to embed himself into our land, our law enforcement, our government, and even my own home.

For a while I couldn't understand why mom agreed to work with Constanzo. He approached her one day, a time when I was just old enough to understand why some people refused to look at us when mom, Caro, and me set foot into town. I remember seeing Caro hanging on to mom's hand. She hadn't been able to separate herself from mom for very long that particular week. I grabbed my sister's hand in return. I remember marveling over the scars on Caro's palm.

When Constanzo leaves, he leaves shaking mom's hand. Mom says the streets will be safer now, because of her, because of *us*.

A few weeks after his visit, we started seeing his men on our streets. Patrolling, is what my mom said, but I watched them pass clear bags off to young kids and scantily clad women, to adults and even the viejitos, too old to work, that sit outside the Taíno bar.

Constanzo visits our home twice every month. At first, I didn't mind it. For all I knew he was coming to my mom for readings, asking things of the cards, or receiving cleansings. But then I started seeing the oscuros.

A ball bounces in my direction, breaking my string of thoughts and the images of black shadows. Boisterous kids yell after one another, chasing for the ball. I smile, kicking it back to them. Their backpacks swing wildly behind them as they race off.

I try to picture them as the homeless man from before. Would I have done something if it were one of them in their little blue polo shirts and rosy cheeks covered in blood at the hands of one of Constanzo's men?

I shake the image out of my head and blow out a low breath when Matamoros High comes into view. Silver, rusted bars surround the school. The entryway is a red brick archway laid against cream-coloured adobe. With the sun blazing down on it, the school almost looks yellow. Me and several other students squeeze together as we walk through the tight entry. Inside, the school looks bare, more doctor's office than educational institute. The walls are white and blank. Each classroom door is situated under arches – oak brown against the stark white walls.

There are a few posters advertising extracurricular activities but those, too, are written on white paper and pinned to a corkboard near the school's entrance.

I see the one I posted a few weeks ago for the Astronomy club. We haven't gained any new members from the post, so it's still just me and Izzy. I'm actually surprised the posting is still up.

Principal Dale wasn't too keen on me starting an Astronomy club on campus, or any club for that matter. Unlike any other principals we've had at Matamoros High, Principal Dale is a transfer principal from the States. He wears denim button ups with his black slacks and dark brown cowboy boots; I've never seen him without his cowboy hat either. It tips up a bit too high in the front and says 'Texas Born' on the underside.

The principal before Principal Dale was rather impassive towards the students. Anything goes, was pretty much his moto. We had kids skipping classes to go smoke out in the quad, teachers would skip weeks of class, leaving us with a substitute who had no idea what we were

learning that week. Several students dropped out, like Caro, who no longer saw the point in coming to school.

Then Principal Dale showed up. He has a strict ‘no more than three absences’ policy. If you skipped more than three days of school, you were kicked out. If you maintained any lower than a 2.5 grade average, you were kicked out. If you caused any fights on campus, you were kicked out. To some, these rules were stupid. To me, they meant structure and stability.

But over time, Principal Dale got caught up in Matamoros gossip, like all people who stay here long enough.

The bell for first period goes off and several students scramble to get into class.

“Get moving!” booms Principal Dale. He holds his hands at his waist, letting them rest on his empty holsters. His eyes fall on me like magnets. They narrow slightly before he’s walking up to the corkboard, right to my posting about Astronomy club. He yanks my posting off the board. “Best not to be late, Ms. Santiago,” he says, in a heavy drawl.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes and I head in the opposite direction of him, straight to my first class of the day.

Principal Dale had heard rumours about drug lords, which didn’t seem to concern him too much; it was talks of the brujas who lived in Matamoros that did. Then he heard that one of those witches attended his school. He tried really hard to get me kicked out. It was actually quite admirable, his efforts.

But one phone call from mom and a life-threat later, he eased up on his efforts. I was apprehensive at first, to mom threatening my school principal. Then I noticed my grades shifting. Teachers were no longer afraid to give me fair marks, or commend me for a well-written essay.

So maybe it had been worth it. Besides, Principal Dale likes to torment me in other ways. Like with Astronomy club. He refuses to recognize it as an actual school club.

Caro likes to point out that it isn't a club if it only involves me and Izzy. But I usually just ignore her.

I sit through an hour of math before I can see Izzy and I'm chomping at the bit to tell her about the full moon tonight. When I was a child, mom used to love to tell Caro and I stories about the three blood moons that helped create our universe. Ever since then, I'd held a sweet spot in my heart for space and the moon.

For a few days now, the moon has been caught in a waxing gibbous phase. The surrounding stars have been flickering more than usual, I noted yesterday, and I've been calculating their distances. They seem to be coming closer together. I've never seen the stars do that before.

When the bell rings, I'm rushing out the door. I reach the quad area and scan our usual spot. Past a small set of bleachers and the gazebo at the center of the quad, I spot Izzy leaning against the rusted bars.

I pass by the gazebo. After Principal Dale's arrival, it stopped being the main smoking spot and was taken over by another group. To our principal, they're the top academic kids. To everyone else, they're low-level drug dealers for Constanzo. They're typically harmless. Typically.

When I pass by, the loud ruckus they were making subsides. I glance at them from the corner of my eye. I notice them watching me, their whispers echoing like screams in my ear. Manuel, the group leader, winks at me and I repress a shiver. I keep moving.

Izzy looks up from her phone when I approach. “Hey,” she says, taking a sip from her thermos.

“You know what’s up with the pot heads today?” I ask, pointing a thumb behind me.

Izzy looks at them with a shrug. “Nope. Why?”

I can’t think of any reason they’d be weird around me, at least any more than usual. I’ve found the kids at my school don’t mind me being a witch; it’s their parents that cause all the fuss. They fear what my presence at the school is doing to their children, but my fellow classmates have no problem confronting me. Often.

“Never mind,” I say. I lean against the gate with her. “A full moon’s coming.” I feel the excitement resurge.

“I can’t tonight,” Izzy says before I can even ask her.

I deflate a little. “Aw, come on,” I protest. “It’ll be fun.”

“You said that last time and we were there for three hours, Lorena. I missed Menudo night for that.”

“It won’t take that long this time. I’m not trying to see a meteor shower, just the moon.” I pull out my notebook to show her my calculations. “Look,” I say, passing them to her.

She reads off the paper. “My name is Lorena. I like books.” She looks at me questioningly.

“Oh,” I say, turning the page. “That’s my ESL homework.” I find the right page. “This one.”

Izzy shakes her head. “Yeah, this isn’t any better.”

I sigh. “There’s something happening with the stars, Izzy. They’re moving closer together at an alarming rate and I think it has something to do with the full moon that’s coming,”

I say, showing her the numbers I've collected. "Stars don't behave this way, at least not so close for us to see with the naked eye. And if my calculations are correct, at least two stars will come together by the time of the full moon."

Izzy stares blankly.

"They will come together," I say again, enunciating each word. But Izzy continues to stare.

"Lots of natural gases coming together and creating a massive explosion in space, Izzy."

"I'm not missing Menudo night again," is Izzy's answer.

I shake my head at her. Astronomy club is officially down to one member.

Sometimes I have to remind myself why Izzy is my best friend. She likes spending hours doing her makeup and I like spending hours watching the stars. There's nothing wrong with either option, but sometimes I wish I had a friend who is as eager as I am about this stuff.

As we make our way to our next class, I notice the crowd near the gazebo has grown. Something tells me to keep my head down and move as fast as possible. Under the radar, I say to myself.

"Make way for la putana," someone says.

I turn slightly. They couldn't be talking about me, right? It was laughable to think me, who only had one friend, could be considered a slut. I look at Izzy briefly. They better not be talking about her.

"Hey, shut up," says Izzy, hand on my back. "Let's go."

"Oye, Manuel, think you'll let us have a turn with her?"

"Excuse me?" I say, fully turning now.

Manuel is in front of me in a flash, a stupid grin on his face. He has always been good with quiet and quick movements. If Caro weren't inherently a loud person, I'd never know when she had him over on school nights. It isn't often though. They do this on again off again dating business that I never waste my time knowing what schedule they're on.

"Hey," says another boy from the group. "Déjala en paz ."

I lift a brow. "You should listen to your friend, Manuel. Leave me alone." I readjust the straps of my bag.

"Why?" He sneers. "Should I be afraid of you?"

I roll my eyes. "Whatever," I say.

Izzy steers us away and this time I let her. I'm used to worse, and I remind myself not to give in to them.

"I can see why Constanzo would be upset if we messed with Caro. She's actually a bruja. But you? Pathetic," Manuel continues.

I know it's not true. I wish it were. I wish I was as powerless as Manuel says I am, maybe that does make me pathetic.

I don't give them the satisfaction of seeing my red face. Then something hard strikes the back of my head. I cry out, mostly from surprise, and look down to see a jagged rock lying at my feet. I touch the back of my head. It comes away red.

"Oh my god," Izzy says, seeing the blood on my fingertips.

My frustration snaps. "What the hell is your problem?"

"Oh, are you mad? You want to hurt me? Do it," Manuel goads. He extends his arms.

"Use your magic on me."

"Hey, stop," says one of his friends, reaching out to pull Manuel back.

Manuel shoves them off. “No, it’s fine. She won’t do shit. Will you, Lorena?” He eyes me knowingly, and a bit smug.

When I don’t answer, he goes on.

“See I don’t understand why people are so afraid of you, or your family. You have magic but don’t like to use it. What kind of bruja does that make you?” Manuel tightens his hands into fists. He erases the distance between us, quietly and hastily.

I look around the crowd. No one tells him to back off this time. No one steps forward to try and break this emerging fight.

No one actually cares that Constanzo has declared me and my family off limits. They just care who is going to be the first person to strike out at us, Constanzo’s consequences be damned. Or maybe that only applies to me. The one Santiago girl who refuses to use her magic. The one Santiago girl who hates what magic has turned her family into. The one Santiago girl who only wants to learn about the stars.

I recall *that* night, the one only a few days before Constanzo’s arrival, the night mom had a young, crying Caro in her arms. Mom smoothed Caro’s silky black hair back and gripped the sides of her face. Caro’s makeup was smeared in red and black splotches. I told her that morning she looked like a clown going to school with so much makeup.

Mom wiped her tears and said to her, “You never let a man touch you without your consent. You defend yourself.” Caro had cried harder, saying she didn’t know how. Mom slapped her before clutching her to her bosom. You know how, she told Caro. You remind these men why they should have never stopped fearing brujas.

I try to conjure up an illusion, just something small, I tell myself. I picture a swarm of bees rushing toward Manuel, the incessant buzzing a quick whoosh through the air as they race

toward their target. I pull on the strings in my mind's eye. I beg the earth to grant me its strength and energy. I beg Santa Muerte to forgive me for calling on her for this trivial matter. But I won't let this boy bully me.

I see the strings in front of me. *Just pull them.* But as my fingers graze the thin wisps, they vanish all together. When I open my eyes, Manuel is still glaring at me, his fists still clenched.

A sudden rush of wind stirs the air and Manuel pulls his arm up toward me. My surroundings blur together and I feel wind beneath my feet. I fly until my back hits the pavement. Hard.

Izzy yells my name, but it sounds so far away to my ears. "Are you okay?" she cries.

Something warm trickles down the side of my temple.

"Lorena, did he just—" Izzy stops.

The crowd surrounding Manuel exclaims and, despite the wooziness in my head, I jump to my feet. Did he just perform magic?

One of Manuel's friends claps him on the back. "It worked," he says. Wonder clouds the boy's voice.

Manuel's eyes widen slowly before he turns back and the crowd follows after him. In a quick motion, I see Manuel grasp his hand, the one that had performed the magic. I vaguely see it shaking.

"Izzy," I breathe. "Where did Manuel get magic?"

Izzy convinces me to skip the rest of school. We silently walk down the familiar path, too full of questions with no answers to give, until her family's market comes into view. Guerano's Mercado is printed in white against a green and red backdrop. Some of the paint has chipped away and Izzy's dad is always saying he'll fix it eventually.

We spot Izzy's mom outside sweeping the entrance, though her long skirt could probably do more sweeping than the ratty broom. She smiles when she sees us and puts her hands on her hips.

"Lorena," she says, warmly. "It's so good to see you."

"Buen día, señora Himena," I greet her.

Himena gasps when I'm arms distance away from her. "Sweet girl, what happened?"

I tentatively touch my head. The initial sting makes me flinch and Himena rushes forward. I touch it again and this time I brave a smile. "It's fine," I tell her.

"People are fucking idiots," Izzy says, arms crossing over her chest.

"Izabelle Patricia," Himena scolds her. Then she touches the sides of my face. "Who did this?"

Izzy answers again. "It was Manuel."

I'm grateful Izzy doesn't mention how he used magic to do it.

Himena moves back with a tsk. Her face pulls taunt. Then she wipes her hands down the front of her skirt. "Si," she says. "People are fucking idiots."

I smile at her and Izzy wraps an arm around my shoulder.

"Come," Himena says, steering us into the market. "I'll make you girls some lunch."

We walk through the market aisles and make our way to the back of the store. It's near the oil funnels and wiper fluid canisters that the front door to Izzy's home rests. Climbing up the stairs into the Guerano's living room, I can already hear Izzy's little brother yelling at whatever video game he's playing.

"Die, alien scum! Pew, pew!"

"Alejandro, watch your language," Himena says behind me.

"Yeah and go play in your room. Me and Lorena get the T.V. now," adds Izzy.

"What?" he whines. Alejandro nearly slams the controller to the ground but one stern look from Himena stops him.

"It's okay, Alejandro. You can keep playing," I say, trying to keep the peace. "Whatcha playing?" I sit next to him.

"Attack of the Alien Invasion 2: Second Wave. It's not out in the U.S. yet," he says, excitedly.

And even though I doubt that, we always get the second hand or knock off versions of stuff, my eyes widen. "Whoa. Is there a two-player option on this thing?"

Izzy stomps her foot behind us. "Can't we play Mario Party or something that we can all play and isn't too difficult?"

I give Alejandro a side eye in question.

He sighs eventually. "Fine, but I get Princess Peach this time."

"Fine," Izzy relents.

"Esperate," Himena says, halting our game. She holds a first aid kit up and motions me to sit at the dining table.

Alejandro perks up. “Lorena, are you hurt?” He leaves his controller on the ground and follows me to the dining table.

“Just a little cut,” I answer.

“Did you fall?” he asks. He places his little hand on my leg.

Himena pauses.

I contemplate how much Himena would like me to say.

She nods briefly.

“Someone hurt me,” I say. “Someone who was not being very nice.”

“No one who hurts people is nice,” Alejandro says. “I will ask my crystal to do a better job of keeping you safe.” He pats my leg once before bounding off back to his game.

“Crystal?” Himena asks. “What crystal, Alejandro?”

“I found it in Izzy’s room. She prays to it sometimes and asks it stuff.” Alejandro goes on blissfully selecting his character.

The silence hangs heavily between the rest of us.

Izzy gets up and sits at the table. “Mama, it’s not a big thing. I bought it at a shop. The woman said it promotes positive energy and protection.”

“A witch shop?” she asks suddenly.

I fold back into the chair, wishing I could dissolve into it.

“It’s a mineral shop, Mamá,” Izzy says.

Himena rounds on me, her face split into outrage and sympathy. She blinks a few times.

“Did you take her there?” Her voice lowers. “Tell me the truth, Lorena.”

I swallow. I hadn’t taken Izzy there; I told her about Gloria’s many, many times. She has gone a few times with me when mom needed a replenishment of thyme and lavender when they

refused to grow in our garden. But Izzy always waited outside. I glance over at Izzy, her face a billboard for regret.

I face Himena. “Yes, I did. I’m sorry, Doña Himena,” I say, referring to her formal title. “I had to get something for mom and I didn’t think it’d be a big deal.”

Himena sighs and lowers her head. “Lorena, please do not involve my daughter in your witchcraft. Ever again,” she punctuates. Her hand grabs my wrist. “If I find that you are bringing Izzy around any of that brujería,” she says, her hold on me tightening.

I have to force myself not to wince.

“May God have mercy on your soul for what I will do,” she finishes.

And just like that, my own self-hatred rears its ugly head. I wish we could go back to five minutes ago. I wish Alejandro hadn’t said anything, but it isn’t his fault. Or Izzy’s or Himena’s.

“Lo prometo,” I say softly. I promise.

Himena’s grip loosens on my wrist and she pats it once. She hands me a band-aid for my cut. “I’m sorry, Lorena, but I have to ask you to leave.” Himena stands in the threshold of the living room, glaring at Izzy. “I need to talk with Izabelle.”

“Of course,” I muster out. I grab my bag, pat Alejandro on the head, and give Izzy a small smile.

Izzy doesn’t meet my eyes.

I tell myself lying was the best option in that moment, for Izzy’s sake. But when I recall Himena’s glare, I start to doubt it. I have to tell myself it isn’t hatred Himena feels toward me; it’s fear. She’s scared her daughter will get involved in the wrong kind of magic and I can’t blame Himena for that. If I could, I’d keep Izzy away from me, too. But I learned quickly that

Izzy does what she wants and hangs out with whom she wants. Just as I reach the market's entrance, Izzy's dad spots me.

"Lorena," he smiles. "What are you doing here?" He pushes back my hair when he's close enough and sees the cut on my head.

"Oh," I say and rip apart the band-aid before placing it over the cut. "Little accident," I tell him.

"I hope you taught the floor who was boss," he jokes.

I try to smile but my efforts fail.

don Ismael notices right away. "What's wrong?"

I wrestle with telling him the truth or lying again; I know Himena has never liked what my family and me are, but don Ismael has never said much about me being a bruja. I stare into his kind eyes. "Izzy got caught with a protection crystal," I say. "I told Himena I took her to buy it." I lower my head.

"Ay Dios," don Ismael sighs. He pulls up two stools by the counter. "Sit," he says.

I take it, begrudgingly.

"When we first moved to town and heard about the brujas who lived here, we were worried. We asked ourselves if we made a mistake moving here," he reveals. "But I told Himena, the chances of us actually encountering the brujas was slim. We would stick to our streets, our Mercado, and be safe. Then Izzy brought you home," don Ismael says with a smile.

I recall the day. Izzy and I were just kids, sweaty and dirty from running around outside. She asked if I wanted to come to her house for popsicles, that her dad bought them a house that never ran out of ice cream.

“How do you explain to a little girl that she can’t hang around her best friend?” don Ismael asks. “So we didn’t say anything. You were so small and you smiled at everything. You made Izzy smile more, too. Himena said we should wait till you were both older to separate you two – when Izzy was old enough to understand what being a bruja meant.” don Ismael breaks off to laugh and I have to join in, because I know what memory he’s thinking of now.

“Izzy was so excited,” I recall, smiling. “She asked if I could turn Alejandro into a frog,” I reveal, picturing an eleven-year-old Izzy with pigtails and pink shorts.

don Ismael laughs then sobers quickly. “Himena and I have known since the first time we saw you that you don’t have a malicious bone in your body. Even now, we trust you with our daughter and our son.” don Ismael twists toward me. “But fear is not something so easily forgotten. I don’t know if Himena will ever stop fearing brujería completely, but you have to know it is not you she fears. It’s the influence of magic that frightens her the most.”

I nod a few times. “I understand.”

don Ismael gets up as a customer walks in, the bells above the door chiming. “Give it a few days,” he says to me. “Things will be fine.”

I smile again. “Thank you, don Ismael.”

He ruffles the top of my hair. “I told you, just Ismael is fine.”

I try not to think about Himena's reaction too much on my way home, and instead remind myself of Ismael's words. She doesn't hate me, I tell myself. I pull out my phone for the tenth time to check for a text from Izzy. I myself have written out seven drafts, all different variations that ask if she's ok and what Himena said to her once I was gone.

But I didn't send any of them. I know Izzy has her reasons for not telling me about the crystal, but part of me is hurt she didn't trust me with the information. Maybe then I would have been better equipped to help her hide it.

There's a sleek silver car parked in front of my house when I approach and I curse under my breath. I've told mom many times that I don't want to be home when Constanzo comes to visit, but I didn't foresee today going down the way it did. I tell myself to suck it up as I push open the front door.

"Lorena?" my mom calls out.

I follow her voice into the dining room we never use. Mom converted it years ago into a meeting room for her and her clients.

Before I step inside, a dark shadow darts past my legs. I jump slightly and train my expression into a calm and cool one before stepping in. That same dark shadow curls its way around one of the dining chairs. It curls around Constanzo's legs and travels up, settling on his shoulder. Cool marble eyes meet mine.

"Hello, Constanzo," I greet.

Mom clears her throat when I don't move. Gritting my teeth, I go to him. I bend forward and with the side of my mouth I drop a kiss to his cheek.

“Good to see you, Lorena,” he says, minty breath fanning across my cheek as he reciprocates the kiss. The tip of his finger touches my temple. “What happened here?”

“Hmm? Is something wrong?” Mom rushes out. She tilts my head toward her, having jumped from her spot across the table. Her nostrils flair and I know she must be remembering the night Caro came home with scars and dried blood.

“It was an accident at school. I’m fine, mami,” I say.

“An accident? Or did someone do this to you?” Mom retorts.

I open my mouth only to shut it again. I don’t want to say what really happened with Constanzo sitting in the same room. Considering the circumstances of how I got this huge cut, and who gave it to me, I prefer not to say anything.

Constanzo stands slowly. His warmth coaxes my back until my shoulders relax. I hadn’t even noticed they’d tensed. Constanzo puts a hand on my shoulder. “If someone hurt you, please tell us. I will make sure there’s a clear understanding that you are not to be touched.” He says it quietly and his soothing tone almost makes me open up. He won’t hurt Manuel for this, just talk to him.

Caro makes a throaty noise from the corner of the room – I didn’t even see her when I came in. She looks disgruntled and she glares at Constanzo’s nearness to me. I shake off the comfort pouring from Constanzo’s presence.

“No one hurt me,” I say, then clear my throat to sound more resolute. “I fell at school and the nurse sent me home. I’m sorry I disrupted your meeting,” I tack on.

“It’s alright,” he says, readjusting the lapels of his jacket. A sliver of a shadow peaks out from underneath it.

I try not to react.

“We were finishing up. Xio, a dozen by next week, please, and write down the recipe. About what he discussed,” Constanzo adds, rising to his full height, “It may be the only way to keep your children safe. Truly safe.”

“Safe from what?” I ask.

Constanzo tucks a stray wisp of hair behind my ear before touching the wound on my head again. The dull pain I felt on my way home disappears. “I’ll let you three discuss this amongst yourselves,” he says, with a smile.

If he were anyone other than himself, I’d think his smile was attractive.

“But I know you will make the right choice, Xio. You always have when it comes to your girls,” he goes on.

I ignore Constanzo’s cryptic messages and look to mom for an answer.

Her smile is tight. “Thank you, Constanzo,” is all she says. She folds her hands together and I know that means we’re not to discuss this in front of the present company.

“Good day, Xio. Caro,” Constanzo says barely glancing at her. “I’ll see you soon, Lorena.” He plants another kiss to my cheek and leaves.

An *oscuro* lingers in the room, running between my legs and I have to force myself not to kick it away. For a second I think I hear it hiss at me before it slinks back toward Constanzo’s receding form.

When the door clicks shut, mom is the first one up and out of the room.

“Mama, what was he talking about?” I ask.

Faintly, Caro’s bare feet pad into the kitchen. “He wants us to join his coven,” she sneers. “Officially.”

“What?” I nearly scream. “Like, move into one of his super-secret compounds and perform worship together?”

“And he wants us to help recruit more brujas for him,” Caro adds.

“No,” I say. “We’re not doing it. Mom, you promised it was our choice whether or not we joined the Matamoros coven. Now we’re being forced to join Constanzo’s fake one?”

“I think mom is seriously considering it,” Caro says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Mom sighs and stirs the pot on the stove. She pulls three bowls from the cupboard.

“Yes,” she finally says.

“But this is our town,” I shout.

“No me grites,” mom shouts back.

I immediately back down and lower my voice. “Mom, Matamoros is our home,” I say again. “I’d more readily join Matamoros coven than Constanzo’s.”

Mom stops and sets down the ladle. She caresses the side of my face before touching the wound on my head. “When I left home, I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was giving myself a better life. And for you girls.”

I blink. Mom told us a few times her reasons for leaving home and Caro and I understood. Mom’s dad was abusive and she said she wouldn’t have lived much longer if he found out about little Caro growing in mom’s belly. “I know, mom. And we’re doing fine here,” I whisper it out, but even so, I look wearily to Caro.

“I should have done better with you two. I thought letting you both choose how much magic you wanted in your life would be best. But I was wrong,” mom continues.

I tilt my head. “Mom, what are you saying?”

“If I had pressed you both to learn the craft at a younger age, shown you how to protect yourself with it, maybe things would have been different. But even now, I can’t protect you,” Mom places a soft kiss on my wound. “Like it or not, Constanzo has more connections around the city than anyone else. He can keep us safe from anyone looking to hurt us for what we can do. That’s why I’m considering it. And considering picking back up your girls’s training.”

Caro jumps up. “Really?” For the first time since I’ve come home, Caro sounds happy.

I shake my head. “You did the right thing letting us choose, mama.”

“No,” mom says. “I waited too long with Caro and she got hurt. I let you move too far away from the craft and now—” mom cuts off. “We won’t make the same mistakes.”

We’re silent for a few moments. Caro wrings her hands together and I can practically feel her excitement and anticipation bubbling over my skin. It makes my stomach churn.

“I won’t train,” I declare.

“Lorena, don’t be stupid. Yes, you will,” Caro cuts in.

“No,” I say again, stronger. “I won’t do it.”

Mom slams the ladle down. The harsh sound of wood cracking echoes in the kitchen. “Mija, enough. You’ve had your fun,” Mom says. “You’ve made your friends and gone to school, pero enough is enough.” Mom faces me, her lips drawn into a stern line, hard-set eyes lacking their familiar warmth. “You will train and take your place among the coven.”

I chuckle, humorlessly. “You mean Constanzo’s fake coven full of corrupt brujas and humans who think they’re witches?”

“We’re not corrupt,” Caro points out, though her voice lowers.

My brows furrow. “We’re not, right, Mom?”

“Ya!” Mom shouts. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore tonight. Now, come,” she says pouring soup into the bowls. “I made caldo de res.”

I place one hand on my hips and rub at my brow with the other. “You made caldo? Mom, it’s like 90 degrees outside.”

Caro sighs. “I tried to tell her.” She gets up and grabs a bowl, pouring the steaming hot soup.

My stomach growls and I grumble about how hot it is in the house until my bowl fills with broth, chicken, chunks of potato and carrots. Mom comes up beside me and places a whole corn onto my soup. “Thanks, Mom,” I mumble out.

We sit together at our small kitchen table. The clink of utensils rings louder than usual in the otherwise tiny room.

“So,” I start, chewing slowly on my potato. “What did Constanzo want written down?” I ask. I try to say in nonchalantly but Mom clinks her spoon down.

“What did I just say? We’re not talking about him,” is her response.

I purse my lips. “Okay,” I draw out.

Caro leans forward. “So what happened at school? Who did it?” she points to my wound.

I sigh. “Yeah, maybe we just shouldn’t talk tonight.”

The corners of Caro’s lips slant upward.

We’re all quiet for another beat.

“Thanks for dinner, Mom,” I say, bringing a hot spoonful of soup to my mouth.

“Yeah, it’s good,” Caro adds, slurping.

Mom curses silently and drops her spoon again, fanning herself with her napkin. “It’s too hot today.”

After dinner, Caro and I tag team the dishes and put away the leftovers we'll no doubt be having for the new few days.

"Why isn't the—" I say, sweat collecting at my back and neck.

Caro cuts me off. "It's broken."

"Again?" I groan. "That's the fifth time." Mom refuses to call someone to come fix the air conditioner, swearing she could fix it herself. I wipe my arm across my forehead. "Maybe we should take a crack at it?" I offer.

Caro stops mid wash. "Wow, *you* offering to use magic? Now I know something is wrong with you."

I place the dried dish back into the cupboard. "I'm willing to come off my magic ban for this"

Caro bumps me with her hip. "Seriously. What happened today?" She lowers her voice and eyes me wearily as she spreads suds across the bowls.

I check behind us quickly, double-checking that Mom has retreated upstairs to her room. "It was Manuel," I tell her.

Caro's face blanches. "Manuel? He wouldn't."

I huff. "Depends. Are you guys dating right now or not?"

Caro rolls her eyes.

"That wasn't the weird part," I say, carefully. I grab Caro's arm and turn her away from the sink.

She lets go of the bowl and drops the sponge. Her brows pinch forward and she searches my eyes intently. In a matter of seconds, I watch her cool, calm, and collected demeanor morph into serious witch mode. She makes it look so badass.

I mentally shake my head. "I'm pretty sure Manuel used magic to do it."

"How sure is 'pretty sure?'" she says.

"Almost certain."

"Well, how certain, Lorena? You can't be making outrageous accusations like this without knowing for sure!"

I pinch the inside of her arm. "Will you lower your voice, please? I don't want Mom to hear."

She dares a glance up the stairs but we hear no footsteps. She sighs. "This isn't the Salem Witch Trials, Lorena. We don't just go around accusing people of being witches. You have to be sure."

"I'm surprised you even know what that is," I tease.

She shoves my shoulder back. "I'm not that daft."

"There was something wrong with him after he did it," I go on. "His hand was shaking, and not in a frightened sort of way. It looked like he was in pain."

Caro freezes for a moment before shuffling back to the sink. "I'll find out."

"What are you going to do?"

"The less you know, the better."

"Oh no," I laugh, humourlessly. "Nope. I told you the truth; you don't get to keep me in the dark now. I want to know what's going on. How did a human end up with magical powers?"

Caro sets a soaking plate down a little too hard. It splinters down the center. "I don't know. But we need to be sure, without a doubt, that Manuel does really have powers before we go to Mom with this."

"Maybe we should tell her now," I suggest with a shrug. I rub at my temple.

“No,” Caro says quickly. “That’ll just get her amped up and she’ll tighten the already tight leash she keeps on us.”

I bite my lip. “I don’t know, Caro. Mom may be able to give us more answers here. She’ll know how to approach this.”

Caro whirls on me. She grips the sides of my arms. “Lorena, think about this. If you tell Mom she’ll fuss even more over us. She’ll keep you from going to school or from going too far into town. Is that what you want? To be stuck here?”

I grimace as she tightens her hold on me. “No,” I say, finally. “I guess not.”

Caro loosens up, breathing out slowly. “Good,” she says. “I’ll find out for sure if Manuel has powers tomorrow. If you see him at school, steer clear. No need to provoke him any further if he does have powers.”

I nod. “Just be careful.”

Caro pats the side of my face. “I always am.”

We finish up the dishes and head upstairs.

I pause at my bedroom door. “Hey,” I start. “Should we be concerned? You know, about Constanzo’s coven and us joining it?”

She bites her lip. “I don’t know, Lorena. Mom seems... worried about something. She’s not telling me what it is, but she’ll tell us when she’s ready.”

Caro’s words reassure me despite the sinking feeling in my stomach.

“You and Izzy going out tonight?” Caro asks.

“Just me,” I answer.

“Izzy finally get tired of your astrology shit?” Caro grins.

I chuckle. “Yeah, something like that.” I step into my room.

“That’s going to leave an ugly scar,” Caro stops me.

We both hover at our respective doors and I feel like there’s more Caro wants to say to me, and maybe I do, too. I really think we should tell Mom about Manuel, but I promised to let Caro handle it. And maybe Caro’s right—there’s no use worrying Mom if we aren’t certain he does have powers. What did I even expect to do? Just hand off all the problems I encounter to my sister and my mom?

Caro interrupts my thoughts. “Let me know if you want me to heal it for you.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, a little too harshly. “Thanks,” I add to soften the remark.

Caro continues to hover.

I wait expectantly. “Spit it out,” I finally say.

“Did you try to defend yourself? Earlier, from Manuel,” Caro asks.

I flinch back. In my bewilderedness over Manuel and his potential powers I had completely forgotten that part of the story. How my powers of illusion failed. But that truth feels too personal to share with Caro, at least for now. That’s a question I need to answer for myself.

“No,” I told her. “You know how I feel about magic.” I brush off her intense stare.

“Right,” she says, but she sounds unconvinced. “You should be more careful.” Her tone hardens. “If it’s down to you and another man, I don’t care what your stance is about magic. You don’t let him take you down.”

My earlier irritation fades away as I consider her words. “I won’t,” I say. “I promise.”

I walk the perimeter of our house twice, making sure our crystal wards of protection are still up, before setting up my telescope.

I readjust the telescope for the twentieth time before swiping through my phone again. Several green circles light up on the corner of the screen, notifying me that more people are coming online in the forum.

StarGirl12: Is anyone seeing it yet?

Astr0B0y: Nothing yet.

Vice: Five degrees to the left

I fumble quickly to move the telescope once more. I lower my gaze into the scope and hold my breath. I'm not sure what two stars colliding are supposed to look like. Is it two objects moving at top speed and crashing violently? Or will I be out here a lot longer than I originally thought? My phone vibrates with a new message.

Vice: Any new calculations?

I smile before typing out a reply.

GazingConcha: Not since yesterday. Any guesses how long this will take?

Vice: I'm betting it'll be over before we know it. Patience is key.

GazingConcha: Yes, Master Yoda.

Vice: Who?

GazingConcha: No way you haven't seen Star Wars.

Vice: I haven't. No real interest.

GazingConcha: For someone so into astrophysics, it's surprising.

Vice: Do they calculate celestial events in that movie?

GazingConcha: Uh.

Vice: Exactly.

I laugh, despite myself. Vice has always been my favorite part of this particular forum. I'm not involved in many, but I like to be kept in the know whenever something comes up in the sky. Though I've never asked, I assume Vice must live somewhere near me, or at least near North America. They calculated the same stars that I did a few nights ago. I was the first to announce it to our little forum group, though. But Vice quickly confirmed it. Another chime from the group message calls my attention.

Vice: Heads up.

I jolt up. I don't see anything for a moment, just flickering lights against a darkened night. And then, almost like two shooting stars racing across the sky, I see them. It's so quick that I'm sure if I blink, I'll miss their collision. My eyes burn to blink but I widen them anyway.

The two stars finally crash, and I let myself blink. I'm not surprised there is no sound, but when two fast moving objects collide, it almost feels expected – the loud explosion of an unexpected event and the chaos that follows. But in space all things are silent. Even the collision and end of two entities. I wait a few more beats. The corners of my mouth tip upward.

“So cool,” I whisper to myself. I sink into the grass and continue to watch the sky until a new light comes out of the seemingly empty wreckage. It's a faint glow at first but the more seconds that pass, the brighter it burns.

I sigh, feeling a warmth blossom in my chest. If I could stay out here all night, I would. I'd never move from this spot. I'm suddenly grateful to have been out here to witness this. I would have gone the rest of my life not having witnessed this, and if I weren't here to see it, would I have believed a star collision could happen so close to earth?

Something lands in my eye and I blink several times, the intrusion making my eyes water. I rub at my eye. A loose eyelash falls with the water in my eye and I curse it before wiping it along the grass. When I look back to the sky, the newborn star is gone.

“What—” I get up, searching the sky. My phone chimes again.

StarGirl12: Man, that was awesome!

Astr0B0y: Hell yeah! See you guys on the next moon?

The rest of the group agrees but I open up my private messages with Vice.

GazingConcha: Did you see the new star?

Vice: What new star?

My fingers hover over the keyboard. I check the night sky one more time. I was so sure I had seen it. Doubt creeps in and I rub at my eye again, the water still pooling there. Maybe it was just another star already in the sky, I conclude to myself. I tuck my phone in my back pocket and start packing away the telescope. Tucking it under my arm, I also grab my crystals I left to charge. They’re warm to the touch, almost uncomfortably so, and when I’m back in my room and place them on the windowsill, they appear to be glowing. Like the star I saw, I think.

A knock at my door startles me from the window and I nearly knock my desk lap off with the telescope still under my arm. I set it down in time for Caro to open my bedroom door.

She holds a rusty looking fan in her hands. “Thought you might want to use it,” she says. She sets it down and plugs it in for me.

“Thanks,” I say, sighing as the air hits my sweaty face.

Caro takes a seat beside me on the bed and leans back. “Can I ask you something?”

I peer at her from the corner of my eye. She looks relaxed. I force my shoulders back.

“Sure.”

“Do you ever think about what your element will be?”

I stare at the fan, feeling the air pick up speed and wonder what part of it is the fan and what part is Caro’s power.

I consider her question. “Yes,” I say, truthfully. “But maybe not for the reasons you’d think. It’s mostly out of fear.”

“Santa Muerte would never give you something you couldn’t handle,” is her immediate response.

“That’s what everyone says. I don’t want any of it,” I say.

Caro remains quiet for a moment. “Not all magic is bad.”

My mind immediately thinks of Himena and our exchange from today – the fear in her eyes. Then I see Constanzo and his shadows. I see Mom smiling across from him. “All the magic I’ve seen is.”

I wait for Caro to argue with me. These conversations always end in explosive arguments. But instead, she grabs my hand in hers. It feels cold against my sweat soaked hands. The breeze picks up again. I smile. “Thanks,” I say.

“No problem.” She squeezes my hand.

Part of me wishes Santa Muerte would give me the gift of winds, too. Then I’d be able to hide behind Caro’s shadow. She’s the one everyone would want to learn from, would ask for when they asked for a wind elemental. Not me. But I’m not that lucky. And Santa Muerte isn’t that kind.

Caro gets up. “Be careful at school tomorrow,” she says. “Last thing your face needs is another ugly scar.” She winks at me before leaving.

“Jerk,” I laugh. I lie back in bed and let the cool air lull me to sleep. I begrudgingly notice the fan has less power now.

I startle awake with a gasp. The ground rumbles with a low, angry protest, jostling the bed. My first thought is it's an earthquake. But then I hear a loud crash, an explosion, I realize. My ears ring as I struggle to get out of bed. The ground is still shaking. Once on my feet, my senses are flooded with the smell of sulfur and ash in the air. The distinct taste of magic hits my tongue. Its metallic tang forces me to grit my teeth.

Sweat beads drip down my temple and the length of my arms. Why am I so hot? I grab at my bedroom door with slick fingers. My sister's name is on the tip of my tongue when the door suddenly flies open. Black smoke hits my face and I stumble back. The fire, mostly black with a tinge of red, creeps up the walls and surrounds the doorframe. I can't see into the hall, or the bedroom door across the hall from me.

I panic. "Caro?" I call out. I inch forward and the fire surges, growing hotter and taller. I have to get out of this room. I eye the window behind me but going out the window and making it to the ground could mean I wouldn't be getting back inside to look for my family. I can't leave without them.

I square my shoulders and charge past the growling flames. A blinding pain hits the back of my thighs. The heat of the flames touches me for less than a second, but it's enough to send me barreling to my knees. "Mom! Caro!" I call out.

Heavy clouds of black smoke block parts of the hallway and I squint hoping to see Mom or Caro through it all. Something falls from the ceiling. It comes down in a blaze of fire. I try my sister's name again. "Caro!"

A shadow moves from the corner of my eye. I track its movement through the smoke and then her face is there. Caro, beautiful even in the chaos of fire and ash, rushes through the

flames, ducking under broken pieces of our home. “Lorena!” she screams after me. I meet her halfway. “Where’s Mom?” she asks.

“She’s not already with you?” I snap.

“No, Lore, she’s clearly not!”

“Okay,” I yell. “We don’t have time for this. Can you clear us a path?”

She lowers her head, eyes pinched in concentration. She holds a hand out. I can already smell her aura as she calls on her element. Sugar and hazel wood mingle together and lift past the smell of ash. As Caro’s aura lifts higher into the air, I think I can see the fire starting to subside. Wind swirls around us as Caro tries to clear the fire.

A sharp pain stabs my side, nearly knocking me to the ground.

“Are you seriously going to be sick right now?” Caro yells at me.

I try to shake my head. This doesn’t feel like the stomach flu. It feels like something is trying to suffocate me. I gasp loudly, smoke and ash filling my lungs.

I grip Caro’s arm, just as the flames rage out of control. They thrash outward, further blocking our path.

“Caro, stop! What are you doing?” I shove her hand down, crying out as I sink to the ground.

“I’m not doing anything!” she says, yanking herself out of my grasp. “It’s reacting to my magic. I can’t do anything.” Her eyes widen as the flames continue to travel.

Another piece of the roof comes crashing down around us.

“We have to move,” Caro says. She yanks me off the ground.

“Wait,” I croak out. I run back to my room.

“Lorena, are you serious? Come on, we have to go!”

I throw an arm over my face and jump over burning wood.

“Just leave it!” Caro yells after me.

But something is telling me to go back and grab my crystal. I see it immediately.

Untouched and still glowing, I grab the crystal.

When I make it back to Caro, we’re both coughing and wheezing.

“Let’s go,” Caro says, grabbing me by the shoulder and dragging me forward.

I try to focus on the movement of my feet – just make it out – but the pain in my chest overshadows the thought. I grip Caro’s hand tighter as we reach the stairs. Part of me wants to just make a run for it but another part says running on these stairs will be worse. So we go steadily. Caro takes a step first and then she nods at me. I follow behind.

We’re halfway down the steps when part of the roof crashes behind us, blocking the path we had just taken.

I stumble on a step. “What about Mom?” I cry out.

Caro drags me forward but we both stop short at the threshold of our living room. We find Mom trapped under wood and fire right in front of our ofrenda.

My eyes widen. I run and yell for her. I try to see if she’s moving. I grip the large chunk of wood crushing my mom and try not to acknowledge the heat and the pain scoring my hands. The pads of my feet start to sting and my toes curl, but I bend my knees and pull harder.

I finally feel the wood start to give and notice Caro on the other end of it, lifting. We shove the wood to the side, hearing it splinter and crack as it lands.

Mom’s face is covered in dust and ash. The entire left side of her face is blistered and bloody, but her chest moves and I see her lips part. Her eyes meet mine and as they widen, she starts to move. She tries to sit up but cries out. Her legs are still pinned down by piles of burning

wood. With her hands free, she grabs for my sister. “You need to get out!” she yells. “Get yourselves out now!”

“You too, ama!” I say to her. I grab another piece of wood. “Come on, Caro. Lift!”

But Mom pulls Caro down, whispering something into her ear. Caro’s eyes widen briefly before rearing up. “Let’s go!” she yells, yanking me away from the wood, from my mom.

“No! What about Mom?” I look back. Mom lies limp under the rubble, but Caro keeps shoving me forward.

We run back into the throng of flames and I see them catch on the tendrils of Caro’s hair, greedily drawing her in. Caro throws an arm over my head and shelters me through the flames.

I grip the front of her shirt until we reach the front door. Flames block our path and Caro lets me go quickly, grabbing a piece of fallen wood. She heaves it at the door and it caves in easily, already weakened from the heat.

Together, we step through. Fresh night air fills our lungs and we’re coughing as Caro puts more distance between our home and us. Caro finally releases me and exhaustion fills my muscles. I fall forward.

Caro bends forward, too, breathing heavily. Her hands ball into fists. She swears under her breath before standing upright. “I’m going back for her.”

I want to protest if only for the selfish reason that I don’t want to be alone. I try to stand with her but my legs buckle and the pain, always the pain, has me gasping into the dirt.

“Deep breaths,” Caro says, her hand on my back.

I nod. I know I have to stay here. So I tell her, “Be careful. And come back.”

Caro holds her hand out for me. I grab it. “I promise,” she says.

I want to tether her to that promise, to tie a string around our joined hands, say a prayer to our Goddess of Death, and curse Caro if she so much as thinks of breaking that promise.

I remain still in the open night, caught between chaos and disbelief. How did this happen? I scramble suddenly for something, a phone, an elixir, anything to feel like I'm useful. My fingers catch on something in my pocket. I'm still in the clothes from earlier in the day and I find a few loose coins. Tucked among the coins is the crystal I had gone back for. I grip it so tightly in my hands it feels like the crystal will break skin.

I touch it to my forehead. "Please," I beg. "Santa Muerte. Tell me what to do."

A loud crash comes from the house and when I look up, the windows in the living room have blown out, the flames licking the place they once stood. I race to the house, the pain in my chest lifting slowly. "Caro! Mom!"

I hesitate at the doorway. The heat comes off in rampant waves and the fear of being burned is there for one fleeting moment before I charge through, consumed by a desperate need to find my sister and Mom. I can't see more than a few feet in front of me and the ash in the air force my eyes to water, making it more difficult to tell which way is which.

I yell for my family again and again. I lose track of the front door. A blast from somewhere in the house throws me back and I land on a piece of wood covered in hot ash. I don't bother hiding the pain anymore. I yell and pull myself up and keep looking. I keep thinking I hear them, hear a whimper or a name but it's eclipsed by the crackle and pop of fire and wood.

Through the darkness, I see a pristine bundle of incense on the ground. I recognize it immediately as the bundle I placed on the altar just yesterday. I run for it, crying out for Caro and Mom as I go.

"Lore."

I hear a throaty moan just before another piece of the house falls apart. I find Caro tucked under the rubble. Only half of her is visible, the other half covered by debris. I kneel beside her.

“I’m going to get you out,” I say, ignoring the sob already choking my words.

I heave a piece of wood from her body. Her arm is bent at an odd angle, her hand contorted and limp, and I know for sure it must be broken.

“Did you find Mom?” I ask.

Caro swallows and she cringes. “I tried,” is all she says.

I blink back tears. “Okay,” I choke out. “Just hang on. You’ll be okay.”

Caro’s hand shoots out and grasps my arm. “You need to get out,” she rasps.

I shove her hand away a little too roughly and continue to move the debris. “No,” I say. I push harder on a chunk of wood but it’s lodged right over Caro’s legs. I’m scared to move it but my resolve returns. “We are both getting out of here,” I declare.

Caro’s nostrils flare. Tears fall down the sides of her face. “I can’t move,” she says, eyes going wide.

“Let me get this off you and we’ll get out,” I say. It’s more to placate her and keep myself steady because I’m walking a fine line between sanity and just lying down beside my sister and accepting what comes.

“No, Lorena,” Caro cries out, spit flying from her mouth. “I can’t feel my legs.”

I grip the sides of Caro’s face, wiping the tears as I caress her. My forehead nearly touches hers and I say, “We will get you to a healer after this and you’ll be good as new. You’ll be fine.” You have to be.

I push on the wood again, wedging my shoulder underneath to help, but the heat charring through my shirt and blistering my skin makes it too hard to move. I wipe an arm over my brow

but sweat coats every part of me. I let out an angry cry and square my shoulders before trying again.

The wood moves slightly.

I breathe out sharply. “Caro, I almost got it, okay?”

I’m met with silence. I push again, the wood coming away much easier this time. I nearly fall when it gives but quickly catch myself. “Caro! Come on. We have to go.” I bend toward her.

Caro’s lips are parted. Her chest doesn’t move.

“No, no, no,” I mumble out. I continue to mumble it, placing my palms to her chest and pressing down. I press down so hard I think I hear her bones crack but I keep pushing. I stare at her paling face, waiting for her to breathe, to move. Any minute now... She’s fine. I just have to wait a little longer.

I press my face to hers and feel wetness trail from my lips to hers. “You promised me.” She was supposed to come back.

A tall silhouette hovers in the distance and I crouch protectively over Caro’s body. It’s the culprit come back to see his handy work. I grit my teeth and place one final kiss on Caro’s temple.

“Don’t come any closer!” I say, shakily to the approaching figure.

It stops briefly before moving closer.

I grip a piece of broken wood on the ground and raise it. “I’ll kill you for this!” My voice, raw and empty, sounds foreign to my ears and I don’t actually know if I have it in me to do what I say I will. But I tighten my grip on the wood anyway.

“Put it down,” a low voice comes through the thick smoke.

I charge forward, the sharp wood above me.

Something smacks the side of my head and I stumble off to the side. The wood piece falls and I hear a cluster of voices around me, nothing quite comprehensible to me. I fall back. Rough arms catch me and hoist me back up. Something scratchy and thick is pulled over my body. I thrash and kick out as best I can, but the heavy weight of the blanket slows me down. My muscles, already tired and weak, falter even more under the added weight.

The voices come through with more clarity as my feet crunch on top of wet grass. I'm outside, I realize.

"Get her checked out immediately. I saw someone else in there. I'm going back in," the voice from earlier says.

He's going back for Caro.

The blanket gets pulled away and the night is lit with red and blue lights. I blink back, thrown off by how bright it all is. I'm steered toward an emergency truck. Several fire trucks line up the driveway but none of them are spraying down the house. I look back.

The fire is mostly out, but that's because there isn't anything left of my home. A cry leaves my lips as I look at the empty space. My chest tightens. How could everything be gone so quickly? I grew up here. I felt safe here. All I'm left with is an emptiness I'm not sure what to fill with. I sit back in the truck and continue to stare at the smoke. It clears slowly.

Hands travel over my skin, pull back my hair, push me forward, lift my shirt, and all the while I can't muster up the will to care. I'm waiting for that man to come back outside with my sister in tow.

When he emerges, his arms are empty.

I close my eyes.

Everything around me fades. My mind rushes to calculate a plan. But through every plan I make I see Caro's face in the ashes. I see Mom begging us to leave her behind. Water rushes down my face. "What am I supposed to do?" I ask the Caro in my mind.

The crystal in my pocket warms again, jostling me from my thoughts. Standing in the street, hovering near police cars and fire trucks, are two men in all black. Their heads are shaved completely clean. Constanzo's men.

Did he do this?

I wring my hands and lean back into the truck, hiding myself from view. Did they see me in here? I peek out.

The two men are talking to the police officers and pointing to the house but they don't catch me hiding in the emergency truck. Another car pulls up. This one plain black. My breath catches. Would he take me away with him? My heart races and it's like I never left the danger of the fire.

When the paramedic is done with me, she excuses herself, saying she'll return shortly. I brace one hand on the truck and wrap the blanket they gave me tighter around myself. I give one last look to my home.

Ruin had a way of making a home in Matamoros, but I always hoped it wouldn't ever come for mine.

I swallow, grip the crystal in my hand, and fall back into the darkness of the trees. I don't know where I'm going but I find myself going further and further away from Caro and the home I've always known.

I never grew accustomed to Matamoros at night. Not that I feared walking these streets, but I never had a reason to walk them this late at night. Caro did, I remind myself, all the time. I stand straighter, hold my chin up, and walk through the villa.

The woods near my house offer a back way into the city, and when I near it, I wonder why we never took this way more often. The arch of a bridge peaks out over the hill. Even in the dead of night the bridge remains busy, an outpouring of college students coming and going from Brownsville, Texas into Matamoros, Mexico. I'm close enough to see their open windows, breeze pushing their hairs back. A few of them look like they've lost a few battles with our bulls after curing their headaches from three-dollar Coronas and street hotdogs. All of them oblivious to how dangerous this town can be. Oblivious, even, to the drug-owned streets and marked graves they think are there just for decoration.

But most of Matamoros dangers don't occur this close to the border. Americans often cross for calle Álvaro Obregón, a tourist border town with clubs and bars lined up and down the street, rarely ever checking for ID.

The familiarity of it all, the loud music and cheerful yells, soothes the ache inside me, even if for a moment. I hike up another slope near the border, a place Caro and I have been to before. It offers a better view of the bridge and calle Álvaro Obregón. The city's lights look brighter up here as I climb higher. Caro and I used to sit for hours, making up stories about the tourists who travelled here.

"A week in Mexico City," I say to the night sky. I settle on a clearing of grass. "There's a college girl looking for a thrill because she's usually very reserved. She wants to prove she can be different," I go on.

A soft image of Caro in her faded denim and wavy, black hair appears next to me. *She'll meet a boy, right? There's got to be a boy involved.*

I let out a sob, mixed together with a chuckle as I nod. "Whatever you want," I say. I lean back into the grass, its cool blades pricking my skin, and close my eyes.

I'm vaguely aware when I start to breathe heavily. My heart accelerates and it's like adrenaline running through me again, but this feels slightly different. I surge up violently, the sense I can't breathe suddenly the only overwhelming thought in my mind.

I scratch at my arms and hands hoping to be rid of the smell of smoke and ash. I rip my shirt off and rub it through the grass, sobbing, yelling. My throat tightens because the fucking smell won't go away and as the wind picks up, something sweet carries up in the air. I stop for a moment. It smells vaguely of hazel wood. Of Caro.

On my knees, I toss my shirt back over my head and let the wind and the smell of Caro wash over me. I rest back into the grass. Just for a moment, I tell myself.

The heaviness I had been carrying all night finally seeps into the ground below me and as I succumb further into sleep, I'm grateful that at least Caro's scent has not left me.

I know I'm in a Dreamscape the moment it happens. From a dreamless sleep, black and silent, to colours too bright and sounds too loud to be just a dream.

I'm back in my home. Flames lick up my legs and it's like I'm back there in reality, remembering the heat and pain. Caro's face is suddenly in front of me, but something is off. Her mouth gapes open but I can't hear the words she's speaking. Eyes wide, she shakes her head and points to something behind me.

"There you are."

The voice makes my back go rigid.

“I was worried you died in the fire, too.”

Eric Constanzo approaches me slowly, tentatively, like a wild animal ready to pounce on its prey and I force myself to remain still. My lips part to ask what he’s doing here in my Dreamscape when I remind myself this is *my* Dreamscape. I control what I see. I press my eyes shut and try to picture something else, somewhere else. But the images I conjure fade away at the sensation of Constanzo’s breath on my skin.

Constanzo turns me toward him and something dark moves beside him. His oscuros slither off his shoulders and twine themselves around my waist and up my arms. They pull and pull until I’m almost nose-to-nose with Constanzo. For a moment I’m reminded of the first time I ever saw them.

I asked Caro if she could see them darting about the room but she shrugged me off, saying there was nothing there and to pay attention to what Constanzo had been saying. But I couldn’t focus on him. I could only focus on his shadows. Big ones, small ones, they all pulsed around his body, moving like snakes on the hunt for their prey. I watched them slither around his neck, much like they are now, and wondered if Constanzo could actually feel them when they did that.

I never brought them up again. But I always see them.

“Tell me where you’ve gone to, Lorena,” Constanzo says, his voice the perfect picture of calm. His cool finger drags down the curve of my cheek and under my chin, tilting my face toward his. He looks me over slowly.

A shadow wraps itself around his hand and in an instant Constanzo has that hand wrapped tightly around my neck.

I gasp, mainly out of shock, and try to pry his hand away. The more I fight his hold, the tighter and tighter it gets, nails digging into the skin of my neck.

Caro's shadow materializes behind Constanzo. She waves her arms around wildly and though I still can't hear a word she says, I know what word she's yelling at me. Run.

I shove Constanzo back with as much strength as I can. I fumble on my feet for a split second before I'm pushing myself forward, running as fast as my weak muscles can carry me.

I keep telling myself it's a Dreamscape, that these are used for witches to communicate with each other, not to harm each other. But the heat singeing my pant legs and spreading feels too real.

I reach the stairs in a few strides. Flames engulf them and no matter how many times I tell myself this isn't real, I hesitate, fearing the heat and pain. There has to be another way out of here. I plant my feet more firmly. I need to wake up.

Something yanks me back and I twist in the fall. Constanzo's weight slams into me, knocking the breath out of me. A sharp pain strikes the side of my hip I've landed on. Behind Constanzo, fire pokes out of the landing where I once stood.

Constanzo's calm demeanor shifts in a blink. His hair is frazzled out of place and he shoots me a glare. "Do you think if you die here you won't die in the real world?" he says through gritted teeth.

I try to crawl away but Constanzo grips my ankle and slides me back.

He climbs over me, a hair's breath away. "What did you do?" he demands.

Heat spreads up my pant legs and scorches the fabric, but I realize it isn't burning me. Still, I yelp and try to shove Constanzo off. I buck and thrash but Constanzo presses his weight further into me.

“Tell me what you’ve done!” he says again.

I lift the leg that’s burning hot and jam it into Constanzo. He cries out, falling to the side. Just as I’m readying myself to bolt again, he grabs a fistful of my hair. He pants into the side of my face, spit and sweat slipping down my cheek.

The only way out is to fight him, I realize. And standing before me in the haze of smoke and ash is Caro, smiling. I think of her stuck under hot debris, of her blistered arms and smell of burnt flesh. I think of the fire that licked my legs and singed my clothes. I want Constanzo to feel it, too.

I raise a hand toward him, desperate and wild to touch any part of him, and when I feel the coolness of his skin, I bring that heat to the surface. Rage fuels my thoughts. He should know what it feels like to run through the flames and find everything you love be destroyed by it.

Constanzo yells suddenly and my knees hit the floor as he releases me. With my hands braced before me, I see the faint glow in my palms.

His yells grate against my ears and their anguish makes me turn. There, crouched on the floor, cradling his face, is a handprint so stark white against his red face.

My handprint.

The edges of my vision start to blur. The fiery house dissolves into pictures of dark skies and tall trees. I concentrate on those images and pull myself from the Dreamscape.

I suck in a huge breath as I wake up. I notice the ache in my muscles instantly and when I move, my hand begins to tingle. I tell myself the glow I see in it is a trick of the light, but when I raise it beside the rest of my body, I can’t help but see a faint glow in it. I swallow thickly.

My eyelids feel heavy, like I slept but never actually rested, but I know I won't be getting anymore sleep tonight. I walk carefully to the cliff's edge. I let my legs hang off and pull my hair to the side, letting the cool air dry the sweat from my neck.

Something pokes the side of my thigh and I reach into my pocket, pulling out my protection crystal. It warms in my hands. Its smooth surface feels familiar under my fingers and I try to force my heartbeat to slow. "Did you wake me up?" I hold the crystal up against the moonlight.

A faint glow emits from its center.

A chill races up my spine and I sit up, turning behind me. There's nothing there and I tell myself it's just the wind. Then I smell hazel wood in the air. My pulse jumps.

"Caro?" I whisper to the wind. But I don't get an answer and I scold myself for thinking I would; I shake my head and turn the crystal over in my hand.

I sit for a while, until the sun starts to peak out over the valley, and while I watch it rise I can't help but wonder who taught Constanzo how to create a Dreamscape.

When the birds start to fill the sky with their music, I trudge back down the hill. I stumble and have to take several breaks as the fatigue in my muscles wears on me. The back of my throat aches and I'm consumed with thoughts of ice cold water and a warm meal. What I would give for a bowl of Mom's caldo soup, even in this heat. As the sun hits the highest point in the sky, I find myself walking back in the direction of my house.

I won't find anything, I tell myself. There's nothing left to find. Yet my feet move manically, without purpose, and that's the only place they want to go. I stick to the tall bank of trees lining the outskirts of town. I don't want to risk stumbling upon Constanzo's men. If he's the one who started this mess, he'll only want to finish me off.

I'd be lying if I said that thought didn't entice me. He could kill me and I could see my family again.

Santa Muerte wouldn't be too happy about it, but to see Mom and Caro again would be worth it. Their absence weighs on me as I make my way through Matamoros' back woods.

A break in the trees shows me the road I used to walk on the way to school, to Gloria's shop. I stop and swallow back the lump in my throat. If I go home now, they'll be waiting, of course they will. Constanzo would have his men there in case I returned home.

I crouch suddenly as a car drives by. I palm the dirt beneath me and pray they didn't see me. But the car drives on. It's too dangerous. I should go back.

And go where?

I sink back behind a tree stump as the question hangs over me. I have nowhere to go. I shake my head almost immediately. Glaring out at the open road, I pull myself up. I have somewhere, I tell myself.

I travel along the tree banks for as long as I can before I have no other option than to travel along the open dirt road. I cross my arms over my chest and hold myself tightly, praying over and over that no one stops me, that Constanzo's men don't come down this path.

Gloria's shop looks like a beacon in the distance and my chest swells with hope for the first time in what feels like weeks. I take off, flying down the rest of the hill, and charge toward her doors. I jiggle the handle but it doesn't budge. Her 'closed' sign sits on the windowsill.

"No no no," I mumble. I knock heavily against her glass door. "Gloria!"

A door sounds a few buildings down and I jump. It's just an older lady looking at me weirdly. She shrugs and continues off.

I knock again, louder. "Gloria!"

Through the glass I see her bare feet padding down a set of stairs. She squints toward the front door and wraps her shawl tighter around herself. I tap more rapidly. “Gloria,” I call to her.

“Please open the door.”

She rushes forward, eyes darting around, before unlocking her door and letting me in.

I stumble forward. “Thank you,” I gulp.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Gloria says.

I pant. “What? Where should I be? I—” I cut off. Swallow hard. “Gloria, he killed them.” I wipe my brow and bend forward, bracing my hands on my knees. “Mom and Caro. I’m alone,” I choke out.

Gloria shivers. “I know. The entire coven knows.”

I try to take a calming breath. “How do they all know already?”

“Constanzo has sent word to all brujas in the coven,” Gloria says through gritted teeth.

“We are to pass on any information on your whereabouts to him.”

My shoulders tense. “They wouldn’t turn me away, would they?” I cast a glance around her shop, keeping Gloria’s quivering frame in view.

“The tides are shifting, Lorena. I fear that dark times are upon us,” she says, softly.

I step forward and grip Gloria’s hands in mine. Their cold touch sends a shiver down my spine. “My mom has done a lot for you, and for the coven. She wouldn’t turn you away. Even if Constanzo was after you. I have to believe that.”

Gloria’s eyes fall to her feet. “There is still so much you don’t understand and there is no more time left to explain it to you.”

I take a slow step back. “Is this it then?” I gulp. “Will you tell Constanzo that I am here?”

Something warm pulsates in my pocket and I pull out the crystal. Gloria's eyes track it, a clouded gaze coming over her.

She runs to the back of her shop and when she returns, she scribbles something furiously on a notepad. She tears the piece of paper and folds it before handing it to me. "I'm sorry. There is nothing more I can do for you." Her tone is clipped and forced, but I stand there and unfold the paper.

It's an address.

My mind scrambles to recall if Mom ever talked about a place of safety in Aguila, but it comes up short.

"Where does it lead?" I ask.

Gloria takes my shoulder and turns me toward the door. "I cannot help you anymore."

I hang on to her door. "But I have nothing. Please, Gloria." I look down to my feet covered in dirt and blood.

Gloria pushes me out. "I have already given you too much," she says, eyeing the crystal.

I tuck it pack in my pocket and nod once. "Thank you," I say.

She pauses. "May Santa Muerte protect you," she whispers, closing the door.

I stand in front of Gloria's shop for a while but she doesn't return, and even now, I can't be upset at her.

The streets are eerily quiet and empty, but I have one more place to stop before leaving the city. There's a part of me, small and faint, that tells me I shouldn't go to Izzy's house. It's too dangerous and, if I were being followed, I'd be leading them straight to her and her family. But the pain in my chest and the ache in my legs take me there anyway, desperate to see a familiar and warm face.

The sun is just starting to set when I reach Izzy's place. The market is open and I see don Ismael at the counter, his brown face wrinkling at the corners as he laughs at something a customer said. As I approach the Mercado, a tall lean figure moves out from the alley. He's dressed in black and faded denim, shirtsleeves cuffed. I startle, thinking he's one of Constanzo's men, and even as he walks past with not even a glance in my direction, I'm not wholly convinced he's not.

I tuck myself inside Guerano's Mercado and place a hand to my chest, my heart beating erratically.

"Lorena?" don Ismael calls from the counter. He looks me over quickly, examining the dirt and blood coating my clothes. don Ismael rushes forward and steers me toward the back of the store. "Are you alright?"

I limp forward. "I just need a place to rest for a little while," I whisper.

The customers he left at the counter whisper to themselves, scrutinizing us from afar. Their looks make my skin crawl and I tuck my arms across my chest.

"Si, of course. Come on." don Ismael holds the back door open for me and yells back to the men, "I'll be back in a moment!"

I can already hear Alejandro's light voice going on about the lessons he learned at school that day as we climb the stairs. I wipe the sweat at my brow and rub my hands down my pant legs, suddenly nervous to see Himena again after our last encounter. Given everything that has happened since, I start to doubt this was a good decision. But I climb up the steps and try to compose myself as don Ismael leads me into the main living room.

"Himena!" he calls out.

"Ismael? ¿Qué pasa?" Himena rounds the corner, wet dish in one hand and towel in another. "Lorena?" she stops. She sets the dish and towel down, meeting me in two big strides. She turns my face left and right before brushing back my frizzy hair. The ponytail it was in is loose now, hanging limp off my shoulder. I hadn't noticed before.

In the middle of their living room, with the smells of fresh lavender and lemon surrounding us, I notice how much I reek of ash. The smell never left me. My chest tightens.

"What's with the yelling?" Izzy says, opening her bedroom door. She stands there for what feels like hours, staring, unsure what I'm doing looking like this in her living room.

I open my mouth to say something but the words fall away, leaving just a whisper of a breath between us.

Izzy rushes toward me.

As her arms wrap around my frame, I tremble into her, letting her fragrance wash over me and begging her to take the smell of ash away. I shake uncontrollably and beg this of her over and over again until her and Himena are able to drag me into the washroom. I sit there in their bathtub, fully clothed, as the water pours down on me.

"Give it a second to warm up," Izzy tells Himena.

“It’s fine,” I try to say. I don’t feel the cold. The burn marks along my thighs and up my arms have never felt hotter. I grip the edges of the tub and watch the dirt and blood slither down the drain. My feet are blistered. Long scratches run down my shoulder and when Izzy asks how this happened, I can’t bring the words to the surface.

The faint glow of the washroom makes my head dizzy and I slowly feel myself letting go of the tension in my back. For a while I’m not sure if I’m above or below the surface of the water, or if Izzy and Himena have to work together to keep me afloat, but I let my eyes close.

“Lift your arms, mija,” Himena says.

My shirt clings to me but once it is peeled away, I breathe in heavily. Coconut and peach fill my nose. Suds fall down the sides of my head as Izzy lathers my hair. It takes longer to pull my jeans off but Izzy lets me lean on her.

I stare at the side of her face as they work. Her cheeks carry a faint pink flush in them. The hair growing at her sideburns is getting longer, growing further down the long length of her face. The curve of her mouth moves and I realize she’s talking.

“They’re gone,” I say, laying my head in the crook of her neck. “Mom and Caro are gone.”

I see Izzy’s throat constrict before swallowing. Her and Himena lower me into the bath again.

They finish washing me up. Himena leaves and returns with a plastic bag. She deposits my clothes in them while Izzy wraps me in a heavy towel. Himena pauses at the bathroom door. She holds my crystal in her hand and looks back at me.

I open my palm for it. “It’s all I have left,” I say to her.

She casts her eyes down and places the crystal gingerly into my waiting hand. “You can rest in Izzy’s room,” she goes on to say. “Lay her down, Izzy. Then come help me in the kitchen.”

When we reenter the living room, don Ismael and Alejandro are both gone. I shiver under the towel. “I must have scared him,” I say.

Izzy pats my arm. “Alejandro doesn’t scare too easily.”

I smile sadly. “I meant your dad.”

Izzy’s room hasn’t changed at all in the last five years, a special feat for someone who gets too bored with simple routines. Her small bookshelf still has the same fairy lights her dad got her when she was thirteen. A few of the stuffed animals on her bed I recognize from her younger years, too, but all throughout are small additions she’s made as she grew older. She took out the reading nook and swapped it for a more formal desk. Her boy band posters were swapped out for simple, minimalist quotes she bought online and I take it all in, letting the familiar space soothe the pressure in my chest.

Izzy pulls the covers on her bed back. “Rest here for a while,” she says.

I hover near her shelves. “I can sleep on the floor.”

She puts a hand on her hip. “Please sleep here and don’t fight me. I’m going to be up for a few hours anyway.” She pats the bed, says, “Rest,” and I carry myself there. I don’t remember laying down or closing my eyes. The rest is just darkness.

When I come back to, I blink away the haze and slowly descend out of bed. As I take in a breath, I catch a whiff of oil and eggs in the air. Slightly surprised that I managed to sleep through the night and into morning, I inhale again. Warm notes of paprika and pepper slither into

the bedroom and I close my eyes for a moment, smiling at Mom's huevo con chorizo cooking away on the stove.

I push the door back and Alejandrito's face appears before me. I stop for a moment. I tilt my head and peer behind me. It's not my room, I remind myself. This isn't my house.

Alejandro takes my hand in his small one. "Morning, Lorena," he says, somberly. The sound, low and hesitant, is unfamiliar coming from Alejandro and immediately I'm flooded with the aches I had slept off during the night.

"Hey," Izzy says from the living room. Her eyes look red and her cheeks are blotchy. "Breakfast is almost ready." She sounds equally as quiet.

I pad out into the kitchen with them, Himena working at the stove and don Ismael sipping his coffee at the table. Himena hands me a plate. "I hope you were able to sleep. Come, the eggs are done." She serves me a plate full of eggs with chorizo and lays a piece of toast over it.

I eat with them at the table but the weariness with which Izzy, Himena, and Ismael eat, takes away my appetite. Himena stares intently at her eggs, stopping only to lift her coffee mug to her lips and sip soundlessly. Izzy pushes her eggs around, only forking the bigger pieces of chorizo. don Ismael doesn't touch his plate. I barely catch the way his fist tightens around the mug.

I swallow a lump of egg. "Thank you for the meal," I say.

don Ismael rears up, nearly knocking his chair back. "I have to open the store now. Thank you for the food." He leaves the rest of his coffee on the table and leaves.

"Dad didn't even eat," Alejandro says, tearing a piece of toast.

"Alejandro, why don't you go watch some cartoons in the living room?" Himena suggests.

“But I’m not done eating,” he pouts.

Izzy puts her piece of toast on his plate. “You can eat in the living room,” she says.

Alejandro’s eyes light up. “Awesome!”

An impending dread hangs over me as I stuff more egg into my mouth. I set my fork down, and fold my hands over my lap.

The three of us remaining at the table don’t say anything.

I bite down on my lower lip.

“Lorena,” Himena starts.

But I extend a hand on the table to stop her. “I know,” I say. “I know I can’t stay here.”

Himena sighs heavily. “It’s what is best for the safety of my family.”

“Not all of us agree,” Izzy mutters.

Himena opens her mouth, though I have a feeling this is a familiar argument. And, again, I can’t blame Himena.

I press my nails into the palm of my hand, an unbridled hatred for Constanzo rising up, stronger than ever. If he had just stayed away from my family, none of this would be happening. I take a steadying breath to calm my nerves. “Izzy, your mom is right. It’s not safe for me to stay here. As it is, even staying the night like I did put you and your family in danger.”

Izzy shakes her head like she’s not convinced.

“Constanzo’s men are dangerous.” That anger from before creeps into my thoughts and my tone goes sour. “This isn’t a game,” I say. “I’ve—” my voice breaks and I pause. “I’ve lost everything to him. So if I can keep you all safe, then I will.”

Himena pulls a folded piece of paper from the pocket of her apron. “I had your clothes cleaned while you slept. This came out of your jeans.”

I clutch the paper in my hand. “Gloria gave me an address. I don’t know where it leads or who is there, but if there’s a chance I can be safe there then I’ll take it.”

Izzy leans forward. She touches my clenched fist lightly. “What will you do? About Constanzo?”

I shake my head. “I’m not strong enough to face him yet.” I wipe my cheeks. “But if I ever see him again, I’ll do everything in my power to kill him.”

Izzy’s brows furrow and she stares back, unconvinced by my words. Part of me is unconvinced, too. But the anger bubbling under the surface of my skin is too real, too raw, and I want to will my words into existence. I want Constanzo dead.

Himena sucks in a shaky breath. I barely hear words of the father, of the son, and of the holy ghost under her breath as she performs the sign of the cross. She leaves the kitchen and returns shortly with a pile of neatly folded clothes and a backpack. “The shirt,” she says, pausing briefly, “could not be salvaged. I gave you one of Izzy’s.”

“I packed some things for you,” says Izzy. “I’m sorry I can’t do more for you.”

I take the clothes and pack. “You’ve done more than enough, Izzy.”

When I’m dressed in my clothes, Izzy takes my hand. She leads us downstairs. don Ismael is at the counter, organizing smokes on the back wall when we reach him.

“Thank you for everything,” I tell him.

His eyes harden, but he nods. “I wish there was more I could do,” he says, sliding something across the counter.

It’s an envelope. I flip the seal open. A slim stack of cash is inside it.

“It’s not much,” he says. “But I hope it helps.”

My throat tightens. “Thank you,” I tell him.

We both know there isn't much else they can help me with. Not without putting their lives in direct danger.

I linger in the space between them for a second longer. Izzy yanks me to her suddenly, arms coming up around me. I breathe her in, not knowing when I'll see her next.

I pull away. "Be careful," I tell her. "Something's going on with this town. I have a feeling Manuel won't be the only one with powers eventually."

Izzy's gaze goes hard. "I'll be careful."

don Ismael stands beside Izzy and puts an arm around her shoulders. "May God watch over you, Lorena. Or," he hesitates, eyes searching mine, before adding "Santa Muerte. I hope they both watch over you."

I nod once. Pushing the door back, address in my other hand, I step away from Izzy and her family and begin the fifteen-mile walk to Aguila.

I limp through the fifteen miles of road to Aguila. My feet go numb halfway through and I grit my teeth with each step, the sensation of needles digging into the soles of my feet. I convince myself to focus on the pain, though, instead of missing Mom and Caro. Think about the piece of paper in my palm. Think of where it may lead.

Mom never mentioned knowing anyone in Aguila, but maybe there's a lot Mom never mentioned to us. Maybe there's a coven there that will take me in. Maybe I can start over.

My mind veers to a darker thought. Maybe they can help me kill Constanzo. I swallowed the dry lump in the back of my throat, pulling a water bottle from my pack. Was I really going to dedicate myself to revenge? A voice in the back of my head yells "You'd be giving in to a life of magic." My teeth latch onto the rim of the bottle and I drink.

Shoulders hunched, I follow the signs along the highway. Thirteen miles to Aguila. I unwrap a marzipan, a smile trailing off at the memory of breaking these in half with Izzy. I desperately want to hear her familiar voice and have her reassure me that I haven't lost her in this tragedy too.

But I can't. And I have no idea when I'll be able to again.

A run-down gas station comes into view a few more miles down the path. I hesitate to stop but a persistent ache has taken refuge in my shoes and the station has a washroom, as gross as it is. I splash water across the back of my neck before refilling my bottle.

The door to the washroom squeaks open and I jump from the sink, water splashing the floor.

"Oh, sorry, doll. Didn't know it was occupied," says the woman. She pulls her tights and proceeds to step inside. "I can't hold it any longer. Sorry," she says again.

Too stunned to do anything, I face the sink, catching her reflection in the foggy mirror. I twist the faucet back on to overpower the sound of her relieving herself. I watch from the mirror as she twists her silky brown hair into a bun. Her heels clack loudly on the floor.

I leave her, taking in a large breath once I'm back outside. I brace a hand over my face to shield from the sun. I haven't seen any signs for Aguila in a while and part of me worries I missed it. Heading down the highway, I spot a withered sign behind drying brush. Aguila is half worn off the sign but below its name reads the miles I have left. Seven more miles.

I trudge on, ignoring the pain in my feet, crawling its way up my legs. I square my shoulders back, the left one ringing out in pain. The familiar sharpness of it reminds me of Mom sitting beside me in my room, wrapping my dislocated shoulder in gauze and a thick layer of her healer's ointment.

Caro and I had been outside playing on our bikes when Caro decided to test out a new spell she'd learned. I don't remember what she was trying to accomplish, but she shut her eyes tight and threw her hand out, shouting, "Grow!"

A tree stump in front of me rose from the ground and sent me flying across the pavement. The skin around my knee burst open and my shoulder hit the concrete with a loud pop.

I whimpered as Mom spread the ointment across my shoulder and chest. She whispered words of healing, 'restore,' 'mend,' and as a child I wondered where she found the threads to put my shoulder back together again. But days later, as the pain subsided, I noticed the perpetual tilt to my shoulders.

Specificity, I had learned, is key when it comes to magic.

I list off the ingredients for Mom's healing ointment (peppermint, cloves, clay, wintergreen) when another sign appears on the highway. Aguila is another five miles. I breathe a sigh of relief and pick up the pace, a shred of exhilaration shooting through me.

Even knowing magic requires specificity, I recall eleven-year-old me managing to screw it up. Mom tells me I was just a kid and I shouldn't be too hard on myself, but I almost killed someone.

It was an accident. That's what the final verdict was.

It was a time when it didn't matter who I hung out with, kids all hung out with kids, but I remember Izzy being there, too. We were playing by the riverbank near the calle Álvaro Obregón border. Another kid slipped on the mud, scraped his hands and knees along the slick rocks, and began to sink. He was top heavy and didn't know how to swim. The kids panicked, screaming, trying to get out of the water, and through the flurry of voices, I dove underwater. The moment my head went under, threads of light exploded around me, swimming up to me, asking me to pull them.

The water was murky and it was difficult to see the drowning kid. I wrapped a golden thread around my hand and pushed my hand out, wanting to cast the water in a golden light. By the time I saw him, the little boy was almost to the bottom of the river. He wasn't moving.

I tried to use the golden threads to pull him toward me, but the second they touched his arms or his ankles, the threads slipped through him and faded to nothing.

The water rippled around me as another boy dove into the water. He shoved past me, gripping the drowned boy and swimming back to shore.

The boy claimed I was drowning the kid. Mom said sometimes, death lays a claim that cannot be swayed, even with magic.

A statue is situated on one side of the highway, forking the road, and as I approach I recognize the religious figure. It's la virgen de Guadalupe. Her off-white appearance still shines against the sun. Leaves dust her shoulders. At her feet is a plaque. I bend, swiping the dirt off it. It reads, 'Pray for us sinners.'

I glance up at her face, the statue's sunken eyes spreading goose bumps across my arms. Behind her, a few yards away, is the sign I've been looking for. Gleeefully, I yank the straps of my bag and rush forward.

I've arrived in Aguila.

The city curves open off the highway. Cream buildings are strewn up high with their coloured paper mache cut outs and fogged windows. Their flat top roofs cut the air, leaving the smell of fresh baked bread and tobacco to ruminate in the city. Crowds of people amass at each building; some are heaving tents and boxes, others are rummaging their purses and towing children along. I follow after them, wondering where the commotion of the day has brought them.

More tents appear as I walk further into Aguila. It's a market, I realize, and I see a man come rushing out of one building carrying a full pan of fresh bolillo. I stop for a moment to savour the smell and picture fresh round bread breaking apart in my mouth. There are fruit stands and sweet bread stands and elote stands. I also notice the tent at the end of the road selling candles with the same image as the statue from the highway, though she looks more colourful. There's a man dressed in multiple layers of robes at the tent, too. He places a hand over another woman's head and I stand there awkwardly watching as he prays over her. I look around though no one else seems to think the openness with which he performs prayer over her is weird. There

was always the promise of giving prayer – I’d hear it all the time, ‘I’ll be praying for you,’ – but never did I think I’d see it done in the middle of a market.

As they come apart, the priest catches my eye. I immediately look away but I feel his gaze follow me.

“Miss,” he calls out.

I dare a glance. I point a finger to my chest.

He nods and beckons me forward. “Would you like a blessing?” he asks me.

“No, thank you,” I say.

His brows furrow slightly. “Okay,” he says, wearily. “Well is there anyone you’d like me to offer a prayer to?”

I start to shake my head, then pause.

I didn’t have time to give Mom and Caro a proper farewell. I should have spent three days in black, three days begging Santa Muerte to guide their souls to the afterlife, three days lighting three different candles to send them off with protection and love. Have I condemned them to a life stuck in the in-between? Have I failed them yet again?

I stare at the cross on the priest’s lapel. Mom wasn’t always a follower of Santa Muerte and she rarely talked about her time growing up as a Catholic. But maybe given the circumstances, she’d prefer this to being stuck wandering a lonely purgatory.

“For my mom and sister,” I tell the priest. “They recently passed.” I swallow hard.

The priest offers a sad smile and puts a hand on my head. He waits for me to bow my head before leaning in. He whispers, “Heavenly Father, we offer up our services in exchange for blessings and prayers to our dearly departed. What were their names?”

It takes me a moment to realize the question is meant for me. “Xiomara and Carolina.”

The priest repeats their names. “We pray this in your name, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

I pull myself, albeit awkwardly, out from under his hand. “Thank you,” I say.

A quizzical look crosses his face but he smiles. “You’re welcome.”

From the corner of my eye, I see a shadow. I startle back, my mind immediately thinking it’s one of Constanzo’s oscuros. But the shadow brightens and morphs until it’s the silhouette of a person.

Brown skin materializes. Long, wavy black hair forms next. The scar above her right eye comes after. I freeze.

“Are you okay, miss?” the priest asks. He follows my gaze. “What is it?”

I stumble, my mouth opening and closing. “D-did you see—” I break off and search the space between the buildings again. I see her face, further away and wispier, but she’s there. I eye the priest, sizing him up in his robes, staring at his folded hands. I inch toward him and inhale deeply. Is he a witch? I smell nothing.

Clearing my throat, I nod once. “Thank you for the, uh,” I peer behind him. The form is moving further away. I step around the priest.

“The prayer?” he finishes.

“Yes! That. Thank you,” I say and take off.

I fumble past the alleyway and into a line of trees. Branches strike my cheeks as I push through and give chase to the figure. Hazel wood fills the air.

“Wait,” I call after it.

It stops.

I marvel at the fresh-looking skin, unmarred, and her hair – so dark it looks blue in the light. “Caro?” Water pricks my eyes.

She turns slowly, her mouth falling open. “Y-you can actually see me?”

I huff, nearly choking on a sob. “Of course I can.”

The corner of her mouth lifts. “I’ve been trying talk to you.”

I look behind her. “Why were you running?”

A clouded look glosses over her. “I don’t know. Sometimes I move without even knowing or thinking.” She blinks several times and smiles. “But you can see me.”

Tentatively, I reach a hand toward my sister. Part of me worries if I get too close she’ll disappear. I graze the skin of her arm. Solid skin. I gasp and we both jump back at the contact. “How?” I demand, a sudden anger sweeping through me. “I saw you in the fire. I saw your dead body.” I know what I saw. I know she can’t really be here.

“I know,” she says. “I know I’m dead.”

The glossy look from before reappears across her face.

I begin to pace. “I don’t understand how this is possible,” I say. “This isn’t right.”

“What kind of magic were you performing?”

“Performing?” I question. Did I somehow do this? Or is Caro stuck here because I didn’t properly send her off to el otro lado. I stop suddenly, my shoulders falling. “Have you seen Mom?” I ask, meekly.

Caro’s lips fall into a hard line. “No,” she shakes her head.

I stamp down my disappointment. This is good, I tell myself. It means Mom has moved on to the other side. She’s not trapped her on this earthly plane – like Caro seems to be.

“You have to move on, Caro. Do you see a light or a hand or—” I cut off, rubbing my temples. “Do you see Santa Muerte?”

Caro shakes her head. “I remember the fire, the pain, then it all goes black. Next thing I see is you.”

“When I’m able to, I will move you on to el otro lado properly.”

Caro’s brow furrows. “Why did you come to Aguila, Lore?”

I pull out the address. “Gloria told me to. Were you with me when she gave it to me? When she said those things about the coven refusing to help me?”

Caro staggers, gripping her head. “No,” she says. “Gloria has wards all around her shop. I guess I wasn’t able to enter.”

I stare at her, wearily. “Maybe,” I say. I take a step toward her. “Are you okay?”

The ground shakes suddenly. I feel the vibrations rise from the soles of my feet straight to the top of my head. It’s almost painful the way it throbs and echoes inside me. Caro’s face contorts like she, too, is feeling it.

I crouch both to steady myself and to feel the earth’s energy when Caro whimpers and falls back into the trees. “Caro?” I call out.

Her voice echoes between branches. “You don’t understand,” she grits out. “It’s not safe here, Lorena.”

A powerful wind knocks me back. The vibrations stop. I rise tentatively. “Caro?”

I am met with silence, not even the trees stir. I trudge back the way I came, gritting my teeth, and determined to get some answers.

When I reenter the town square, there isn’t a stall out of place. Maybe what I felt in the woods wasn’t real at all, maybe neither was Caro.

Aguila is comprised mostly of mountains. The highway I came from was the only low-leveled slope I walked, but surrounding this small town is nothing but high mountains and hills.

It creates a comfortable feeling as I walk through Aguila's streets at night. Though it does make the temperatures here much colder than Matamoros ever got. A chill lingers in the air and it seeps into my clothes, reminding me that the seasons are changing.

Fall is Mom and Caro's favourite season – or rather, it was – and despite spending years avoiding the call of magic, I can't help but notice when it feels the strongest. Magic thrives with the moon, something Mom constantly reiterated to us as children, and every time the seasons change and the nights grow longer, I am reminded of it.

The center of the city, where only a while ago it was bustling with people and vendors, has dwindled. The tent with religious medallions and the priest offering prayer, has broken down to its spikes. I hover near what is left of it.

Just down the road, I see another gathering of people. Their kind smiles attract me closer. But the cross, poised and sharp on the roof, gives me pause. I should focus on finding where the address leads. Yet, as the crowd slowly piles into the church, and the stain glass windows lay an outpouring of blues and purples on the ground, warmth settles in my chest. Maybe the safest place to be is in the most unlikely of places.

The sweet scent of chocolate hits me as I approach the church. It strikes me as odd. I was used to the septic smell of churches I passed from Matamoros, not the inviting sweetness of chocolate. I hover in the empty doorway. The priest from earlier is standing near an altar table. There are golden bowls and cups laid out on top.

I've seen this before. My mind paints a picture of black cloth altars and bird beaks, herb jars and silver bowls filled with water and flowers and drops of blood. The priest doesn't have blood, but he has wine, I notice as he tips it into a golden chalice.

I try to picture Mom sitting in the pews. I see her in her all-black garb, bright red lipstick and wild curls free among the white-dress-wearing Catholics. I picture her singing the hymns loudly and out of tone from everyone else. When it comes time to accept the body and blood of Christ, I have to wonder if Mom ever stood up. Did she stand in line with the rest of them and open her mouth to Christ's body?

Holding on to the warmth in my chest, I take a step inside the church. A few eyes turn when they hear my padded footsteps on the luxury vinyl flooring, but I mostly go unnoticed. The priest notices me, however. And he smiles as I take a seat in the back pew.

The churchgoers continue to line up for their piece of Christ's body and blood and I decide that Mom wouldn't have stood with them. She would remain in her pew, like the few scattered around me. She'd do it, not because she felt defiant, but maybe because she felt undeserving.

As the priest gives a few more closing prayers and blessings, I feel the energy in the room stir. Women grab their purses and men re-adjust their button ups. I decide to take my leave. Again, at the doorway, the smell of chocolate lingers. There are two hallways on either side of the entryway. A light shines down one of them and an elderly woman pushes the door open, two cups in her hands. Another woman flanks her, carrying a full tray of cups. When they spot me, the elderly woman smiles brightly and holds a cup out to me.

"No, thank you," I whisper, mindful of how voices carry in this place.

The old lady lifts one brow and chuckles. "Nonsense. We made more than enough for everyone."

"And more," the other woman beside her adds.

My stomach chooses that moment to grumble loudly. I cringe inwardly, clutching my stomach.

The old woman doesn't try to mask the loud sound of her laughter and it rings through the hallway, and no doubt into the church where the procession is still in service.

Awkwardly, I take the steaming cup from her hands and take a sip. "*Santo!*" I curse. I put a hand over my lips. "I'm sorry," I recover immediately.

The old woman pats my back. "You should stay for dinner," she says and walks past me.

The other woman, her companion, hovers near me. I stare at her more closely and realize she's not much older than me, maybe a year or two. She's taller than me, too, and the way her shoulders square back, pulling herself straighter, makes her seem older. Her brown skin looks flushed carrying the large tray of drinks but there's a sparkle behind her green eyes. The dark mole on her upper lip lifts. She points a thumb toward the door they came from. "We made a lot for dinner. Please stay and enjoy." Then she's gone.

After she leaves, I realize my hands are sweating. I look into my cup of champurrado and watch the top layer clump together in chunks of chocolate atole. I guess there is no harm in staying for a meal, I tell myself. My stomach grumbles again.

I've always loved the smell of masa. Something about the fresh cooked corn reminds me of rare occasions when Mom handmade tortillas for dinner. When I enter the church hall, several women are working down the masa, flattening them into thin cakes before placing them on a fryer. The smell of oil and corn fills the room. There's another station where others are wrapping fried masa stuffed with chicken, some stuffed with cheese and green chilies. They wrap the finished product in cornhusk. Natural oils from the masa and chicken coat the outside of the cornhusk and my mouth waters.

Loud commotion comes from behind me; more and more people pile into the great hall. The procession has ended, I realize, and I follow their lead, grab a paper plate, and follow the assembly line. I grab two tamales and a fork. I stand at the far end of the hall watching the tables fill up, everyone knowing someone else's cousin and cousin's cousin and soon, the tables are all full.

I sit on the ground and disregard my fork. I tear the cornhusk straight down the middle instead of the usual unwrapping it requires. I break the tamale in half, the meat and masa and cheese pouring out. I stuff one half into my mouth and gasp, the heat almost burning my tongue.

"Cuidado," someone warns. It's the girl from earlier. She assembles her skirts in one hand and plops down beside me. "No point making your tongue useless now." She smirks before cutting into her own set of tamales.

Heat spreads across my cheeks. I pick up my fork and cut into the tamale a little slower than before.

"Sorry about before," the girl goes on. "I didn't even get your name."

I swallow. "Lorena."

She smiles. "Buen provecho, Lorena. I'm Ago." She holds a hand to me.

I wipe my hand along the side of my jeans, grease still lingering between my fingers.

"Nice to meet you, Ago."

"Did you just move to town?" Ago asks, hand over her full mouth.

I shake my head and consider how much I should tell her. The spark in her eyes I noticed before comforts me in a way that reminds me of Izzy. Or something similar. "Just passing through, I guess. I'm looking for something in town."

"Something? Or someone?" she asks.

I fidget with the fork and shrug.

Ago sets down her plate and presses the wrinkles from her ruby-coloured gown before training her eyes on me.

Her eyes rove over me quickly, almost hastily, and I squirm. “Is everything ok?”

“Yes!” She smiles, sheepishly. “Sorry, you just have a very familiar face.”

I’ve never been told that and I shift uncomfortably, trying to decide if this is a bad sign. “Yeah, I get that a lot,” I lie.

“Agostina!” The old woman from earlier returns. She presses her fingers into her back, wincing. “Can you help wrap a few more tamales, por favor? Nancy left early to put the baby to bed.”

“Sure, Antonia,” Ago answers. Ago stands, hesitating before twisting toward me. “Have you wrapped corn husk before?”

I laugh before I can stop myself. It’s something I never thought I’d be asked. “No,” I answer.

Ago bites her lip but the smile breaks free anyway. “Would you like to?”

Hours later, when we’re both covered in flour and oil, reeking of corn and chocolate, I’m shocked at how late it is. The church is almost empty, save for a few of the women who organize these weekly dinners.

“Where are you staying?” Ago asks as we’re wiping down tables.

And just like that, the good mood I spent the last couple hours in evaporates as reality tumbles down. “I’m not sure,” I answer. I pull the worn piece of paper from my jeans. “I’m trying to get to this address.”

Ago's face scrutinizes the paper. "I can take you," she says. "It's not far from here."

"It's ok. I can walk there if you just point me in the right direction."

"No, no, no," Ago starts. "Mujeres like us really shouldn't be travelling alone. Gracias a Dios nothing has happened to you this far, but I'll feel better if you let me come with you."

Ago excuses herself to let Antonia and the other ladies know that she's leaving and I wring my hands out, uncertain if I should let Ago take me. I have no idea where this leads still and, for all I know, it could be leading me into a trap. Maybe Ago is the trap. And even though Ago claims the place isn't far, she insists on taking her car. It's shiny red and the inside smells brand new. I'm afraid to touch anything when she says, "Buckle up," but I do so with careful fingers.

The small town blends into a residential area, and the only way I know it's residential is because of the sign we drive by indicating that this is a neighborhood watch zone. Every other lamppost is unlit. The homes, dingy and chipped, still hold a quaint charm in their white windowpanes and picket fences.

Ago perks up beside me. "I thought this street sounded familiar. A few of the church ladies live on this street."

My suspicions that the address is leading me to a witch dwindle only slightly. Maybe, like me, a bruja recognizes the church as a great hiding place. Ago asks me for the number on the address again and when I give it to her, she makes a slow turn into someone's driveway.

"Oh!" she says. "You know Rosa?"

I hesitate, unsure how much I should share with Ago. "Thank you for the ride," I tell her instead. "I can take it from here."

“But this is where you’re staying?” Ago looks through the windshield. “The lights aren’t on. Do they know you’re coming?”

A sinking feeling hits the pit of my stomach.

“Lorena?”

“I’m not sure,” I answer, honestly.

When I look back at Ago, a clouded look crosses over her face, and she continues to stare as if she recognizes something in me.

“You have no one else?” she asks, tentatively.

“No,” I say.

We’re both quiet a beat longer.

Ago snaps her seatbelt off with a harsh yank and grabs my hand. “Come on,” she says before exiting the car.

I inhale sharply and follow Ago out and up the unknown driveway.

I never knew a front door could be so intimidating, but it is. And Rosa, or whoever is behind it, makes my nerves skyrocket. I feel the tingle of magic under my skin and I tamper it down as I knock on the door. A series of lights come on and I flinch back as the porch light nearly blinds me.

Ago pats my back lightly.

I hear light footsteps approach the door and I steel myself.

A woman answers the door. I want to assume it's Rosa, but I'm too stunned by her appearance to think beyond how much she looks like Mom. Her eyes are the first things I notice. They're dark brown, almost black, much like Mom's were, much like mine are. She's thinner than Mom was but she has the signature outline of wide and thick hips, the way Santiago women have them. Her hair pulls lighter than Mom's, almost a light brown, but the resemblance makes my chest ache.

The woman, Rosa, wraps a robe around herself. "You shouldn't be here."

My eyes widen. She knows who I am.

"I do," she answers and I realize I must have said it aloud. "And you should not be here. Xiomara promised me." Rosa steps away, ready to close the door in my face when I step forward.

I shove my hand between the door and the doorframe. I shut my eyes, anticipating the pain of crushed fingers and a broken hand but when I look down, Ago's foot is holding the door open, too.

"Rosa, por favor," Ago says.

A light seems to go off in Rosa's head as she recognizes Ago, her lips falling into a grim line at Ago's interference. I'm worried for a brief moment that she'll tell Ago what I am.

I clear my throat. "I was sent here," I start. "By Gloria, not my mom. Gloria thought you'd be able to help me."

Rosa pulls the door back slightly. "Where's Xiomara?" Her tone is grave, but she looks behind us, searching for something.

My throat feels tight but I swallow and say, "My mom is dead."

The harsh light in Rosa's eyes softens briefly. "Loss of life is always tragic," she says.

I blink several times before scoffing. "That's it? Who are you?" I feel my anger rising. "How do you know my mom and why do you—" I break off. I want to know why she looks like her, but something tells me I already know.

"Xiomara was my sister."

My fingers twitch. "Why did she never mention you?"

"Because I asked her not to," Rosa answers timidly. "I think it best if you leave."

"What? How can you say that? I'm f-family," my voice breaks and I struggle to take it all in, what this all means. I try to concentrate on Rosa's aura, trying to sense a deep-rooted magic inside her. If she really is Mom's sister, then I'd be able to sense an echo of that magic in her, wouldn't I?

I sense nothing.

Rosa clutches the front of her robe and narrows her eyes. "Don't play the family card with me, muchacha. I know exactly what you are." Rosa steps closer with her harsh gaze. "I know exactly what your mother was, too. And it is not welcome in my home. Not after everything."

I lift my head. “Everything?”

Rosa sighs, bites down on her lower lip. “You’re the younger one, right? Lorena?”

I startle. “Yes.”

She nods and retreats down the hall of her home. The glimpse inside I get makes it seem warm. There are pictures all along the hallway, potted flowers near the entryway. One of them is lavender. Mom’s favourite.

Rosa returns with a shoebox. She hands it to me. “I never responded to them,” she says.

I lift the cover. Inside are hundreds of letters. Years worth of letters, I realize, and I pass a thumb over the yellowed envelopes. The scent of rosewater reaches my nose. “But you read them all.”

Rosa’s stare is unwavering. “I did,” she says. “They may give you more answers than I can give.”

I realize then, this is it. The feeling of being let down again by the people around me creates a hollowness in my chest. First Gloria, then Himena, now Rosa. The aunt I never got to have.

She tries to close the door again, but as the door nearly shuts, I feel a building pressure inside me. This can’t be it. I came all this way. This is my chance to retain some sense of family. I can’t let it go.

“Wait, please, tía Rosa. I have nowhere else to go,” I tell her. “I’m family,” I smile past the tears building in my eyes. “I’m your niece. That has to mean something to you, right?”

Rosa sucks in a breath and closes her eyes. When she reopens them, her features shift. There is a softness to her that wasn’t there before and her lip quivers. “It means something,” she

says. “But you have to understand, I have my own family to think about. I can’t bring that kind of dark brujería into my home. Never again.”

“Ama?” someone calls from inside the house. Rosa doesn’t turn away from me, but I see her, a young girl maybe a year or two younger than me. Her light, green coloured eyes and dark curls are a contrast to her mom, to me, to my own family. But there’s something in those eyes that feels familiar. I watch her until Rosa comes out of the house and closes the door behind her.

“I had an older sister,” I tell Rosa. “Her name was Carolina. She was beautiful, more beautiful than me or Mom.” My throat tightens.

“Yes,” tía Rosa says. “I knew of her.”

I close my eyes. Of course. From the letters.

“When I told Xiomara to leave she was five months pregnant.” Rosa says it so matter-of-factly, detached almost.

A cold pressure caresses the skin of my arm. I flinch instinctively and see Caro’s weary figure beside me. Her gaze is sharp, hair wild, as she tries to speak but I don’t hear a thing.

Energy swarms up my legs, leaving a tingle in its wake. “You could have helped us,” I say, realizing I sound somewhat hysterical and not caring. If I had known about her, about the normal life she led here in this small town, I could have gotten out. Maybe Caro, too.

At the thought of her, Caro’s figure solidifies rapidly. She inhales, as if for the first time, and grips my hand. The hairs along my arm stand on end. “Lorena, walk away. Walk away now,” Caro says.

“No,” I say, turning on my sister. I whirl back, gripping tía Rosa’s arm. She’s Mom’s sister. She knew Mom before magic ever entered the picture. “If there’s a way to get rid of this then I need to know.”

Rosa shakes her head, eyes wide and full of sadness and something else, something that leaves a cold bitter taste in my mouth. It looks like pity.

“Your mother was obsessed with gaining power and didn’t care who she hurt in the process. When she first brought witchcraft into our home she brought with her dark spirits no one should be able to manifest, all for the sake of power. They promised her more power,” Rosa said.

I wondered who were the dark spirits she mentioned. I immediately thought of Constanzo’s oscuros. Had Mom seen them?

“The dark spirits,” Rosa pauses, trepidation clouding her voice. Her eyes well up. “They took my powers.”

I falter. “You were a bruja?”

“Your mom and I were born brujas, just like you and your sister. But Xio wanted more.”

A loud crash comes from down the street, startling us all. Rosa opens her door hastily and steps inside. “You need to leave. Don’t tell anyone what you are. If they find out, they’ll kill you.”

“They? Who will kill me?”

Rosa shakes her head, shooting a look at Ago. “They came for Xio all those years ago. I can’t have them coming here. Leave.” Rosa doesn’t wait. She slams the door shut.

I have half a mind to slam against the door and demand more answers, but Caro stands in front of me. In a blur of whites and blues she appears, brows arched. “She knows nothing, Lorena. She only knows her own grief. Walk away,” Caro grits out.

I start to respond, to tell her no, there is more Rosa knows and I can get her to talk. If I can just spend more time with her, make her see that I'm different - that I'm not like Mom and I don't want this magic, she'll help me.

She'll help me, she'll help me, I repeat over and over. My hands begin to vibrate. An overwhelming heat cuts through my chest and spreads, like a dam bursting open, until I'm surrounded. I gasp, energy and heat blocking my airways until the only thought I'm left with is to release whatever is inside me. *Get it out.*

The tension in my body snaps.

My hands shoot away from me and then Ago and I are being showered in glass. I duck, the shards nipping my skin as they descend. I hear the faint clink as they hit the pavement.

My body feels spent. A new wave of exhaustion settles in.

Then I realize what just happened. All of the front windows of tía Rosa's house have been blown out. The glass on the floor has turned to dust. There's a crushing moment between seeing the gaps where there should be glass windows, and seeing that glass shattered at my feet that I realize whatever is inside me is never going away.

The drive back to the church only makes me more fearful. The darkness around us feels tangible, huddled over Ago's car just waiting for us to stop. I begin to think there are eyes watching us in the shadows.

My first thought is of Constanzo. Does his influence reach Aguila? Is nowhere really safe?

"Lorena?"

Ago says it like this isn't the first time she's tried to grab my attention.

“Sorry,” I say.

“My place is small, but you’re more than welcome to stay with me,” Ago offers.

I hear tía Rosa’s words in my head again. “I don’t think it’d be safe for you to be near me.”

The hum of Ago’s car fills the silent space before Ago says, “Maybe. But you don’t have anywhere to go, right? I can’t just send you away. No, that isn’t the right thing to do.”

“You heard what Rosa said,” though I don’t specify what part. All of it screams danger for Ago. I stare into the pitch-black night.

Ago sighs. “I did. And of course, I’m worried about the dangers, but not just for my own life, Lorena. I worry about your life, too.”

We reach the church and Ago veers to the left, parking the car into an alcove, somewhat hidden from the main road. Floor-level suites are tucked close together. A few of them have lights on and shadowed silhouettes that pass by.

Ago doesn’t take her seatbelt off yet. “I believe that things in life happen for a reason.” Ago’s voice softens. “I understand things have happened to you, bad things from the sounds of it, but I believe it brought you to Aguila for a reason. If my only role is to offer you a safe place to rest, then I will gladly accept that role.” Ago offers me a smile. “It’s not much. But this church and its housing are protected.”

I almost ask what she means by that but remain quiet.

“You’ll be safe here,” Ago continues.

“The church doesn’t know what I am.”

Ago glances sideways at me. “Yes, well. Let’s make sure they don’t find out.”

I eye her wearily.

“I won’t tell anyone, Lorena. That isn’t my secret to tell.” Ago’s face pinches at something, her eyes darken.

I relent, nodding and following Ago to her suite. Her house is small, slightly bigger than the size my bedroom was. The kitchen has no oven and in place of a full functioning stove, she has a two-burner hot plate. She informs me there is no place to wash or dry clothing so if I should feel inclined to do laundry, I’ll have to fill the kitchen sink with water and hang my clothes in the bathroom. Tucked into a corner of her bedroom is a plush sitting chair and a stack of books on the floor beside it. Hidden deep within her closet, Ago pulls out two thick wool blankets and I help her lay them down on the carpet floor.

Ago lets me use her mouthwash before offering me a pillow and retreating into the washroom. I settle down into the thicket of blankets at my feet. I try to relax, even allowing myself to sniff the blankets – they smell of laundry soap and something sweet, like cherry.

I jump underneath the blankets when the washroom door reopens. Relax, I scold myself, and I have the begrudging feeling I won’t be getting much sleep tonight.

“Are you comfortable?” Ago asks from her bed.

Moonlight plays along the edges of Ago’s face, casting her brown eyes in a pale gold glow. A sudden flush of pink plays at the tops of her cheeks.

“Yes,” I answer. Shifting, I arrange my arms behind my head. “You live alone here?”

Ago hums. “Yes.”

“Your parents don’t mind you living alone at such a young age?” I say it casually, not trying to pry but my curiosity soars. How did a young girl like Ago manage to get a place on her own?

I see the tops of Ago's shoulders rise and fall. "My parents weren't good people," she says.

"No siblings?"

"No. Just me. That might be a good thing, though." Ago sits up, the moonlight falling away from her face. "What about your dad?"

"I never knew him." I wish there was more to say, but the truth is there isn't much more.

"Can I ask about your magic?" Ago asks. "I'm sorry if that's prying but I've never met someone who could perform magic."

I sit up then, fold my hands over my lap. I think of all the times I used magic when I didn't want to. "Whenever I do it," I say, carefully, "it's like I take a huge gulp of air and I can't release it until I do more magic. It's pain but it's also a release of pain."

Ago leans forward, the bed sheet falling to her waist. "Can I see it again?" Her voice is timid, but her eager eyes stun me.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," I say.

Ago shakes her head, as if scolding herself. "Right. Of course." She pauses. "But it isn't *bad*, right? Your magic?"

I hesitate, unsure. I've done magic that I've rationalized as being helpful. But they were never things done through powers of illusion, or powers in the way Caro used to command winds. What I did was more practical. I wish I could show Ago those things. I wish I could show her how we heal, show her that what we do is not something out of nothing, but that poppy seed mixed with lemon balm can cure simple aches. I wish I could show her that boiling rose water with black sea salt, carom seeds, and lemon juice can cure a stomachache. There is nature in our craft, not just magical powers.

But most people aren't interested in the natural; Most people only want to see the magic. I sit up and hold my hand out. Energy rises to my fingertips as I call it forward.

I've always been good at destruction. There was Mom's favorite tea set I crumbled to pieces when Caro stole my toy at age six. Then there was Caro's perfume bottle when she told me no amount of makeup would hide how ugly I was at twelve. But now, I think about creating.

I'm not sure what Ago expects, maybe something to burst her windows, too. But I concentrate on the flowing energy that runs from the earth, to me. I close my eyes. Behind my eyelids I see the strings waiting for me. I pull one at a time, carefully stitching and weaving them together. I think about soil and how trees grow from it. I think about the rain that fuels it and the sun that nurtures it. Warmth spreads across my chest. I remember the seed as my brows furrow. Because everything starts from the seed. I squeeze my eyes shut and concentrate harder. My hand heats and cools rapidly. My palm itches and I feel the pull of skin.

I hear Ago gasp and I open my eyes.

In my palm is a tiny tree. It must be one foot tall and I see its roots embedded in the lines of my palm. As the breeze from outside comes in, I notice the leaves of my tree begin to stir. I stare at it and lift my hand above my head. Tree roots carve around my hand and continue down my arm. I gap at it and poke at the tree bark. It's rough and a tiny splinter of wood peels off.

"Dios mio," Ago says breathless. She jumps from her bed and sits across from me. Her hand hovers below mine.

Ago touches it, marveling over the texture of the leaves and wood. She strokes the leaves. I feel the touch down to my veins and my body jolts forward unexpectedly. My hand flexes, almost closing on the tree, because it's too much, feels too good. Do illusions normally feel this real, I wonder?

“Sorry! Did I hurt you? I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to.” She talks quickly.

I laugh, breathless. “No, quite the opposite actually.”

After some time of admiring the tree, I close my eyes again. When I end other illusions, I disintegrate the strings all together, like wiping fog from a mirror. But the tree resists. The roots refuse to detach from my veins. The leaves flake one by one but they embed themselves on my open palm.

I reexamine the tree in my palm. The roots give the greatest resistance and I start slowly, visually plucking the strings in my mind with a snap. Each string detached is a sharp pain up my arm and I marvel at how real this feels. I pluck the last root and with excruciating slowness, the illusion of the tree finally disintegrates. When I open my eyes again, the magic simmering back to the pit of my stomach, in my hand is a pile of ashes.

I stare quizzically at it. Illusions have never done this before.

I hold the ashes in my hand and move them away from the open window threatening to spill them across the floor.

“Thank you,” Ago says, oblivious to my own confusion. “That was beautiful.”

In some ways, she’s right. The tree was beautiful. But the ashes left in my palm reek of nothing but death. I dump them down the kitchen sink and let it wash away with water.

Quietly, Ago’s voice drifts toward me. “Lorena? You can stay here as long as you need. It’s not a problem for me. Ok?”

Anxiety settles into my bones and I force myself to take a calming breath. But loneliness makes a home inside me, fogging the edges of my mind and bringing to light the only thing I know to be true: I have no one left.

That's not true, I tell myself almost immediately. I have Caro. In some way. I recall her ghost in the woods, then again at tía Rosa's. I haven't seen Caro since but I keep searching for warm brown eyes in the shadows. But soon enough, even her ghost will be gone. She can't stay with me. Then I will be alone, stuck in this body that creates but loves to destroy.

Maybe I'm more similar to Constanzo than I originally thought.

I spend the next few days going over the letters tía Rosa handed off to me. Most of them detail Caro's younger years, and Mom finding out she was pregnant with me. Mom doesn't mention my father in any of the letters, but she never did. I started with the earliest letter in the box but as each produced no answers, I plucked letters randomly.

Mom mentions dark shadows in the tenth letter I pull.

"Did you find anything out in the letters?" Ago asks.

I shake my head, tossing another letter aside. "I'm not entirely sure what to look for," I admit. "People keep telling me my mom was one thing but I only ever knew her as..." I trail off.

"Your mom," Ago finishes, softly.

I sigh, nodding.

Ago leaves me to sift through more letters and I lose track of how many hours I spend on Ago's floor, reading Mom's elegant cursive. I find a stack of letters tied together with a string towards the middle of the box. As I read off the first one, I realize it's the first letter where Mom talks about Caro and I in greater detail. She talks about how Caro is learning, and failing, to cook birria. She tells Rosa about my spelling bee victory. Mom mentions how she wants to buy me a telescope because of my love for the stars. She mentions how that reminds her of my father. It's the only letter referencing my dad.

The tied stack of letters continues in a similar fashion, Mom talking about how Caro and I have conquered certain mundane tasks like gardening and academics. Mom writes about the first time I got my period and how she told me it doesn't change who I am as a person, then how she showed me to craft my own undergarments for that time of the month.

I smile fondly over the memory. Mom did love finding ways for us to produce less waste where we could. Though as Mom discusses her financial burdens in some of these letters, part of me wonders if that was because we couldn't always afford other options.

The last letter in the bunch proves difficult to get through. Mom tells Rosa about Caro's attack. I swallow through it, remembering how excited Caro was to go to a school dance, how weary Mom seemed to let her go but she couldn't deny Caro's excitement. Mom writes about her guilt.

I realize I'm crying when Mom writes, "If I had been a better mother, I could have protected her."

All Mom ever wanted was for Caro and I to be safe. I know this, and as I tie the letters back together, I know in my heart that whatever reasons Mom had for helping Constanzo, keeping Caro and I safe was at the top of that list.

On days I feel the need for a break from the letters, I spend time with Ago at the church. I learn to make homemade enchilada sauce with serrano peppers and basil blended together, drenched over fried tortillas stuffed with chicken, cheese sprinkled over top. I help myself to four enchiladas that day.

I'm mostly surprised that I'm starting to feel comfortable working among the other ladies in the church. I'm able to blend in with them. I haven't seen Ago in days and I swore, after that

night in front of tía Rosa's house, to keep my emotions in check and use no more magic. Using it would only get me into trouble here, and worse, get Ago into trouble.

I decided quickly that I cared about that, Ago's safety. I didn't want to be the cause of her distress and so I tried. I kept up civil conversations with the churchgoers, I attended their mass, I hummed to their songs. I manage to avoid standing with them in front of the altar to accept the body and blood of their God, and though some of the older ladies seem displeased by this, they don't push me.

"The youth these days," they mutter under their breath, all while sending Ago a meaningful look until she, too, stands with them.

She and I laugh about it later and she assures me they mean well.

It's pastelito night when everything changes. I'm setting down a fresh plate of guayaba pastelitos when they carry her in. The viejitas tell me her name is Julia. She's six years old. I can tell something is wrong with her, and not from the way her father carries her in his arms, but by the pale, yellow colour of her skin. Sweat clings to her temples. It's hard to tell if she's even breathing. The Viejitas are rushing them to another sector of the church, a section I understand as belonging to the priest.

"Ay, Dios," Ago says doing the sign of the cross over herself.

"She's sick," I state the obvious.

Ago nods. "She was born sick. They tried a lot of different medicines but nothing sticks. She always ends up sick again and they bring her here when it gets bad."

"Why?"

"To give her last rites."

My brow wrinkles and Ago continues. “To cleanse her of her sins and prepare her for the journey into heaven.” Ago eyes me, disbelieving of my lack of knowledge.

It’s hours before we see the man and his daughter come out of the priest’s room. Julia’s head rests in her father’s neck and her hands ball into fists on his shoulders. What sins could this little girl possibly have?

My fingers begin to tingle.

Feverfew and sage, I remember, picked just before it flowers must hang. Above the stove is the best place to hang them. Give them a couple days to dry and let the stove heat their stems. Keeping them dry is the most time-consuming part, but also the most important. When they’re ready, mix them together with boiled lemon juice and a dash of cinnamon. That’s what Mom would make for someone like Julia. She used to make Caro and I join her in praying over it to amplify its effects.

I’ve never made the mixture myself, but it’s always worked for Mom.

Don’t, a voice creeps in suddenly.

“What?” I twist toward Ago and beside her is Caro’s somewhat translucent figure.

Her eyes darken. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Hmm?” Ago says. She follows my gaze and stares quizzically. “Is everything okay?”

Caro’s right. I shouldn’t meddle. But knowing that Mom would makes me feel like I should. Healing is the purest form of our magic and it’s something I never minded Mom doing. I even enjoyed when she took the time to show me.

I wring my hands, a sense of duty washing over me.

“This is not for us to control, Lore,” Caro goes on. “Santa Muerte has claimed that little girl. Leave it be.”

But how can I? It's one thing to avoid something terrible when you don't have to look at it, but once you've seen it and its destruction, aren't we called to act? And if I have the means to do something, shouldn't I? I've seen many an evil around my city and I've let my distaste for magic keep me from acting. Although Mom loved performing magic, she was always careful with it, seldom using it for the good of the people, but to keep herself safe. Caro, on the other hand, performed magic out of self-indulgence. If it didn't benefit her or make her a more powerful witch, she didn't bother.

Maybe I can do better. Maybe this is my chance.

I touch Ago's arm cautiously. "I may be able to help her."

Ago's eyes widen. She swallows down her pastry. "Are you sure?"

No, I want to say. I'm never sure when it comes to magic and maybe that's always been my problem with it. There's also the townspeople to worry about. If Julia's father finds out I'm a bruja he could tell everyone. And my time at the church, with Ago, would be over. But I steel myself. If this works, if I save this little girl, then maybe I'm not like Constanzo after all. Maybe my magic is worth having.

Later that night, Ago and I go into the woods behind the church and scour the bushes for the necessary herbs. It takes a while but after we do, I tie a wool string around their stems and hang them above her stove. "It could take a few days," I tell her.

It takes the herbs three full days to dry, and on the fourth, I set to making the elixir. I boil the lemon juice and cinnamon first, getting them to such a high heat that it nearly boils over. Then I cut the stems from the herbs. I dip them into the mixture. I instruct Ago to hold them in there for a few minutes while I ground the feverfew and sage down.

I crush them with my fingers, mostly, since Ago doesn't have a pestle, and once they're fine enough, I sprinkle them over the now-simmering pot. With steam rising from the pot, I lean over and sniff. The herbal sage hits my nose first and then the cinnamon. The lemon won't be noticeable till Julia drinks it.

"No elixir is stronger than the one who makes it," Mom told me once. She said the more powerful the witch, the stronger the elixir, but to maximize its effects...

I grab a knife from Ago's kitchen drawer. The tip isn't as sharp as I'd hoped and the little nip I wanted to make becomes a longer gash as I run it back and forth over my finger.

"Ay Dios!" Ago gasps. "What are you doing?"

"It makes the elixir stronger," I tell her. As strong as me. Or at least as strong as my will to help Julia.

"We have to be careful about this," Ago says, grabbing a jar to fill with the elixir.

Heat rises as evening comes and it feels odd for fall evenings, but I don't say anything, and Ago wraps me up in one of her shawls. I tie the laces of my boots, the borrowed ones from Izzy. I still haven't contacted her. And the more days that pass, the possibility of having her in my life passes along with them.

I stare at Ago, watch her pack the elixir in one of her shoulder bags, rearrange her long brown tresses and the dainty cross at her neck.

She catches me staring. "You ready?" she asks.

My cheeks warm and I shift the black and red shawl around my shoulders. I nod. "Let's go."

Goosebumps spread across my arms and I start to recognize the signs when Caro appears. The wind carries her voice. "You know there's a chance it won't work," Caro says.

And I want to hate her for voicing my doubts, but I can't. As we trudge up the hill to Julia's place, all I tell myself is I can't make Julia any worse.

The roads are mostly empty, though I notice a few people scattered along the trail clutching rosaries around their neck. "What are they doing here so late at night?" I ask Ago.

She huddles closer to me. Our shoulders brush against each other. "Up this hill is a temple where many people go to pray."

"But this late at night?" I whisper back.

Ago shrugs slightly. "You never know when you'll need prayer."

We veer off the path shortly after. A row of houses lines the roads on either side. Ago hands me the bag when we reach Julia's house, the front yard littered with toys, though I imagine its been a while since Julia used them. There is a dirty and tattered teddy bear at my feet when Ago knocks on the door.

My stomach sinks when I hear heavy footsteps approaching. As I clutch my bag to me and feel the outline of the jar mixture, I take a step back. I could still turn away. Walk back down the hill and dump the mixture onto the dirt, no one the wiser. But the doorknob jiggles, and the door is pulled open. His eyes look sunken into their sockets. The dark circles underneath look like dark purple paint were smeared there and he pulls up the collar of his shirt.

"Buenas noches, Jorge" Ago says, lowering her head slightly. "We are from padre Rogelio's congregation." Ago opens her hands toward me. "This is my cousin, Lorena. We apologize for the late hour, but we needed to see you."

Julia's father, Jorge shifts from foot to foot, his brow furrowing. "It isn't a good time," he tells us. "Julia had a rough day and I am tired."

“Yes, of course,” Ago goes on. “But we would like to offer a blessing over Julia, if that’s ok. Padre Dios offers great peace in times of suffering.” Ago touches the cross at her neck.

“You came all this way at this hour to give Julia a blessing?” he asks, not believing Ago for a second.

I wrap the black shawl tighter around me and clear my throat. “I think we can be of some help to her, and to you.”

Jorge eyes me skeptically and I watch as his eyes dart to the satchel beside me. “How?” he asks.

Ago places a hand on my shoulder. “With prayer, as we’ve said.”

Jorge’s eyes remain on me. I try to tell him that he can trust us, that he should let us in and once he sees how my mixture will help Julia, he’ll be glad he did. But I smile sweetly at him and grab Ago’s hand. “May we come in?”

He hesitates in the doorway. I hear a heaving cough inside the house and he turns away from us immediately. In a rare fit of boldness, I reach forward and grab his hand.

“Please, sir. We have more that may be able to help Julia. We can make her comfortable in ways no doctor or priest can.” The words fall out quickly and I hope that my eyes can convey this new desperation that I feel. I need him to believe me without knowing the truth and I realize it’s a difficult thing to ask, especially when it involves his own flesh and blood. So I give him a bit more truth. “My mom was a skilled healer. She studied herbs and plants and she knows what heals. Your daughter deserves a chance to live. I believe I can help her with that.”

He swallows thickly, and a whimper comes from inside the house. Julia is in pain. I can almost feel her aches within my own bones; the mixture in my bag feels heavier.

Jorge yanks me forward suddenly and I nearly fall into his chest when his stale breath hits my face. “If you do more to hurt her, I will kill you with my bare hands.” Despite his words, his tone is sad and I nod. I have no intentions of letting this girl die.

The inside of Jorge's house is dark, save for a singular light coming from down the hall. Jorge leads us to it. I'm mindful of the creaks in the floorboards as we walk, trying to remain as quiet as the house itself. Making any loud noises feel too intrusive. But then I'm reminded of why I'm here and what I came to do. Intrusive of a different kind, I tell myself.

Jorge pauses outside of Julia's lit room.

"I have made something that will help Julia," I tell him, careful not to say the word cure. It adds to much pressure and the possibility of it failing, well, it can't be an option here.

But Jorge asks anyway. "A cure?"

I pat the bag hanging off my shoulder. "Something like that," I say.

"You're not the first to tell me they have a cure," he admits.

I wonder immediately if he has had other brujas or healers in his home that have tried. Just before I ask, Julia cries out in pain again.

Despite the dark dreariness of the home, Julia's room is bright pink. Chipped white bookcases line the room and they're filled with toy cars, teacup sets, and colouring books. Stuffed animals cocoon little Julia on the bed as she rocks herself back and forth, body quivering.

Ago and I kneel beside Julia.

"You sure you can do this?" Ago whispers. I notice Jorge hovering behind, probably wondering the same thing.

Over Julia's whimpers I say, "I can take the pain away. I can make her comfortable." I pull my bag over my head and open the flap. I carefully extract the mixture from my bag. The rim of the jar is damp. "I need a glass, please."

Jorge returns with a cup. "What is that?" he asks, intently watching me pour the mixture.

It sloshes when I set it back down. “It’s an herbal elixir,” I say. I rub my hands together and carefully start massaging the muscles of Julia’s legs. They spasm harshly. “Shh, it’s ok, Julia. You’ll be ok soon.”

Closing my eyes, I begin whispering a prayer to Santa Muerte. I pray and pray, begging Santa Muerte to hear my pleas, but nothing happens. I pause, opening my eyes to see Ago and Jorge watching me closely. I brush off their gazes and force myself to concentrate.

Please, Santa Muerte. Release your hold on this girl.

The back of my eyelids begins to burn, my fingers tingling soon after. *Please.* Pressure builds in my fingers and I feel my hand shake. Sharp, painful tugs make me think my fingernail is going to snap off. The burning in my eyes intensifies.

Santa Muerte must be rejecting my prayers.

Strings of light appear in my mind’s eye. I kneel before them, grip my hands in front of them, pleading.

A figure steps out of the strings and takes all the light with it. Shadows fill the space, shrouding the figure, keeping its face hidden. The hooded figure lifts its head slightly. A piece of stark white bone sneaks out from beneath the hood.

My breath catches and I think I hear Ago’s voice, faint and far away, calling my name.

Santa Muerte?

The hooded figure points a finger at me. It’s all bone, all white, all harsh edges. She steps closer. Her calavera face shocks me for a second. Her entire presence feels too much, too beautiful but also too ugly to look at, and I cower before I remember the dying girl under my hands.

I grit my teeth. *You have claimed enough death. This is one you will not have,* I say.

Santa Muerte tilts her head. The hollowness in her eyes grows darker. When she speaks, it's like hearing the wind howl. *Death is never satisfied, child. And you speak as if you already command it.* Her figure grows larger, towering over me. *Death answers to no one but Death itself.*

The strings that hold Santa Muerte together explode into thousands of brilliant bright strings and I'm jolted back to the present. I open my eyes. Julia breathes heavily on the bed and my hands shake furiously.

"Hurry," I say, voice raw. "We don't have much time." My mind feels groggy, and I can still hear Santa Muerte's words loud and clear. I've never had Santa Muerte appear and answer my direct prayers. I've felt her presence in our rituals and prayers, but never seen her figure so pronounced and downright frightful.

My eyes find Ago and I motion for her to hold Julia up. I notice her hands are trembling, too, and she hoists the sickly girl up into her arms, one hand going to her mouth where she gently tugs it open.

"She has to drink it all," I say.

I tip the cup back toward Julia's lips. Her face twists at the first taste. It's disgusting, I know, but I force more of it down. Julia sputters. "Tip her back more," I instruct Ago. I continue to pour the mixture down her throat until it's all gone.

Julia twists and spasms some more on the bed and for a second I think I messed it up and the mixture didn't work. I feel her father's presence ever so close at my back, the heat and anxiety of him shouting over me. But then there is silence. Julia rests her head back on her pillow and when I see her chest rise and fall at a steady pace, I let out my own breath.

"Julia," I call to her. I use the end of my shawl to wipe some of the sweat on her brow.

Her eyes are shut, but the hint of a smile plays at the edges of her lips. “Papá,” she says. Her face puckers. “Was that juice? It wasn’t very good.”

Jorge laughs, pushing past Ago and I to sit beside Julia. “But how are you feeling, mi amor?”

Julia shuffles her feet and lifts a leg over the bed. Her eyes brighten. “It doesn’t hurt!” A smile spreads across her face. “How?”

Jorge pulls Julia to his chest and addresses me over her head. “I don’t know how you did that,” he says, “but thank you. It is best I don’t know, but gracias a Dios.” He sobs into Julia’s hair.

Ago presses her hand into mine and though I still need to check up on Julia’s look for any marks or residual effects of the mixture, I let Ago lead us out of the room. Then her arms are crushing me to her chest. “You did it,” she says, smiling.

“We won’t know for sure until a few days have passed,” I say, but smile anyway. The magic under my skin hums and for once I don’t have a reason to hate myself.

Though, as Ago goes back to join Jorge and Julia, it’s Santa Muerte’s haunting image I can’t keep out.

Just before we leave Jorge’s house, I hand him the rest of the elixir. “Half a glass every other day,” I instruct. “It’s very important it’s only every other day, comprendes?”

Jorge holds the jar tentatively in his hands. “And this is permanent?”

If it works, yes. But I know that’s not what Jorge wants to hear. So I muster as encouraging a smile as I can and say, “Yes.”

“It’s exhilarating, isn’t it?” Ago exclaims as we make our way back to her place. We stayed with Julia for most of the day to monitor her symptoms but there was lightness involved with watching her and Ago play tea party and princess and the knight, with Ago as the knight.

“You know señora Dalia has really bad arthritis and Juanito, from Guatemala, has la gripa and it gets really bad that the doctors don’t know if it’s lung cancer. We could help them!”

“Whoa, hold on, Ago. I didn’t say anything about helping others. Plus, it’ll bring too much attention,” I say, shaking my head. Even if helping Julia feels right and good, I don’t want to live in yet another city where I am feared or hated. Even if the magic burrowed inside me excites at the idea of being used, I can’t let go of the idea of normal and what that may look like for someone like me. If I continue to heal people, it will attract too many eyes. And I’ll never get to be normal.

Ago grabs my hands and laughs. “It’s a gift, Lorena. This gift you have can save people. This is God’s will.”

“Your God’s or mine?” I snap.

Ago’s cheerful attitude sobers quickly. It’s the first time our different ideologies have been made so blatantly clear, and it’s more than just me preferring jeans and black hoodies to Ago’s ornate dresses and cross necklaces.

Ago drops my hands. “I’m sorry,” she says. She gives me a look, like she wants to say something more, but turns on her heels and continues the walk home. We remain quiet even as we get ready for bed and my muscles tense at the thick tension surrounding us. But I don’t break it. I know I shouldn’t have snapped at her; I know she means well – Ago has always meant well. But the hooded image of Santa Muerte, her ominous words, keeps me from feeling the same elation that Ago does.

And the next morning, when I'm jostled awake by the smell of smoke, memories of my home imploding behind my eyelids and springing me off the floor, I know that I was right to be weary. There, on the stove, is a pile of ashes. The herbs I left strung up are gone.

"Lorena?" Ago calls sleepily from her bed. She rubs the sleep from her eyes. "What's wrong?"

"They're gone," I say.

Ago joins me in the kitchen. We eye the ashes.

"But we made enough, yes?"

I take small comfort in that. I nod. "I hope so."

The next set of events passes by in one large multicoloured blur. The black of the ashes, the brown of Caro's eyes as the life left them, Ago's yellow house slippers, the grey of Ago's phone as she picks it up. I hadn't heard it ring.

"Antonia, slow down!" Ago says into the receiver.

"Did you hear me?" the caller, Antonia, says into the phone. "He's saying you and Lorena did something to her. Ago, he's saying she's a bruja!"

Consequence.

It's like I can hear Santa Muerte saying it again. Then it repeats over and over and over. I disturbed the natural order of things. Magic is meant to maintain the order.

I bite the inside of my cheek. No, I used it for something good. I saved a life, I repeat to myself.

"The Padre is demanding to see her," Antonia continues.

Ago's eyes widen as our eyes meet. "She didn't do anything wrong," Ago says.

Antonia's voice lowers. "The people are demanding answers, Ago. Julia is dead. The bruja needs to answer for this."

No. That can't be right. I almost snatch the phone from ago to demand what she means, but I know what dead is. I rub my temple. I was there, I saw the smile on her face when she felt no more pain, when she reached for her father and I knew I had done something good. Was it all for nothing?

Ago shoves a bag in my arms and I realize she's no longer on the phone. "Quick. If we leave now, we can take the backwoods out of the city. Bancaria isn't too far from here but it's enough that the town gossip won't reach." Ago shoves several dresses into a bag of her own.

My hand flexes on the bag, wanting suddenly to wrap Ago up in a hug. "It's okay," I tell her. "I will answer for this."

Ago shakes her head before I get the words out. "I don't know what they will do," she says quietly. Her shoulders quiver and she frantically wipes at the edges of her eyes.

Swallowing hard, I take her hand. I've never been good at comfort – Caro was always the one to comfort me when I needed and Caro never seemed to need my comfort. She always had Mom. So with uncertain motions, I drag Ago forward and into the circle of my arms. "It will be okay," I say, trying to sound reassuring. I offer her a smile.

A tear caresses the curve of her cheek. "May your God protect you, Lorena."

Entering the church feels different this time. All eyes are on me and I feel them slide over me like ichor, leaving their stain as I make my way to the altar. The priest, padre Rogelio, gestures for me to sit on the chair, the golden tabernacle and chalice disappearing behind me.

In all my life, I have never been made a spectacle of – I had no idea what it would feel like. I read about Salem witch trials in school, and I wonder if it felt anything like this, to be on display and be told that everything I was made up of was a plague on society. But surely we are passed sentencing witches to death.

I try not to snap at padre Rogelio's questions – the same question he's asked the last ten minutes – and avoid the ongoing glares from the congregation. "I told you, what I gave her was of the earth. It is not meant to kill but to give life. It's not magic."

padre Rogelio flinches at the word.

On its own, the word means nothing. But when the church thinks I've used it to kill the little girl up the hill, it means everything.

"What was in it?" padre Rogelio asks.

"Herbs. Sage, feverfew, lemon juice." I omit the part about my blood. "Sage is grounded in earth and the feverfew helps bring out its healing properties.

padre Rogelio shakes his head. "So drinking a jar of herbs cured Julia? When no one else could?"

My jaw tightens. "The cure has always been there, it's just about finding the right combination of herbs to do it."

"Lies!" someone yells. It's Jorge, Julia's father. "It killed her! You told me it would help and I gave it to her and it killed her!" He repeats it over and over. *It killed her. You killed her.*

Jorge throws something at my feet. It shatters to pieces but I know it's the jar of the elixir I made. It's empty.

"Idiot," I mutter, glaring at the broken glass. He gave Julia all of it. My anger flares. This is why we don't meddle. I can almost hear Caro's voice punctuating these words at me.

Jorge's sobs break through. They shatter the tension in the air and shatter something inside me, too. Behind all his anger, he was just a broken man who saw something that could save his daughter. How was he to know that giving her the entire elixir would be too much for her small body, that all that energy and herbs would overwhelm her system until it shut Julia's body down?

padre Rogelio blocks Jorge from view, drawing my attention. "Let us decide what we'll do with you," he says, lowly.

What they'll do? I flinch. "I'll leave," I say.

padre Rogelio steps closer, his eyes darkening. "We can't let you leave. We have no idea what you'll do and we can't have you bringing death to other villas."

"She can't be released! What of our children!" someone yells. Others chime in similar grievance.

"Stone her!"

"Crucify her!"

The yells bleed together and through the flurry of red faces, I see a familiar one. It's not Ago – I told her to stay behind, she didn't need to hear this. I'm thankful now. But the face I recognize is one I saw at tía Rosa's. Her green eyes burn into mine. She doesn't yell with the others. She just stands there, hands balled up in fists. Something pulsates between us when our gazes lock. I see the faintest string of light threading between the crowd and leading me to her.

Energy crackles sharply for a second, so brief I'm almost not sure it actually happened. Her wide eyes tell me it did.

Use your magic. Caro materializes beside me. She's paler than she normally is. It makes her look more menacing than I remember her to be.

At her suggestion, I feel my magic soaring to the surface of my skin. I stamp it down immediately. Using magic won't make this situation any better, I tell myself and hope Caro understands.

It's then that I realize I care how this turns out.

I think of Ago and her kindness when she found out what I am, how the church invited me in, fed me, and laughed with me. They know kindness, too, not just this hatred for something they don't quite understand.

Caro sneers. Voice deep and grave, she says, "You are a fool."

"I will keep the bruja here until we have decided her fate!" Padre says.

padre Rogelio yanks me up, dragging me by the arm away from the yelling crowd. Caro's figure has disappeared and the altar looks less golden as the Padre slams the door shut to it.

I turn, examining the stuffy room Padre tucked me into. I notice the lack of windows immediately. My anxiety spikes but I step further in. I look through the two walls of bookshelves.

Padre sighs, his voice sounds tired. "I enjoy history," he says. He turns a desk light on, illuminating the room in a warm hue. He gestures to a chair across his desk. "There are many lessons to be learned within our history."

"I've never known Mexican history to be fascinating," I say, wearily.

“Not just our history,” he says, folding his hands in front of him. He leans forward, lowering his voice. “All of the world’s history is our history.”

“That’s an interesting theory,” I say.

The air feels heavier as he goes on. “There are patterns, you know. There are losers and victors, war and death, oppressors and the oppressed.” Padre stands, circles around the desk and stops at my back.

I press my palms flat against the chair. Energy fills them. “There are no winners in history,” I say. “Just those lucky enough to tell the story.”

padre Rogelio chuckles, the sound slithering over me and it reminds me of someone. “Now that’s an interesting theory,” he says. I can hear the smile in his voice. “I want to apologize, Lorena. This is not how things were supposed to go.”

The noises outside the room are faint, receding still. I swallow. “I really was just trying to help her,” I say.

Padre takes a seat at his desk again. He smiles sadly. “I know. I understand you wanted to help. But they’re angry,” he says, gesturing toward the door. “They want justice.” He inhales.

“And I want to make things right.”

I startle from my seat when there’s a faint knock from the door.

“That’s good to hear,” Padre says, though I’m unsure if he’s referring to my comment or the door. “Just a moment, please.”

He leaves the room and the door disappears back into its compartment along the wall. I had heard about hidden walls and doors behind the church’s altars. Mom used to tell us it’s how the priest would check who came to pray throughout the week, as they’d be given special blessings come Sunday service, but it was always just that – a story Mom told us.

Heaviness weighs down on my shoulders as I sink back. I rub my palms along the seams of my pants, their sudden itch making me uncomfortable. A soft murmur echoes throughout the room and I realize they're voices. I go to the wall, placing my hands along the wooden crevices and press my ear to the hidden door. I don't make out any concrete words but the shuffling of feet grow louder until it sounds like they're inches away.

Energy crackles in the void space between me and whoever is on the other side. The faint smell of charcoal creeps into the small space. A shock runs through my hand. I hiss, pulling away from the door, but the energy runs rampant around me, swirling and suffocating. Unsure what's happening, I take several steps back.

The taste of ash coats my tongue when the door is pushed open. Instead of padre Rogelio, two men enter the room. One of them is thin, so thin it reminds me of the way Caro used to get during cold winters. While one side of his head is full of light brown curls, the other is shaved clean. The other man towers over him, and me, that black lines of ink spreading across his knuckles and reaching up and up his torso until it's just underneath his eyes.

I smile wearily. "The Padre keeps interesting company these days," I say. A breathless laugh escapes but as the two men exchange a dark look, I notice the C burned onto their shaved heads.

"Lorena," the burly one says. "Let's not make this more difficult."

I inch back, the backs of my legs hitting the desk. "Whatever Constanzo thinks I have, I don't," I say. "Doesn't he understand? I can't help him the way Mom did." I struggle to center the energy swirling inside me. "I'm not powerful like them," I say, my voice lowering. And I realize the tone, then. It's sadness. My brows furrow, but I shake the confusion away. This isn't the time to question what that sadness means.

“His orders are clear. We don’t ask questions,” the man says, eyes fixed on me.

Just behind his head, I see a small white tendril. I latch onto it. I yank the string forward, cascading the room in a blinding white light that isn’t really there.

The thin man shuts his eyes, yelling against the brightness for his partner to grab me.

Burly man jumps forward and I duck under his arms, running for the open door and into the church hall.

As the string fades out of my mind’s eye, it leaves a hot pressure behind my eyelids. I tuck myself under the white cloth stretching across the altar. I place a hand over my mouth, though the adrenaline makes my efforts pointless. I breathe quick and loud and as the heavy footfalls of my pursuers grow closer, I realize how stupid it was to hide. I can’t hide from them.

“Lorena!” a voice yells.

I gasp, hand falling away from my mouth. “Ago?” I pull the white cloth back. The burly man’s inked face and jagged smile startle me. He grabs my arm, drags me forward onto the altar.

“Your little illusions won’t work on me,” he grits out. He lifts his hands in front of my face and electricity sparks erratically between them.

“What?” I breathe out. I’ve never known witches to conjure electricity like that. Maybe a wind user, I tell myself, could pull that off. But as he stretches his hands further apart, the current flying higher and wilder through the room, it doesn’t feel rooted in wind. His body is the conductor, I realize. “Impossible.”

The door to the main hall flies open and there is Ago, hair wild around her face.

“Lorena!” she shouts, running toward me.

I shake my head. What is she doing? The brujo turns toward her, electricity casting the room in golden hues, and smirks at this dumb powerless girl running toward him. Toward me.

I try to conjure a string of illusion. But the electricity has pushed them so far back that I can't reach them. The brujo winds his hands together, charging his energy. I groan against the strings too far from reach and instead, I create my own. When utilizing strings of magic around me, it's easier to pull them and bend them to the image I want. Creating my own, it's so much harder to nurture it into being. But I pull and push and twist the strings, pulling them it seems from my own being.

The pit in my stomach starts to burn and it feels like I'm burning from the inside out but I can't break concentration. I only have enough focus to keep one thing in mind: protect Ago.

Electricity shoots across the room. It hits the stained glass windows, shattering them. The high beams of the church are struck and a loud crack echoes throughout.

"Run!" I yell to Ago.

She's smart enough to give pause but she shakes her head and continues after me.

I rear up, stepping away from the altar and run toward her, my strings billowing behind me. One by one I throw illusions at the man. I make him see the sun from below the ocean water. I make him see his own flesh being burnt away. I make him see pure darkness. But it doesn't deter him. The loud hum of his currents roar louder after each illusion as he brushes them away.

When I reach Ago, I drag her down to the floor. "You need to leave," I huff.

She shakes her head. "So do you."

Pews explode around us. Broken pieces of wood fly up and rain down.

The man towers over us and his eyes, though so dark and angry when I first saw them, spark a golden yellow. His eyes shift to Ago for a second and then I'm moving.

The lightning strikes in the blink of an eye and it takes me a second to register that it hit me, not Ago. My body convulses. My ears ring. It feels like I'm floating as I struggle to feel the floor beneath me. I take a stuttering breath.

Ago's face appears above me. Her lips move but I don't hear a sound.

She clutches the cross at her neck and closes her eyes for a brief second, her lips moving again.

I can do nothing except watch as the man reaches down, grips Ago by the back of her neck, lifts her into the air, and throws her like a rag doll. There's a faint snap when she hits the wall and falls limp beside the altar.

My eyes stay glued to her. Is she breathing? Is she moving?

"I said not to make this difficult," the man says, breaking my line of sight to Ago, and lifting me over his shoulder.

Blood rushes to my head but I try to find Ago again, needing to see if she's okay before I'm dragged away. But I can't find the strength.

I shut my eyes and welcome the darkness.

My first thought when I wake up is of Ago.

It takes me second to realize I'm not in her apartment and the last image of her beside the altar jolts me up. My shaky arms cave in and my head hits something hard. I groan, rubbing the sore spot. When I try to stretch my legs out, they brush against something cold. Opening my eyes, I see the surrounding metal bars. There's a lock beside my head.

They put me in a fucking cage.

Red, hot anger gives me enough strength to sit up.

I struggle to breathe in the humid room, wherever I am. I wipe a hand across my sweat-soaked brow but the sweat clings. I manage to see at one end of the room several rows of planters. I inch closer to the bars. The room is massive, I realize, and I'm not the only one trapped in a cage. More than a dozen cages surround me. Only a few of them have someone inside but I'm not even sure they're alive.

A bell goes off suddenly and I rush to cover my ears against the loud intrusion, my head still ringing. The cage beside me rattles. It's another girl. Her pale brown skin glistens as she moves. The dry, cracked edges of her lips part as she scrambles to sit up. She shoves her tiny hands through the bars and cups them.

Water trickles from the ceiling. The girl extends her arms as far as she can, the bars pressing into her hollow cheeks. Her sunken eyes widen as the water falls into her cupped hands. The corners of her mouth lift and she tips her cupped hands into her mouth, and then lays them out again.

She catches my eye for a split second. We scrutinize each other through the bars, passing questions back and forth – who are you, where do you come from, how did you get here?

But then the water stops. The girl whimpers, sagging against her cage and folding her legs toward her chest. She buries her head into her arms.

I blink past the lingering dizziness and grip the metal bars in front of me. The strings of light are further away but I coax them closer. Just as they touch the metal bars, a sharp pain zings through my palm. I gasp, flinching back. I stare quizzically. I try again, conjuring the strings of light quicker and more hastily than before but reach the same result, the pain becoming sharper. I cry out.

“An enchantment,” says Caro. She sits outside the cage, far enough away from the sizzling bars. Caro sniffs the air. “It’s strong,” she says.

The loud sound of scraping metal straightens my spine. Footsteps thud closer.

“Alright. Who is going to be next?” He runs a hand through his greasy black hair when he stops in front of another cage. The bottoms of his jeans are rolled up and I notice the spots of red speckled over the tops of his Chuck Taylor’s.

The girl inside the cage scampers back until her back hits the metal. “No, no, no,” she mumbles. She kicks and screams at him and I wonder if this is her first time fighting him off. The man yanks her by the leg, dragging her out from the cage and gripping her hair. Her agonizing cries fade slowly as he drags her away. It’s a sound I won’t quickly forget.

I spend the next several hours trying to conjure up the strings needed to break apart the bars. Not only does the enchanted bars make it impossible, but turning the simple illusion strings into tangible outcomes is also proving impossible. I slam my fist against the bars, a painful jolt zapping through me. I hang my head. Drops of water slide down the bridge of my nose.

Part of me, the one full of regret and guilt, acknowledges that if I spent less time denying my practice and more time learning, then I'd be able to free myself – even from an enchantment as strong as this.

I manage to get some sleep, surprisingly, and the scraping of metal again wakes me. The man from before has returned with the girl. Another man flanks him, though he looks much younger. My age, I realize. Even from this distance, I can see the scar running the length of his cheek. It reaches the tops of his lips and moves every time he speaks.

I try not to move. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch them open the cage and place the girl inside it once more. The front of her shirt is cut open. Red stains her brown skin. I realize then that she isn't breathing.

“What did you do?” the words come out as whispers.

A pair of dirtied Chuck Taylor's step in front of my cage as he bends down, bringing his crooked nose to eye level. I feel his gaze crawl over my skin. I grit my teeth.

“Would you like to find out?” he sneers beside my cage. His breath reeks of stale tobacco and cloves. He turns toward his companion. “Should we take her backstage? Show her the real magic?”

I refuse to take his bait and though my curiosity is still piquing, I sit tight and keep my mouth shut.

He rattles the cage. I flinch.

“They're quite harmless, aren't they?” he laughs. “Constanzo's wasting his time if you ask me. Should just take her power and be rid of her – like he did with the rest of her mierda familia.”

Before I can stop myself, I shot a large gob of spit at his face. The browns in his eyes burn darker and I revel in that anger.

“Rico, enough,” his companion says, coolly. He checks the watch at his wrist. “We don’t have time for this.” He spares me a brief glance, his light eyes contrasting from the grimace etched in them. “And she’ll be gone soon enough.”

Rico grabs me through the bars, yanking my hair and slamming my face into the bars. My head rings as I sag back, my vision blurring. I blink, watching their shadows retreat back into darkness and the scraping of metal as the warehouse door slides shut.

I cross my legs and try to sit up. So that’s why Constanzo is keeping me here? To somehow take my magic? I muddle through Rico’s words. He confirmed what I already suspected, that Constanzo was the one to start the fire that night and kill my family. Had he taken Caro’s magic? Was that why she couldn’t put out the fire?

But to take another witch’s magic is unnatural. Our powers are gifts from Santa Muerte and even I understand the sacredness of that gift.

This sparks an even frightening thought, how did Constanzo learn to take magic? I recall Manuel in the schoolyard. I huff, feeling there’s a missing piece to the puzzle I can’t quite figure out.

I eye the girl next to me.

I inch forward, till my face comes within centimeters of the bars. I can hear the electric current of the enchantment. It smells my magic inside me. But I stamp it down and press my face against the bars.

Down the center of her body from her chest to her navel is a jagged line. Though parts of her body are covered in speckles of red, the line near her stomach has been wiped clean. The

smell of the antiseptic comes off her body in waves. Her brown skin is pale and getting paler by the minute. I notice something around her eyes and I stretch my neck until I realize what it is. Her eyes have been sown shut.

“They’ve stuffed her,” says a girl a few cages down.

Unlike the rest of us, this girl’s cage has a collection of cloths in one corner and a bowl filled with water in the other. She stretches her legs out and dips a cloth into the water bowl. She washes the skin around her eyes first, pale blue even in the dim room, and moves down her arms to her legs. Unbuttoning her shorts, she sticks the cloth between her legs.

I avert my eyes back to the dead girl. Dark strings hold her stomach together. “Stuffed her with what?” I ask.

“Drugs. Easiest way to get them across. Little Mary asleep in the backseat, traveling with friends, no one will know.” She laughs and pulls her shirt over her head. She rubs the cloth over her bare breasts, wincing slightly. “The other half,” she continues, pointing to the set of cages on the other side of the room. “They get sold. Pretty little brown girls, who doesn’t want a little brown pussy?” She wrings the cloth over her head and laughs again. It comes out more like a cackle, but she soothes the ends of her hair down and adds the cloth to her growing pile.

The dead girl next to me smells like the Pinesol my mom would use to wash our kitchen floors. I imagine they’ll move her before she starts to reek of anything else. My throat constricts and I feel something rising. I barely have time to turn my head before I’m vomiting.

I press my nails into my palm, forcing my brain to focus on my own pain, but I remember the girl’s cries too vividly. Did they put her to sleep before cutting her open? Did they hire a corrupt to cut open a perfectly healthy girl and stuff her full of drugs?

Hours pass and I watch the dead girl's skin turn grey. Her parents will never know what came of her and maybe that's for the best. Was she a sister? A girlfriend? A friend?

The bell chimes and the sprinklers go off, soaking her clothes and her stringy brown hair. She's not anything anymore.

I can remember one instance where I thought of doing violence to someone. The thought was so visceral; I saw it in my dreams, I saw it during the day, I saw it at prayer with Mom and Caro's bruised skin beside me. I ripped that man's skin from his flesh. I tore him into pieces and set each piece on fire. I sent him to a place he would never be able to touch my sister again. But it stayed there, in my mind of images and illusions. And even though he never did see Caro again, he didn't actually leave Caro. I'm not sure if he ever really did.

My vengeance would not bring her peace. I know that to be true for the girl beside me now. My anger for her pain will not bring her peace. Anger and vengeance and notions of justice are not reserved for the dead.

Bracing my shoulders, I shove my weight against the cage, sending it rattling but the enchantment around it shoots me back. I tumble, sending the cage flying back. My head hits the bars on all sides, and I grit my teeth.

I try to call on the strings again, I yank and yank but they're always just out of reach. Squeezing my eyes shut, I force energy to swarm up my bent legs and project it out from my hands. "Open," I demand, concentrating my thoughts on the cage. Lightning zaps my hands and I'm caught in its rage, too stunned to pull back. Burnt flesh reaches my nose, triggering a slew of memories of a burning home and dead family. I cry out through the pain, the memories, the heat.

I fall back haggardly.

“It’s no use,” the girl beside me says. She’s petite and pale, her nails broken as she bites around them. “Only way any of us get out of our cage is if we’re to end up like Lucille,” she says, pointing to the dead girl on my other side.

“I’ll find a way,” I retort, hands shaking, blisters scattered across them.

“You can try. But you’re not the first witch they’ve put in a cage and things didn’t end well for him, either.”

I pause. “What happened to him?”

The girl shrugs. “We never saw him again,” she lowers her head.

I sag against the cage, the small ounce of hope left in me slowly fading.

“What’s your name?” she asks.

I huddle into the far corner of my cage, trying not to smell my vomit from earlier.

“Lorena,” I answer. “Yours?”

“Inés.”

“How long have you been in here, Inés?” I ask.

Her jaw tightens and flexes. “I lost track,” she admits, begrudgingly. “She’s been here longer than any of us,” she goes on, pointing to the girl across the way.

The girl smiles, though it looks more like a sneer. “I’m the favorite,” she announces, chest puffed out.

Inés clears her throat, a sad look crossing her face. “I don’t know what they did to her,” she whispers to me. “But something isn’t—” Inés struggles to find the right word, then gives up.

I nod anyway.

Time doesn't exist in the cage. With no real way to tell how long I've been here, I try endlessly to get out. The golden strings have disappeared altogether. The earth's energy feels too far.

Heat spreads up my spine and across my brow. Shakily, I wipe a hand across my face but it's so damn hot. The humidity clings to every pore in my body and traps the heat inside me. I knock my head against the cool bars and rest there.

"So cool. So hot," I mumble.

"Hey, you don't look so good," says Inés.

The hairs on my arms stand on end. I squint at the blurry figure in front of my cage.

Caro glares at the cage. "She's right," she says.

I nod. "I think he's going to kill me." Saying the words aloud makes me shiver, but that could be the high fever I know I'm running. I swing my head from side to side, mumbling. I swallow hard. "What's it like? Dying, I mean," I whisper to Caro.

Caro blinks. "It's dark. Then you see Santa Muerte's face and it doesn't matter that it's dark anymore. There is peace. And calm." A hint of a smile plays on Caro's pale lips. She's looking paler every time I see her. "It feels like magic."

My lip twitches. "Does she hate me?" I ask, shrinking back into myself at the thought of Santa Muerte and her acts of consequence. I shouldn't have tried to save that little girl. I should have listened to Santa Muerte and accepted what was to come. Maybe I'd still be with Ago if I had.

"She doesn't hate you," Caro says inching closer to the cage. She draws a line on the ground with dirt and water. "We do things in Her name. What we are is given from Her. Bad

things happen when we forget that, Lore.” Caro breaks the line in half with her finger. “We are not the creators. We are merely pawns for Her will.”

My brow furrows. I don’t want to be a pawn. That’s why I said no to magic for so long. I didn’t want to let it control me. I am in control, no one else.

“Little girl, little girl, who talks and talks to the wind. There it goes, the voice the voice. The ghost and all her little magic, stuck inside her little bruja,” sings the girl from earlier. She laughs and points to something above my cage. I stare at her cracked lips and bushy hair. Does she see Caro?

Caro bends down beside me. She watches the other girl. “Santa Muerte does not want you in this cage, Lorena.” Her eyes find mine again. “She wants you to break it.” Caro gets to her feet again and I see the edges of her begin to blur.

“Break it?” I say. I can barely muster the energy to sit up let alone try to bust through this enchanted cage.

The metal door slides open again. I sit back alongside my cage and wrap my hands around my knees, clutching them tight against my chest. Rico saunters in. He stops at crazy girl’s cage and she giggles, the sound making me cringe.

“All washed up?” he asks.

“Yes, sir,” she answers.

He fishes out a set of keys in his pocket and unlocks her cage. She giggles again and jumps up at him when she’s free. She wraps her arms around his neck and he pulls her along. She waves at me coyly before I hear the door slide shut.

Glaring at the metal bars, I sink back and wonder how on earth I’m going to break free.

Days could have passed before they return.

In their absence, I did everything apart from throwing myself at the cage. My hands and arms are scored red from my efforts. My fever hasn't broken either, though my energy ebbs and flows.

When they finally do return, Rico doesn't linger. He shoves the crazy girl back into her cage and stalks off. She hums in her cage and I try my best to ignore her pestering gaze.

The bell sounds off again, the third time of the day. Girls stir in their cages, pressing themselves so far back; it puzzles me, like they're afraid of it.

"Brace yourself," Inés says next to me. "You get caught under the spray at night, you won't make it to morning."

The temperature in the room has dropped. The windows near the high ceilings are closed but the dark blue sky pouring through tells me it's night. Frost collects at the edges of the window.

The first strike of water on my skin makes me gasp. It falls like ice onto my skin and evaporates immediately, coming off me in steam. I watch another drop land, marveling at how quickly it disappears, like it was never there. My head spins, heat spreading further and faster across my skin, cancelling out the earlier chill I felt.

Even with this added layer of heat, I find it hard to sleep against the sound of teeth clattering and cages rattling. When I do find sleep, I am met with dreams of the dead girl beside me. I dream that she is in my cage and that the stitches on her eyes tear open and they are hollow inside. I dream that she takes her sharp nails and rips apart the stitches holding her skin together and from her stomach comes flowers and maggots and intestines.

I wake in a sweat though the floor around me is drier than when I fell asleep. The dead girl is still there in her cage. I didn't hear anyone disturbing the cages through the night, but I'm almost certain she has moved. Her head is askew, like it's trying to face me.

Metal slides and I know Rico has returned, maybe for another girl like the one beside me. Whimpers, shuffling, soft cries, and then his Chuck Taylor's are brushing cages, inspecting, taking in his pickings.

He pauses in front of Ines's cage. She immediately bucks, fighting through his hold, biting and scratching, but as he yanks her through the cage, her head hits the back of the bars. She stumbles forward.

"Wait," I say.

Rico holds Ines by the back of her hair and waits.

"I want to see," I say, meekly. "Can you show me the magic?" The words churn my stomach but I hold steady.

Rico approaches me.

"Please," I say, peering at him from under my lashes.

The crazy girl laughs.

Rico's teeth flash. He bends down, bringing himself at eye level with me. "You think I'm stupid enough to let you out of this cage?"

My lips twitch. I bat my lashes. "Would you like me to answer that truthfully?"

Rico's smile vanishes, a grimace in its place.

"I think your stupid enough to let me out and stupid enough to challenge me. I think your stupid enough to reveal that Constanzo knows how to extract magic from brujas and stupid enough to tell me that he wants mine," I say, coming up on my knees. "You're stupid enough to

think being on his side makes you safe.” The anger I felt for the dead girl, anger for Ago, anger for Caro, anger for Mom, even anger for me and everything I lost – it all surges at my words. Energy vibrates beneath my feet, fighting the strains of the enchanted cage. I feel it rising from the ground. It claws its way to the surface and shoots up my legs.

Caro’s face appears.

As the energy reaches my neck and climbs higher, I panic. This is too much energy. This is too much *heat*. White explodes behind my eyelids. Heat rips past my lungs and I scream, curdling and wild.

What I think is Caro suddenly morphs. Her silhouette bends and contorts until she’s nothing but bone. I see Santa Muerte.

Just as the heat becomes too much, when I’m convinced it’s going to burn me alive, it stops. Like stepping into a cold shower, my body cools off instantly. The shock jolts me. I open my eyes, suddenly unaware of where I am.

Focus. A warehouse. Rico. The cage.

My hands grip the metal bars.

I sense a different type of energy to call on, one that is molten and raging – one that I now control. I call on it like I have a thousand times before. It moves like warm honey through my body, filling every empty space inside me, and pours out in waves. My hands begin to glow a bright orange red.

The bars between my hands melt away.

Rico’s eyes widen but it’s too late. I leap out of the cage, nails digging into his chest and crushing all my weight onto him. We hit the floor with a harsh thud. Rico’s agonizing scream

pierces my ears and I realize my hands are still glowing, pressed flat against his chest. The fabric of his shirt disintegrates. The smell of burning flesh hits my face.

Rico shakes beneath me. Through gritted teeth he sneers, “I should have killed you when I had the chance. Screw what Constanzo wants! Ridding the world of brujas is what God demands of us.” His head falls back as he struggles to breathe.

That’s what God demands? I picture Ago’s rosy cheeks and soft hands as she helped me, gave me shelter, gave me hope. Is that what her God demands? The image of Ago shifts to her motionless at the altar of the church.

Still glowing, I lift my hand. As I summon more energy, more heat, the cooling sensation inside me intensifies. I cluster the energy into my hand, waiting until the energy is so great my hand vibrates.

Rico tries to twist away but I press my knee into him and hold him fast.

I plunge my hand into his chest.

I am the knife and I cut through flesh and bone until I reach the heart. I grip it tight.

I take pleasure in his startled look and parted lips. Did these girls look like that before he killed them and filled their insides with drugs?

Marveling at the sound of tearing flesh, I release the pent-up heat and set my hand on fire. I gasp at the coolness of it. With my hand ablaze, I turn Rico’s heart to ash before setting the rest of him to flames.

His screams quickly fade to nothing and I set my gaze to Constanzo’s drugs. I want him to know it was me. I killed one of his men. I ruined his operation here. Me, the young bruja he had the misfortune of pissing off. My hand hovers over the planters. The flames lick greedily at them and I set my palm down.

I twist back toward the cages. Inés huddles behind her cage, arms braced around her.

I take a step toward her.

She yelps, jumping back, eyes widening.

I gulp through the sting of her reaction and bend down, placing my palms to the concrete floor. Narrowing my eyes, I *pull* the energy up.

Free them, I command of it.

There is no resistance as the energy rushes to the surface and the locks melt away.

The girls hesitate to move at first, and as I take a step forward, they cower back.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I say, “you are free to go, but you have to hurry.” I hold a hand to Inés. “Please,” I say to her. “This is our chance.”

Slowly, Inés uncurls herself from the floor and lifts herself up, choosing to ignore my outstretched hand.

We race for the warehouse door. I shove the metal door back. Though it’s night out, the perimeter of the warehouse is lit up from the outside. A few feet away is another building, it looks more like a dilapidated shack. The windows have black tarp taped to them so I move more confidently around the side, utilizing the shadows. When I round the corner, a long stretch of green appears. There are no other buildings in sight, no street roads or highways to run for – there is only the flat green land and the stalk of corn fields in the distance.

If we can make it there, we have a better chance of reaching safety. Murmurs behind me halt my progress. I press myself as flat as I can against the side of the building, inhaling sharply and holding my breath. I peer left.

“Follow me this way,” I say to Inés and the group of girls behind her.

Suddenly, windows shatter above us, expelling heat and smoke. We cower but in the open space, there's nowhere to hide from the shower of glass and ash. The shack beside us erupts, men shuffling out with their guns and shouts. The girls scramble away, running for any place they can. Some run to the left, some to the right, some cower beside me.

"This way!" I yell, running at a full sprint.

I disregard my original plan to keep to the shadows. Even that seems to be illuminated in the chaos. I tumble as my feet hit sharp rocks among the dirt but I push on. Looking behind me, I see the few girls following me. I don't let myself think to the ones who didn't. A little girl in a pink shirt staggers beside me.

"Keep going! Just a bit further!" I encourage her.

She trips on her feet, falling face first into the dirt. It coats her mouth as she tries to get up. Men close in on her and then I see one of them take aim.

"Down!" I yell, crushing myself and anyone near me to the floor.

Gunshots ring out. Louder than any firework I've ever heard and I begin to crawl across the dirt. There's a reprieve of gunfire and I jolt up, continuing my sprint. The added adrenaline makes my legs wobbly but I gulp in a lungful of fresh night air and force myself to focus.

The firing goes off again. I can't tell if they're close to me or if they're aiming at the other girls, but the intrusive sound seems close, too close. I begin to run in quick zigzag motions, hoping the girls are smart enough to follow suit. We reach the beginning of the field but it's too much open space to run the entire way across and not get shot.

My knees buckle as I stop suddenly. The girls continue, too afraid of being shot. I nod. "Go!" I yell after them.

I twist, bringing my hands up in front of me like a barrier. The pit of my stomach flares, firing up the rest of its energy and shooting it outward.

Fire explodes from my palms, ebbing out in a cascade of red and orange and yellow. The heat comes off in waves sharpening to a point until it hits one of the men. From there, it blossoms across creating a makeshift shield of flames.

The men stop. Some have the sense to run around the flames but the more I shove the energy out, the further the shield expands. Flames reach out and grab the men who evaded its grasp, gripping them and licking greedily at their flesh.

Consume anyone who crosses, I tell the fire. It responds, rising higher, obscuring me from their view.

Through the stretching flames, a face appears. Jagged scar and slick black hair – the man who accompanied Rico in the warehouse. He stares at me through the flames but doesn't make to follow, doesn't lift a gun to me. He just stares.

The last of my fire leaves me with a sharp snap, like a rubber band stretching too far. I stagger back, unsure how long the fire will hold the line but I shake the thought and bolt. I skip along the muddied grass, find my footing, and push on.

The moonlight paints silver across the field, making me forget it's night. Corn stalks swallow and take the light with it. Darkness cocoons me as leaves brush against my skin. Tassels scrape the apples of my cheek. Shadows move amongst the stalks in front of me. I slow my pace. A pale face appears with split lips and tattered clothes. Inés. She motions me to follow her.

I lose her as she turns onto another path, but the soft murmurs carry me back. There are maybe seven or eight girls huddled together in a small patch of broken stalks.

That's it, I realize. I don't know what happened to the rest – if they made it out – but I don't have time to look behind. I need to keep moving forward.

I get horrible sleep that night. Every time I close my eyes the reality of what I've done sets in.

I killed someone.

Even someone as horrible as Rico, it's still a life I have taken.

In my dreams, everything runs red – my hands, the sky, my tears, the flowers. I'm on a field and I can see the warehouse up in flames. Red. Rico's body is at my feet. Red. Ago's body is there, too. Red.

I lift Ago's body into my arms but when I do, her body disintegrates, turns to ashes before I can think to put her down.

I wake from the dream in a cold sweat, leaves sticking to the back of my neck. I decide to give up on sleep and keep watch instead.

The girls huddle in groups of three and when I look down to the other girl huddled close to me, the one in the pink shirt from before, I notice the sheen of sweat coating her brow. Tentatively, I touch her skin. She's burning up. I think back to my time in the cage, my fever. I lift my hand to my head. I don't feel hot. In fact, I realize, setting my hand down, I'm not cold at all.

"You've ascended."

I jump but compose myself quickly, blinking and finding Caro in the dark. "My birthday isn't for another three days," I say, dismissively.

"Birthdays aren't exact ascension days, you know that," Caro says. "Santa Muerte decides that."

I shake my head. "No," I say, vehemently. "I do. And I say I haven't ascended. Not yet." I rub the dirt off my hands and shuffle up. I head through the stalks, grabbing corn as I go. I tuck

bundles of corn under my arm, grabbing piles of sticks to create a fire before realizing that fire and smoke would just alert any of Constanzo's men to our location. I curse, tossing the sticks away.

Caro hovers nearby, her presence like an ominous cloud overhead. "How else do you explain what you did back there?"

I pull a corn from its stalk too harshly. The stalk sways and smacks me in the chest. "Sheer luck," I grumble.

I can almost hear Caro's eye roll. "Keep living in denial, Lore. It's what you're good at."

I stop, my hold on the corn tightening. I won't take the bait. I won't. I squeeze the corn too tight and it slides out of my arm, landing on my foot. "It wasn't supposed to happen like this." I was hoping it'd never happen at all.

Caro scoffs lightly. "I never understood your attitude towards magic. You pray to a God that grants magic and yet you wanted a life free of it."

I yank another piece of corn free but don't bother explaining how difficult it is to love something that always takes, that even in my last hopes, I begged Santa Muerte for a power so docile I'd be unneeded. Instead, I ascended. And I have this volatile and wild power.

When I turn back, Caro is gone but her voice lingers in the air. "Magic doesn't just take. It gives, too."

I stand between the stalks shoving back darker emotions and carry on with my task. I bring two arms full of corn back to our little makeshift campsite.

As I peel back its layers, unveiling the corn, an idea strikes me. I slow my breathing, holding the corn in my palm, closing my fingers around it carefully. Warmth surges through to my fingertips. The smell of warm baked corn fills our small space.

The girls stir at the smell, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Beside me, someone gasps. Pink shirt girl watches closely, her brows knitting together as I warm the corn one by one with my hands. The sweat from her brow is gone and I start to suspect maybe it was I making her run so hot.

“So you’re a bruja,” she says, eyes glazed over with excitement.

“Did you not see what she did back there? Of course she is, estúpida,” another girl says. The tie holding her hair up has come loose, her thick black hair framing her face elegantly. Or as elegantly as she can be with the dirt and mud coating her skin.

Pink shirt girl slides closer to me. She shivers once before settling into me. I eye her warily through my lashes before holding a stalk of corn out to her.

She sinks her teeth into it, juice and loose kernels falling down her chin. She smiles through mouthfuls of corn. “Delicioso,” she says.

The other girls chatter excitedly and gather around, passing corn down the line until every hand is full with warm corn.

“I’ve never seen a fire witch before,” says Inés. She wipes her sleeve across her mouth.

Pink shirt girl perks up. “I have!” she says. “But I never saw him do something like what you did. That was so...cool,” her eyes widen.

Though her excitement unsettles me, I shift and try to smile.

She holds her hand out to me. “I’m Stephanie,” she says, pale pink rising on her cheeks.

My brow lifts. How can this girl be so happy eating corn in the early morning hours with no idea where she is or what comes next?

“Lorena,” I respond.

Stephanie touches the sleeve of my shirt. Her voice gets smaller as she asks, “Does this mean we’ll get to go home soon?”

Several other eyes implore me the way Stephanie does and I realize they must all be wondering the same thing. I fidget under their gazes, unsure how to answer.

Something loud snaps beside our camp. I stand, tapping into my magic. It rushes forward so quickly that it almost explodes out of me. I rein it in, keeping the heat at bay. The girls sink lower to the ground, tensed shoulders brushing against the stalks. A flock of crows jump from the field to our left. They take off with a loud cry.

Another snap of stalks sounds behind me. I twist, hands raised.

“Lorena?” says a voice.

I recognize the voice, but disbelief roots me to the ground. She says my name again, like wind chimes through the morning draft, and I rush forward. I move frantically, desperate to know if what I’m hearing is real. I need to see her brown skin and smell the fresh lavender on her skin, see the tilt on her lips and her furrow brows to know it’s really her.

I let out a laugh when her face comes more directly under the moonlight. My heart feels broken and completely whole at the same time. It’s a sinking feeling of disbelief and relief that nearly brings me to my knees.

“Ago,” I breathe, my arms wrapped tightly around her. Her solid form in my arms is comforting and her warmth tells me she really is here and that she’s alive. But when I remember the sound of her bones snapping, I pull back. Am I seeing Ago’s ghost the same way I see Caro’s?

She cups my face in her hands. “I’m here,” she says. “And I’m glad you are here, too.”

I shake my head. “How did you find me?”

“We saw smoke from the bottom of the hill. I guessed the farmlands would be the best place to run to,” she replies.

I pause. “We?” I scold myself for getting so carried away by Ago’s presence that I didn’t notice someone else with her.

I recognize her light eyes, almost as bright as the moon, and her curls a contrast from my own straight locks. We share the same blood but you’d never know by just a glance. I step closer to her. “What are you doing here? Does tía Rosa know you’re here?” I look behind her expecting tía Rosa’s wild eyes to scare me away from her daughter. But it’s just her – this girl I saw in tía Rosa’s home, and again in the crowd at the church.

“Mom doesn’t know I’m here,” she says, coming closer. The wind moves her curls back. “I’m Mia. It’s nice to meet you, cousin.”

Up this close and under direct moonlight, I can see where the Santiago peeks out in her. The freckles scattered along her nose and the tops of her cheeks remind me of the ones Mom had, the ones I would stare at while she covered them with powder. Caro and I had them, too, but not as pronounced as Mom’s.

Her top lip juts out more than her bottom, much like mine, and her round shaped face is identical to what I’ve spent most of my life looking at.

“What happened back there?” Ago asks, softly.

We form a circle around the piles of corn and continue to eat. I catch Ago up on what exactly happened at the warehouse, though I don’t tell her about my ascension. I’m not ready to share what that means yet.

“It reeks of roses,” Mia whispers beside me. She cups a piece of corn in her palms. “At the warehouse,” she specifies. “Like roses burning over firewood. Is that your aura?”

I consider this. Mom used to smell like roses when she did powerful magic, too. Even though she seldom did big bouts of magic in her older age, she was never without the faint smell of roses. She boiled it, soaked it in milk, and wrung it out over bowls full of crows' feathers and cinnamon.

"I don't know," I tell her, shrugging. "I've never done big magic like that."

She's quiet a moment. "Mom never lets me do any magic," she says, sullenly.

"But she knows? About you, I mean, and what you are."

Mia's face becomes unreadable, clouded and glazed. She plucks a kernel from her corn and tosses it aside. "How do you do it? Magic," she asks.

"Uh," I fumble, unsure. I've never thought of *how* I do magic. I just do it. That's always been the reason for my fear of it. It's unstable and uncontrollable. But I consider how I've used it the past few days, even in the last couple of hours. "A lot of it comes from my emotions," I realize. "Mom used to say that emotions shouldn't be anywhere near magic, that it muddles the power." I pause a moment to smile at the memory of Mom's teachings. "But for me, that's the easiest way to access it." Maybe that's what makes it so unstable. I don't tell Mia that, but it's making me examine my magic in a different way. It was never a question of how to do, but of how not to.

"My mom doesn't like to teach me about any of this," Mia goes on.

"It makes sense," I say. "She is no longer a bruja."

"I don't understand how that's possible. I thought if you were born a bruja you just always were."

I shrug. "If there's really a way to get rid of someone's magic, maybe that isn't such a bad thing."

Mia clenches the corn tighter. “What?”

Sighing, I say, “You have no idea what this life is like.”

Her hands ball into fists. “And you have no idea what it’s like to hide this or ignore it because everyone else wants you to be normal.” She huffs once. “It’s starting to ache, you know? The magic. It’s getting harder to ignore and I don’t want to anymore.”

My eyes widen as I stare at her. So different in so many ways. But Mom would have loved her. Mom would have taken her in and shown her the way, like she tried to do to me. Maybe Mom would have even loved her more than me.

Across the way, Ago helps Stephanie peel back another piece of corn. Ago bends and whispers something in her ear, making Stephanie laugh. The sound, easy and warm, eases some of us. Even Alba seems to have moved closer to them. I watch Ago move, the sound of her hitting the altar and bones snapping souring the moment.

“How is she still here?” I ask. “I heard her bones snap.”

Mia lowers her head and pulls something from her bag. Her hands run along the books smooth surface. “I had a feeling something was wrong,” she says. “There were bodies in the church hall. I’ve never seen a dead body before. They’re not as pale as you’d think, at least not at first. But they’re so still. It’s scary.”

Mia hands me the book. “I got it at a swap meet on my way home from bible study one night. I read it every night before bed,” she says, almost reverently.

Beginners Guide to Alchemy, I raise a brow to it. Its deckled edges rub harshly on my fingers.

“I know,” she says, almost defensive. “But it’s as close to a spell book as I could get. It’s actually quite fascinating. There’s so much in here about herbs and how they heal but also

chemicals and how they can be infused in nature to be something, well, magical.” She smiles full of pride before taking the book back and flipping it open to a specific page. “This is what I used on Ago.”

It’s a mending spell, though calling it a spell seems like a stretch. There’s nothing specific about what it mends. All the specificity is in the ingredients and how to make it. It’s similar to magic in that way. The specifics are in what you put, not what you make.

“Thank you,” I say. “I thought she was dead.”

“Nope, but almost,” Mia says, tucking the book back into her bag.

The dusk glow of early morning slowly fades into yellow as the sun rises. We watch it climb the sky.

“You know I’m not going back, right?” I say after some time. It’s too dangerous to go back to Aguila.

Mia shuffles. “I know,” she says. “But if I’m going to learn anything about magic, I figure I’m better off with you then stuck at home taking care of Vero.”

“That’s the little girl I saw that night, yes?”

Mia nods. “Your little cousin.”

My family. Maybe. My heart warms at the possibility.

Then I reach out and ruffle her curls. “What do you mean? You’re my little cousin, too.”

She makes a face and swats my hand away. “No touching the curls. I swear you could just look at them wrong and suddenly there’s twenty knots in there.”

I chuckle. “My sister used to make fake curls in her hair. She’d take empty toilet paper rolls and use bobby pins to clip them to her hair. The worst curls I’d ever seen, but Caro loved them.”

Mia and I break out in laughter.

The girls get their fill of warm corn and once our bellies are full, I sit down with both Ago and Mia and tell them both I plan to make it to the next city – however long that may take.

“You’ve walked your way into the Aguila farmlands so if my mapping skills are as great as I think, and they should be because Mr. Gregory – my geography teacher – he says I’m really good at memorizing maps and mapping the land—”

Ago puts a hand on Mia’s shoulder. “Focus,” she says.

Mia shakes her head. “Right. So if you keep on the path east,” she says, “then you’ll make it to Bancaria soon. It’s about five miles outside of Matamoros.”

Maybe we can find a peaceful place in Bancaria. Coven or no coven, maybe we could make something of our own. We could find jobs there, maybe I could work out in one of these farmlands pulling corn and grapes and everything else to grow here. For now, I tell myself I will lead these girls safely to Bancaria. The rest I’ll leave up to them.

We walk in clusters with me at the forefront.

The farmlands start to blur together. I see fields for miles, broken wooden gates, and straggling farm animals as we walk. We pass a lone cow as we travel up a small hill and I notice the tag on its ear. There’s a good chance we’re passing on someone’s farm but we make haste, moving quickly and efficiently.

We stop once for food which requires we steal some of the less-than-nice crops, Ago’s insistent pleads that we leave the good crops behind. The chilies we steal taste stale and Alba refuses to eat another bite after she thinks she just ingested a moldy pepper.

At high noon, the temperature reaches its peak. My mouth goes dry and the girls grumble about being thirsty.

Mom talked about different spells to stave off hunger and thirst. I didn't think I'd ever need to know it, so I didn't bother listening during those lessons. I don't think Caro did either. And when I remember Caro, my chest starts to ache.

I haven't seen her spirit since the night of our escape. But when I remember the way we left things, I think it best not to try and summon her.

By early evening, the fields we spent hours traveling through, the tall stalks I've grown tired of shoving aside, thin out and give way to freshly grazed lands. In the distance I spot a paved road.

I sigh and something that sounds like a surprised laugh escapes me.

"Did we make it?" Stephanie asks. She bounces on the balls of her feet, holding onto Ago's hand.

I smile. I'm not sure if we've made it anywhere yet but a road is always a good sign. Wooden fences line the roads to keep animals in and we hop over it, following the road.

The town appears in blocks. The first block is rows of outdoor shops close to the two-lane highway we just came in from. Along that road are fruit stands with their wooden signs painted white, red letters across with the price, and line drawings of strawberries and grapes. Rosaries also hang from the tops of the stands.

The girls salivate over the fresh fruits, but without any money, they pull their heads low and continue walking. Mila, on the other hand, stops at a fruit stand and pulls a small pouch from her bag. The coins jingle away in the pouch.

She hands over three pesos for a pound of red grapes. The girls huddle around her as she opens the bag for us to consume. The juices make me sigh when they hit the back of my throat.

I've missed the taste of fruit, and as I watch Ago shove a couple into her mouth, I know she must be missing those home cooked meals back at the church right about now.

The second block of town appears a couple miles after the fruit stands. Most of the buildings we pass are saloons and bars and the girls bunch closer together. The bars look run down, chipped paint and broken signs, but the people overflow out into the streets despite this. They cheer loudly and whistle as we pass. My nerves go on edge but Ago takes my hand in hers and urges me to walk faster. The girls follow suit. Just as we pass the last bar on this strip of town, we see a sign that makes the girls relax. 'Welcome to Bancaria' the sign says.

It's like the city shifts right before our eyes. The buildings look like newer builds with reinforced brick painted a pearly white colour, sunlight blocking windows I've only ever seen in magazines, and red wood doors. Despite the white buildings, the city still explodes with colour – because Mexico is rarely ever without its colour. Red and green and white banners hang from building to building, fairy lights stretch across windowsills. In front of almost every door is a large, pale pink pot filled with a cactus.

Although I should be happy that we've reached the next town and that the farmlands are behind us, I can't help but feel my anxiety spike. Now what do we do?

With a final destination unclear, we travel further into the final block of the town. At the end of the road is a church. It looks more like a cottage than its neighbouring buildings and the large wooden cross planted in its front lawn is a dead giveaway of its religious implications.

The padre stands outside of his church, among his congregation, some of the nuns there are holding rosaries and passing them out to those walking by.

I can't bring myself to approach the church and I'm stunned by the small part of me that seems disappointed by this. But instead of seeing this new church and its padre, all I see is padre Rogelio and I feel nauseous.

As if reading my thoughts, the padre suddenly looks directly at me. I wipe a hand over my brow, fearing I have some sort of sign or tattoo stamped on my forehead that reads, "I'm a bruja! Come kill me!" But I hold my ground.

"Don't let the padre intimidate you," says a voice behind me.

It's a deeper voice, though it speaks with a warmth I haven't heard since last speaking to my mom. Behind me is a woman with dark black hair wrapped up into a knot. She has a light blue shawl draped across her shoulders and the black dress she wears is simple and long. Her lips are painted a plum, berry shade and black liner trails across her lower lash line.

I shrug. "He doesn't intimidate me," I say, even though fear and intimidation seem to run a lot closer these days.

"He's a pompous dick," the lady says.

The corners of my lips tip up and I let out a chuckle. "You would speak like that about el Padre? Isn't he the closest to God's word you'll ever get?" I scold myself for being too abrasive when talking about the padre or the church. I don't need to make myself stand out, not in this way.

The lady folds her hands underneath her shawl. "My God doesn't give a damn about padres like him." She smiles at me. "I'm Silvia, and we've been waiting for you."

My shoulders tense but I force myself not to react. I examine the woman's face one more time. Do I know her? Something about her aura reaches out to me. I move my finger slightly,

calling on my magic. It reaches across the space between this woman and me. When it touches her it sparks, like static friction, and retreats back into me.

Silvia smiles, knowingly. “You do not have to fear me. I can understand your mistrust but you should be able to sense the truth in me.”

I tilt my head. “Sense the truth?”

“Do you not know how?”

I shake my head. I feel stupid for not knowing, like I’m being judged but it was my choice to avoid learning more. I hadn’t realized how much knowledge I was missing until Mom was gone.

“All that power,” Silvia says. She pats down the side of her perfect hair. “It seems there is much work to do.” She readjusts the shawl around her and smiles brightly when I hear steps come up behind me.

“Hello,” Mia greets. “Everything okay here?”

“Hmm,” Silvia muses, her smile growing. She looks to me again. “And untapped potential.” She grabs the ends of her dress, fluffs the dirt out, and squares her shoulders. “You must come with me. My coven can provide you shelter and food.”

“Coven?” Mia perks up.

I hold a hand up. “Wait a second, you can’t expect us to just go with you because you mention a coven. We don’t know you.”

“It’s smart to be wary,” Silvia amends. “But seeing as you have nowhere else to go, no coven to back you up, and no knowledge of a simple magic trick, it is not smart to turn away an ally.”

Mia nudges my side. Ago peers behind her, intensely interested in the conversation.

“You are welcome to stay and try your luck here,” Silvia adds.

I wonder if she knows what happened in Aguila with Julia. Maybe word will have spread already about how a bruja caused a little girl’s death in the small town of Aguila. Either way, I don’t want to be inside a church again. I’d rather not put myself under the thumb of yet another priest.

“Fine,” I relent.

“Your friends are welcome to join as well,” Silvia adds. “We have plenty of room.”

Silvia leads us around the church and down a long stretch of road, somewhat tucked in amongst the forestry growing behind the main hub of the town. I begin to wonder if I made a mistake trusting her. Ago’s soft hand slides into mine and with a reassuring squeeze, I follow firmly behind Silvia.

We reach an old Victorian mansion. The windows are sunken into the walls; potted plants with succulents line the edges. The window at the top of the mansion is open and I watch smoke funnel through it. Part of me expects to smell rose and sage, or even rabbits feet. Mom used to boil rabbits feet as part of her good luck elixirs but the smell was so rancid it would make the house smell like soggy old socks for weeks. But instead I catch a whiff of spices and what smells like beef or maybe carne asada.

I quicken my pace to catch up with Silvia, not noticing that she is already at the front door. Its thick wood frame looks like it could flatten me in one swoop. Silvia pushes against it, which I find odd. She doesn’t use a key to unlock it and I notice that the door doesn’t have a lock on it to begin with. How unsafe, I think to myself. But the door shimmers as it moves against Silvia’s hand. A glamor, I realize. I squint my eyes at the home.

The entire thing is a glamour. It shimmers with magic.

“Protection wards?” I ask.

“Glad you know that much,” Silvia says.

I shake my head at her disdain of my knowledge.

We step inside, allowing the spices and herbs to swallow us whole. It’s so familiar and so foreign at the same time, reminding me of what my home used to smell like – my family.

The foyer arches over us. There are piles of shoes beside the door and I pause. “Should we take our shoes off?”

“Unless you’re volunteering to clean the floors this week,” Silvia says, walking ahead of us.

My cheeks warm as I slide my muddy shoes off and notice only two other pairs of shoes beside my own. I had forgotten that the girls from the warehouse are without the basic necessities. I tuck my head and follow Silvia.

The further we step into the house the more colourful it becomes. There are portraits of Santa Muerte in the dining room, the living room, and I start to wonder if I’d find one in the bathroom. They each have different colour schemes but Santa Muerte herself remains the same. Her bones peek out from under her cloak that changes colour depending on the portrait, and she points one bony finger in the air.

I then notice the antique furniture. Mom liked collecting antique woodwork but not to this magnitude. The dining table looks to be standing on wobbly legs and I’d be nervous to sit in those similar chairs.

The smell of food grows stronger as we pass the dining room, step into the hall, and to my left I see the kitchen. The old pottery is what catches my attention first. The brown pots molded from clay have light blue flower patterns along the edges. My mom had the same style in

her kitchen. She used to serve us tostadas with beans and shredded beef on them and at times she stored bird beaks on them.

Besides the plates and serving platters, I notice how big this kitchen is. It fits a large dining table that I imagine could seat fifteen to twenty people. Instead of individual chairs, there is a long bench to possibly squeeze two or three more people in.

“Take a seat, ladies,” Silvia says. At the sight of the dining table, and the smell of food cooking, the girls quickly seat themselves. I remain beside Silvia.

Mia nudges my arm. “Are you coming?”

I smile, saying, “You go ahead. I need to talk to Silvia for a bit.” When Mia doesn’t move, and I notice Ago doesn’t either, I grab their hands. I give them a reassuring smile. “I’ll come eat with you both in a moment.”

Seemingly satisfied, I watch them join the other girls. Silvia and I step closer to the stove and another woman enters the room.

“Bienvenido,” she says. Her Spanish sounds odd to me. It lacks an accent.

“Hello,” I say curiously. Her white skin sticks out against the brown serving plates and her light brown curls threaten to spill out of the bun she has them in. She drops down the lump of dough she brought in.

“Lorena, this is Angelica,” says Silvia.

“Nice to meet you.” I hold my hand out.

Angelica wipes her hands on her skirt. Flour sticks to the brown material and she tries to pat it off. With a shake of her head she meets my eyes. “Nice to meet you,” she says, shaking my hand.

“Angelica attends college in Texas,” Silvia adds.

“You travel all the way here?” I ask.

Angelica nods. “A few times a week when I don’t have school.”

“But you’re not a bruja?” I say, seeking to confirm my suspicions.

Silvia shifts beside me and Angelica wrings her hands. I suddenly feel like I’ve said something wrong. “No, I’m not,” Angelica replies, her tone light.

“Angelica is an avid practitioner, but she does not exhibit the types of magic you or I have,” Silvia explains. It reminds me of my cousin Mia with her alchemical book.

“It’s amazing the things you can do,” Angelica adds, eyes gleaming.

I want to tell her it’s amazing the things she can’t do but I hold my tongue.

Angelica clears her throat and lifts the lid to a huge pot on the stove. Steam pours out. The air fills with sweetness and savory all at once. Spices mingling together with sweet cocoa. “I made menudo,” Angelica announces. The girls murmur with excitement. “Come and get some!”

The girls line up and I end up having a hoard of them nearly clawing at my back, desperate for the sweet chili and meat.

Silvia opens another pot and the orange rice makes my mouth water. We eat our meal in relative silence. The girls scarf down their food quickly, chunks of brown chili splattering the table.

Silvia tells us that there are rooms for us and although I will admit the house is fairly big I question just how many rooms could be in here. It must be magic, it’s the only explanation I can think of.

The rooms are big enough to fit three beds, some with four. I run my finger along the white cotton sheets and fuzzy blankets. I almost want to cry thinking of the soft comfort they bring, the memory of harsh, cold cement and wet grass too fresh in my mind.

That night, I'm finally able to shower. I had forgotten what simple pleasure there is in having a hot shower. I scrub the dirt and mud away, and think of Ago and Mia, wondering if they're comfortable or if they regret coming here with me.

I think of Silvia and how she said they were expecting me, never telling me who *they* is, though I assume she means her coven. I haven't seen anymore around.

Then I spend some time thinking of Angelica.

A pang of jealousy hits me. She's a fool, and I almost feel bad for thinking it, but she is. She lives on the other side, she goes to a university, she doesn't have to live like *this*. The fear of losing something precious because of the darkness this life carries with it. Death should not be as regular a thing as it is here, but it is and I'm no longer a stranger to it.

I consider conjuring Caro to me, part of me feeling her absence like a fresh wound. But I don't.

"Lorena?"

I wipe at my eyes. "Yes?" It's Ago's voice I hear and then the soft click of the door. "Are you okay?" I ask.

Through the yellow and green floral pattern of the shower curtain I see Ago's silhouette. I blush, worried about her seeing my own outline through the curtain. I've always hated the jut of my hips and I'm sure the shower curtain isn't hiding that at all. I force myself to relax.

The water almost overpowers her voice, but I hear her, soft, just above a whisper. "I'm scared," she says.

I swallow and almost move the shower curtain, overcome with the urge to see her face and try to find her kind smile. "Me too," I say instead.

The dark shadow of her hand appears on the shower curtain. I grip it before I second-guess myself. The curtain hangs awkwardly as we grip hands, but we don't seem to care. "I can't have anything happen to you," I tell her.

Saying the words brands them into my mind. I cannot have anything bad happen to Ago. She welcomed me with open arms and I answered in kind. By doing so, I put her life in danger. I still hear her bones snapping when I close my eyes and allow myself to wonder how she isn't dead. But after everything, she feels the closest thing to family I've had in days.

We stay like that for some time, until the water gets lukewarm and I pull away. I quickly wash my hair and come out smelling like vanilla and peppermint, Ago already long gone.

I dress in clothes Silvia scrounged up for me. The sweatpants are a size too big and I double knot the drawstring in the hopes it'll stay in place. Same with the borrowed grey shirt, it falls just above my knees so I twist a simple knot into the front.

On the way back to the room I'm sharing with my cousin and Ago, I distract myself with the photos on the wall, not yet ready to be face their questions. Some of the photos are aged, the white film turning a lighter shade of brown. They're mostly group photos I notice, women in long gowns and ornate shawls. I see a photo of three women, all in long black dresses. Big flowers and jewels are pinned to their hair. On their faces they have painted intricate details of traditional Mexican Calaveras.

Except the last photo at the end of the hall, it's a photo of a younger looking Silvia and a little boy. Silvia isn't looking at the camera. She squishes the little boy's cheeks and smiles lovingly at him, much in the same way Mom used to look at Caro or me. The boy looks like he's holding back an eye roll and his eyes try to find the camera from his squished skin.

"Mom was obsessed with my chubby cheeks."

I twist, the long pant legs twirling around my leg. Had it not been for the long scar on his face, I would not have known it was the same guy from the warehouse.

My magic swirls to life before I even command it. Heat waves slither past my fingers, shaking the picture frames on the wall. The guy's easy demeanor shifts. He throws a hand up and a gust of wind slices through the air. I flinch, the air stealing my breath and heat for a moment. That's all it takes.

He moves so fast I can't track his movements but suddenly he's gripping my wrists and twisting. I yelp, my body moving without me meaning to and I feel his chest at my back. I can't move my arms.

"Stop!" Silvia comes running down the hall in her nightgown. "Everyone calm down."

My fingers go numb first before a calming sensation follows. I shake my head at the fuzzy feeling creeping at the edges of my head. Silvia's outstretched hand curls and I feel my body relax.

The boy releases me and moves to stand beside Silvia.

"You don't understand," I say almost sluggishly. "He's works for Constanzo."

A few heads poke out from their rooms, most likely startled from all the commotion the boy and I made.

Silvia steps closer and shakes her head. "You don't know the entire situation, please, just give us a chance to explain things." Silvia pleads with me and my magic argues against her; it wants to slither out and burn this boy from the inside out for what he has done, for what he's involved in. But I take a breath and close my hand into a fist to rein it back in.

"Then explain," I say behind gritted teeth.

Silvia lets out a breath and readjusts the strings of her robe across her gown. She places a hand on the boy's arm. He breathes heavily, his gaze unreadable to me. "This is my son," Silvia says. "He does work for Constanzo, but he is also with us. He is a spy for us."

I give her an incredulous look. "That's fucking stupid."

"Lorena," Ago chastises. I hadn't seen her come out of our room but she's beside me quickly.

Clearing my throat, I say, "I'm sorry but you really think you can act a spy in a gang run by someone like Constanzo and he won't know about it?"

"He doesn't suspect," says the boy behind Silvia. His brown skin almost looks flawless beneath white cotton. Almost.

"What do you even need a spy for?" I ask.

"We've been monitoring the Constanzo situation for some time now," says the boy.

"Constanzo 'situation?'" I say, brow furrowing. An unbridled and hot anger sprouts inside me. "It's not a situation. People are dead because of him."

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make light of this," he says. And for a moment his eyes cloud over, almost looking regretful.

Silvia steps forward and clears her throat. "We've heard talks of Constanzo taking brujas' powers."

I lift my head immediately and meet her intense gaze.

"There have been several instances along the border," she says. She carefully adds, "And some in the neighbouring villas."

Like in Matamoros, I almost say.

"It seems I have your attention now," Silvia says. "Let's discuss this in my office."

We pack into Silvia's office and my nostrils are instantly flooded with the sharp incense burning in the room. With the amount she's burning, she could keep an army of evil spirits away.

I cough once.

Silvia cracks a window open. "This is something my coven and I have been working on for quite some time now," she says.

I cross my arms over my chest and glare at the boy next to me. The jagged scar across his face, by nature, is ugly but I can't help notice it doesn't make him any less handsome. I hate that I notice it.

"It started before either of you were born. Constanzo approached our covens wanting to understand the craft. He was quite the charmer, too. He could get an entire room to listen to him with a smile and his enigmatic words. You couldn't help it." Silvia pauses to smile. "And he loved to travel. So he went from villa to villa with zeal, claiming he was learning and researching ways for us to integrate magic into everyday life."

"But he was never of magic," her son interjects. His scar tilts up in what I assume is a grimace.

"Yes," Silvia admits solemnly. "Constanzo was not born of magic. He was a vehement follower of those that could do magic. He would attend our coven meetings, go one by one and bow to each of us, give us blessings before the end of the night." Silvia twists the bracelet at her wrist. "He was a gentle boy, would hold our hands and kiss our wrists, would wrap shawls around our shoulders to keep the cold away."

The way Silvia speaks of him creates an uneasy ache in my chest. She speaks with such a fondness and remembrance, but there's a hint of longing in there, too.

“It started with slight changes,” Silvia notes. “He would suggest different ways to respect and worship Santa Muerte. Then he entertained ideas of letting regular people experience wielding magic. Then he said he found a way to do it.” Silvia gets up and shuts the window. She leans against it. “He started bringing dead animals to our worships. He said Santa Muerte required sacrifices to be fully appeased. He said Santa Muerte had come to him in a dream and said She was planning to cleanse the earth and we needed to prove ourselves worthy.”

“And you told him to fuck off, right?” I say.

“Some of us did,” Silvia replies. She bows her head for a moment. “You have to understand. We had no reason to suspect he was anything but kind or good. He held a belief and understanding that no other human had ever shown for the craft.”

On some level I could understand it. A person of no magic being accepting of those with magic, it was what most of us wanted from this life. To be known with an acceptance, or at least an understanding.

“We followed his instructions. Two deep cuts on either side of the animals’ necks. Though he preferred the blood to drip, I knew enough from my papá’s farming days that the most humane way was to bleed a creature quickly.”

I don’t mention that this situation isn’t humane to begin with and let her continue.

“They still moved even when the heads were cut off,” Silvia says, brows crinkling. “Bad things started happening after that. I’d find spoiled food covered in maggots in the fridge even though I just cooked it the night before. Elixirs weren’t working anymore. I turned an old woman’s desire for a sex drive into a desire for actual flesh. She ate through to her husband’s heart.”

“You displeased Her,” I say.

“Constanzo said Santa Muerte wasn’t satisfied. And so we continued the sacrifices for months,” says Silvia.

“We had no reason to distrust him,” she says, suddenly on the defensive.

“And no reason to trust him,” I quip.

Silvia laughs humorlessly. “You still don’t understand. And that’s fine,” she says, getting up from behind her desk. “I don’t expect you to, but you should know the facts, because the truth is we need your help. We all need to be united in this.”

“You said I’m untrained, why would you need my help?” I ask.

“Vicente will help you with that,” she answers.

“What’s your role in all this?” I ask him.

Vicente shifts in his seat. “I’m gathering information,” he says.

“You said he’s taking bruja powers, do you know how he’s doing it?”

Silvia nods sadly. “He’s killing them and draining their blood. Vicente says Constanzo is performing some type of black magic but that he hasn’t actually seen it done.”

Vicente shifts beside me. “I just gather the test subjects,” he says quietly, head bowed.

I soften my tone. “Are you sure it’s black magic?”

He nods. “It reeks of sulfur – a sign of demonic activity. Santa Muerte’s magic doesn’t come from demonic essence.”

“Wait,” I say, stopping him short. “Demons? You’re saying demons are real?”

“If magic is real, why wouldn’t demons be real, too?”

I shake my head. “Mom never said anything to me about demons.”

“I imagine there is a lot your mom never told you,” Vicente says, though it doesn’t come off as bitter or rude; he sounds mournful.

“Santa Muerte is real, and we believe that to be true, why would demons not be real, too? Or God? Or Angels, for that matter?” Silvia says.

I try to think of an answer. They can’t be real for the same reason Mom never took us to a church to praise another God. But all I can think to say is, “Because Santa Muerte just *is*.” It doesn’t answer her other questions and I’m not sure if believing in Santa Muerte should make the other absurdities real, but I latch onto my belief. I know Santa Muerte is real. I feel Her. I know Her.

“For argument sake,” I start, “let’s say demons are real and that Constanzo is dealing with some nasty demonic crap, that doesn’t explain exactly *how* he’s taking bruja magic.”

“Our magic is tied to our blood, to our souls. When we die, our magic clings to us still and when we are buried, it seeps out into the soil. Constanzo seems to have found a way to extract our magic by taking our blood. We think he’s consuming the blood,” Silvia grimaces.

“Great, now you’ll tell me vampires are real, too.”

Vicente and Silvia exchange a weary glance.

“Are you kidding me? Stop.” I get up, pacing the length of the room. “So what do you need me for?” I reiterate.

“Are you familiar with the blood moon prophecy?” Vicente asks.

My brows furrow. “You mean the fairytale? My mom used to tell them to me and my sister when we were little.”

The story goes that earth used to have three moons, each representing an aspect of life – a moon of earth, a moon of the sky, and a moon of the stars. The moons used to live harmoniously together in the universe.

Each moon had its own respective power. The earth moon controlled how quickly or slowly the earth rotated. The sky moon controlled what could be seen and unseen in the sky. The star moon, the weakest of the moons, had control over star patterns. But the presence of the sun was too powerful, and its pattern could not be controlled.

The star moon resented the sun for not conforming to its power.

A feud began between the star moon and the sun. Stars exploded and debris fell to earth. Heat waves blew across the universe.

The sun tried relentlessly to make peace with the star moon, but the star moon was much more cunning and manipulative than the sun gave it credit for. The star moon convinced the sky moon to side with them, striking a deal that sky moon would force the sun down every day if the star moon kept falling debris off of earth. While the earth moon sided with the sun, feeling everyone could live peacefully as they had before under the sun's rays.

The feud tore the fabric of the universe in half and in its place grew a darkness neither of them knew how to close. From that darkness came animalitos, dark creatures with large fangs that fell onto earth and ravaged everything in its path. This part of the tale used to scare me as a child and I begged Mom to hurry past this part of the story.

Earth plummeted into death and darkness, not strong enough to rid its surface of these creatures. They were bountiful and more and more continued to creep out of the universe's void.

The war between the moons and the sun raged on for centuries, and it was only when Santa Muerte came to be that the war shifted. She was once a human girl living on earth who had been consumed by the animalitos. This was common as the war persisted and human life faltered. But from the ashes, this girl rose. She emerged from darkness as nothing but bone.

The story says she commanded the darkness, the animalitos. After displaying such power, she was also able to command the moons. She sent the sky moon to the opposite end of the universe. Earth's moon was allowed to stay in harmony with the sun. As for the star moon, Santa Muerte exploded it, scattering it across the universe. It pulses and burns with a desire to be whole again.

At the end of the story, Mom used to say there was a prophecy that the three moons would come together after four hundred years have passed – that they'd appear like blood moons in the sky and take revenge on each other, and on Santa Muerte, with Earth as its battlefield.

But it was only ever just that – a bedtime story.

"It's more than just a story," Vicente adds, head tilting. "And it's not about the world ending." He reaches across the desk and lays out several notes. Numbers written across it slowly start to make sense to me.

"I've been tracking the patterns of the stars. At first glance they seem erratic, but they're circling something."

I'm momentarily stunned by the fact he tracks star patterns like I used to do.

"Then the more I thought about it," he continues, "the blood moons were so powerful in their feud against one another that they opened a darkness even they didn't know how to stop. What if the stars are foretelling something cataclysmic that's coming?"

An unsettled feeling takes root in the pit of my stomach and blossoms.

"We need you in this fight, Lorena," says Silvia. "You have the potential to harness something powerful and you would add great value to our fight."

I stand wearily. "I'm sure there are other brujas out there willing to fight but," I pause, shaking my head, "there is so much I failed to learn," I admit. That admission tightens my

breath. It's on me and no one else that I don't know how to help. I need to stop looking for someone to blame.

I wish I could see Caro again. I wish I could apologize to Mom.

Silvia wrings her hands. "That doesn't negate the power you have. And," she hesitates, shooting a weary glance to Vicente. "Lorena, we know what happened that night at your house. We know what you did." She levels her gaze on me.

"What?" I stop. I glance between Silvia and her son. "What did I do?"

Vicente tone lowers. "You started the fire that night at your home."

I've heard a lot of ridiculous and asinine things tonight. But this one takes the cake. Yet my mind races to try and fit those pieces together. How could I? I shake my head more fervently. "No, it was Constanzo," I say. Rico confirmed it at the warehouse. My mind scrambles to recall his exact words.

"It wasn't Constanzo's aura that we smelled that night," Vicente says.

I try to remember if I smelled an aura, but all that comes up is ash and the way it filled my nostrils. "No," is my only response. I grip the fabric of my shirt. "I couldn't have. I was asleep and I couldn't stop it and," I gasp into my next words, "Caro and mom couldn't stop it."

Silvia places a hand over my balled-up fists. "I know this is difficult to hear," she starts.

"Not difficult, it's impossible," I snap.

"But the mark of a powerful magic was there, something different from Constanzo's aura and, trust me, I've smelled his aura before," Silvia concludes.

I shake my head. I stare at my hands and feel the magic stir within. It pools at the pit of my stomach and I wonder if there's more in there, festering and maybe growing by the day. It sends a shiver down my spine.

“Constanzo kept saying your mom promised him a powerful magic,” Vicente starts. A timid look crosses over his features, softening the hard edges of his face. “We think she meant to give him yours.”

“No, my mom would never give my powers to that monster.”

“And yet she welcomed him into your home,” says Silvia.

“You don’t know my mom and you don’t know her reasons,” I snap back. I think back to the letters, to Mom’s guilt, to her need to protect us.

“You’re right, we don’t know her reasons,” Vicente says. And for a moment we just stare.

The softness in his eyes makes me stop pacing and I sit back down. “My aunt said Mom was obsessed with power. Is it possible she wanted it for herself?” I feel tears tittering on the edge of my vision.

I struggle to hold on to the mother I knew, the one who knitted me a Disney Princess blanket when she couldn’t afford to buy me one, the one who sat on my bedside when I was sick with stomach flu, the one who made eggs and beans and fresh bolillo bread on weekends because they were my favourite.

I vaguely hear Silvia approach me. Her cool hand runs down the length of my arm. “We can’t be sure. But as a mother myself, I like to think your mother was doing what she thought was best.”

I look at Vicente. “You expect me to believe my mom was going to hand me off to Constanzo so he could kill me, take my magic, and that it was because she thought it was for the best?”

“Actually,” Silvia says. “We think your mom found a way to extract bruja magic without killing anyone.”

I sink back into my chair, my legs suddenly heavy. I grip the sides of my head. It’s too much. And if Mom really did find a way to strip magic away, why wouldn’t she tell me?

“Do you know how?” I bite my lip. I feel Vicente’s piercing gaze.

“No,” he says. “But we think Constanzo knows.”

“We’re not sure,” Silvia interjects, quickly. “But if your mom told anyone, it would be him.”

I swallow down any hope. “But how can you be sure she found a way? To take magic away.”

“I’ve seen her failed attempts,” is all Vicente says.

“Failed attempts?”

“Your mom gave Constanzo a spell to try and it failed. People died because of it,” Vicente says.

“My mom couldn’t have known people would die because of it,” I retort. “She wouldn’t have given it to him if she knew.”

“Not even if he threatened her? Or you? If you or your sister were to be killed if she didn’t, do you still believe your mom wouldn’t have helped him?”

In his rant, I hadn’t noticed he moved closer to me. I blink and inch back.

“Did you see any successes?” I ask.

“There was one,” he says after a moment. “But I wasn’t there when it happened,” Vicente says.

One success doesn't mean she figured it out. And yet she was going to try it on me next. I was the second attempt. And something went horribly wrong.

"So what? I started the fire and don't remember it? Is my mind blocking it out? Repressive memory, or something?" I start recounting things we briefly discussed in school, on the psychology of the brain and how it defends itself against painful events. The brain switches into survival mode and suddenly it's like it never happened.

Vicente shrugs. "We're not sure."

I sigh, frustrated.

"Look, maybe your magic felt your mom trying to separate you two and it lashed out," he says.

"If my magic is becoming sentient then I have more problems than just Constanzo to consider," I bite back.

"Okay," Silvia says walking the length of the room. She paces a few times before stopping before the window. "There is still much we are not certain of, but what we do know is Constanzo is searching for power and he is willing to kill brujas to get it. He must be stopped and we need your help to do it, Lorena."

I hang my head low and wish my mom was here.

You're the reason she's gone, a voice snaps in my head. I press my nails into my skin. They can't be right about this. It's a mistake, a horrible mistake. Magic doesn't work unknowingly like that, I would have to be aware it's happening. I scramble to remember that night to see if I had woken up before the fire started, if there was any way I could have caused it.

Even so, if they're right, then it's all my fault.

My chest tightens. I want nothing more than to get out of this room and be alone, but they're waiting for my answer. I almost scream 'no.'

I rub a sore spot on my chest. Mom would know how to fix this, and maybe that's what she was working on by finding ways to extract magic without killing brujas. Maybe she was doing it for me.

If Mom did find a way and she succeeded, albeit a single success, then Vicente and Silvia are right about one thing: Constanzo may be the only person alive who knows how Mom did it.

A loud bang sounds behind us. We turn toward the open window and sitting on the wooden perch is a raven – messengers of our lady of Death.

An alarmed Angelica opens the office door. "Everything okay?" she says, breathless.

"Yes, Angelica," says Silvia. Silvia grabs a box from her desk and opens it. The bird's feather's perk up before relaxing again. It flies into the room and lands on the desk. Silvia hands a broken piece of something, bread maybe, and gives it to the bird. It swallows it down, caws, and takes off again. She eyes Angelica out of the corner of her eye. "Remember what I said about entering my office, Angelica."

"Right. I'm sorry." Angelica fumbles out, her hand sliding along the doorknob. We wait for it to settle and quiet.

"Santa Muerte must be telling us we are on the right track," Silvia smiles, smoothing the crow's wings back.

I think back to Constanzo and the knowledge he may have. "Maybe we are," I say.

I haven't left my room in days. Or at least it feels like days. It could be weeks. I agreed to work with Silvia and her coven on the condition that they help the girls from the warehouse return to their homes. After that, I retreated to the bedroom allocated for me, Ago, and Mia, curled into myself and listened to their soft snores throughout the night. Sleep didn't come easy for me.

Ago brought me lunches and dinners in bed. Mia tried to read me pages from her alchemical book. But I couldn't bring myself to move, much less care. What use am I to Silvia and her coven when I can't even control my powers, when I can set fire to my entire family and not even know it?

The tears never came, though I expected them, and maybe that's why they never came. Expecting something only leads to disappointment.

"Lorena, you need to eat something," Ago says. She holds a tray of carne asada and beans for me.

I shake my head. "Not hungry."

She sighs, setting the tray down. She grabs the small bowl of fruit and picks a slice of mango for me. "Come on. Just a few bites."

I relent for her, nibbling at the piece of fruit. The skin is peeled off. Mom used to leave them on, saying eating the skin was good for us. I glare at the bare mango. "How could I have done this?" I say, lowly.

Ago's movements are silent as she moves the tray aside to get closer. "You had no control over it. It wasn't your fault."

"How do you know?" My voice breaks. "You weren't there. What if I meant to do that? Meant to kill my family."

Ago shifts, gripping my shoulders and shaking me lightly. “You love your family, Lorena. The way you talk about your mom is full of love and fondness. You talk about your sister like she’s still here and that means something,” she says.

I look at the space around us. Maybe Caro is still here. Does she hate me as much as I hate myself?

“That evening in the church, when you said you could heal that sick girl, I saw that look of determination in your eyes. You made that choice to help her because you saw a need your magic could fill. You saw a way to help,” Ago says, hand cradling my cheek.

Tears spill past my lips before I can stop them.

“That isn’t the mindset of someone who wanted to kill their family.”

The conviction in her voice makes me want to believe her. “What do I do now?”

I hate how small my voice sounds, how little it makes me, and I search Ago’s gaze for some kind of answer.

“All you can do is keep moving forward. Maybe learning how to control your magic is where you start.”

I dreaded the using my magic again but the fear that kept me up at night, the fear that kept me locked inside this room, was enough to convince me that something had to be done. I went in search of Vicente the following day. He agreed to help me train, though I suspect it was the plan all along, they were just giving me time to come to that conclusion myself.

As Silvia put it so nicely other night, and when we first met, there is a lot I still need to learn when it comes to our craft. My years of putting it off, ignoring the teachings, are done. If I want to come within even a foot of Constanzo, then I need to train. I don’t count the encounter I

had with him in the Dreamscape as a positive encounter, and the fact that I couldn't keep Ago or the church people safe from Constanzo's men only reinforces the fact that I need to be stronger.

Mia demanded to come and watch and I quickly realized being her older cousin wasn't granting me any favors. Just telling her no isn't working but when Vicente ruffles the tops of Mia's curls, his eyes glinting as she shoves his hand away, she finally relents.

"We can begin your training on another day," Vicente says to her. Maybe it's something in his smile or the small dimple on his left cheek, or heck maybe it's the way his light green eyes shine brighter when he smiles, but Mia agrees and lets Vicente and I move to the backyard to begin.

I plant my feet into the grass beneath me. I rub my hands together and watch Vicente tug off his light cardigan. He stretches his arms across his chest and pulls on the muscle. I watch him curiously for a moment but shake it off, trying to center myself. I don't really know how to channel my magic unless I'm mad, but I'm sure if I just close my eyes and quiet my mind then something will come of it. Maybe I'll get close to something powerful.

Then Vicente smacks me upside the head. Hard.

"What the fuck!" I stumble back. I rub at the back of my head as the pain flickers in and out, making my ears ring. "I'm trying to concentrate here!"

"On what exactly? The wind patterns? I said we would be training, not conjuring spirits," Vicente says.

I try to maintain a neutral expression at the mention of spirits. "Yeah, training. That's why I'm trying to focus."

Vicente chuckles and unzips the bag on the ground. He produces two staffs, long in length and heavy. I stagger back as he tosses one to me.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” I ask.

“You are missing key teachings of our craft. As far as brujas go,” he pauses to strike.

I yelp and shove the stick forward. They meet with a loud clack.

“Your magic is unreliable,” Vicente finishes.

I push against his staff. “So I’m supposed to fight Constanzo with sticks?” I grit my teeth.

Vicente moves quickly, striking my left side. My reactions are too slow and my movements feel sloppy. I’m holding him off but only because he’s allowing it.

“A stick, a rock, a blade – it makes no difference what you use as a weapon,” Vicente says.

When I lift the staff, Vicente aims low and when I try to meet him move for move, he finds a way to hit me anyway.

“Try to mimick my moves,” he says, moving his arms and legs slowly.

Vicente moves the staff to the right, and I notice his body leaning left. I try to mimic it. Move the staff one-way, body another. His knees bend lower and he strikes the staff down. I plant mine in return to stop his move, but at the last second, he twists the staff in his hand and the top half of the staff hits my head.

“Quicker feet!” he says as I fall back into the grass.

He arches the staff above his head. I feel breathless; I won’t be able to move in time. I just need a second, I think to myself. I need a moment to catch my breath. But he won’t allow me that. He won’t stop until I’ve stopped him. The staff comes swinging down above my chest. That thing is going to pierce my fucking chest.

I look away because I can't watch the staff as it kills me, and I lift my hands. I wait for the impact, a part of me welcoming the pain that accompanies it. But there's a stillness in the air that seems charged. I open my eyes.

The staff is suspended above me. It vibrates just above my heart, my energy coming off in waves of heat.

"No magic," Vicente grunts, brows pinched. His hands tighten on the staff.

I shake my head. I force the energy to burn hotter.

Vicente's hands shake before he releases the staff. It hovers for a moment until I'm out of the way and then it falls to the floor with a muted thud.

"We're done for today," Vicente says, already walking back.

"What?" I call out, looking at the staffs left on the floor and his bag I'm sure is full of other weapons. "But we just started!"

Vicente doesn't say anything. I glare at his back. "You're not even going to commend me for that move? That was awesome!"

At that Vicente turns around. "You don't get it do you?"

I huff out a breath. "Get what?"

Vicente shakes his head. "If you think this is about getting you to use more magic then you need more training that I thought."

The words hurt, even if I was the one who turned away from my craft. I know I have much to learn, but I'm not powerless. I'm not inept.

Vicente sighs. "I'm sorry," he says. "Let's pick this up again tomorrow."

And even in my triumph, I manage to do things the wrong way. I sit back on the grass, holding the forgotten staff. I sit there until Ago comes looking for me.

The next morning, I'm awake before Vicente knocks at my door. After lacing up the old pair of boots Silvia gave me, I make my way to the backyard tentatively.

Angelica is in the kitchen scrabbling up a batch of eggs. Her brown hair, almost red in the early morning light, is tied with a royal blue ribbon. "Breakfast?" she asks, holding the skillet up from the stove.

I shake my head. "I'd probably just throw it up anyway."

"You'll get it," Angelica says. She peers toward the yard. "Just listen to Vicente and try your best." She smiles.

I huff. "Might not be that easy. But thank you, Angelica."

"Call me Angie, please," she says. She clicks on the coffee maker. It sputters and gurgles before spewing out coffee into the pot. Angie hands me a banana. "Eat something," she says.

On the counter I notice a few opened textbooks. I break half the banana, eyeing the titles from the corner of my eye.

"Chemistry test on Wednesday," says Angie, flipping tortillas on the stove. She sets down a few plates. "I'm a Biochem major. The work never stops." She smiles painfully, lifting the sleeves of her dark blue sweater.

I notice faded black lines peeking out beneath the gold band of her watch.

"So why waste time here? Why not study at your place or at the school library?" I ask. I mean it to sound casual, but my judgement leaks out into my words.

"Being here isn't a waste," she says. "I get to better understand how you guys live and function, and how active powers work. It's all very fascinating to me."

"We're not test subjects," I say. "We're not a science project. We're real people and we didn't choose to be witches."

Angie's head tilts slightly, like she's examining something about me. Then she twists her watch down and opens the back door for me. "Good luck out there," Angie says. Her smile is tight lipped.

"You too," I say, glancing at her textbooks.

Shaking off the weird encounter, I begin stretching my muscles. I have no idea what Vicente has planned for training but having relaxed muscles seems like safe bet. Vicente meets me a few minutes later. He rummages through a duffle bag and the familiar sight of the staffs makes my palms sweat.

He hands me a staff. "The moves I'm going to show you aren't meant to kill. They're meant to subdue."

I get myself used to the staff's weight. "But I thought we were trying to kill Constanzo."

"At some point," Vicente says, gravely. "But these tactics will get you near enough to him so that you may use your magic to kill him."

My mouth lifts. I suppose he's right.

Vicente gets into a fighter's stance. I try to copy that same stance. He spends the next several hours showing me specific moves. I learn to roundhouse kick and how to wrist strike with the staff. I learn that being smaller than my opponent can be used to my own advantage. I learn how to throat punch and how of all the moves he's shown me, this has the highest possibility of killing my opponent.

All the explanation and mimicking of stances, and when it comes to finally trying them out on Vicente, I still fail spectacularly. When I try to step forward and strike his wrist, Vicente sidesteps me and hits me with the staff.

“Right arm in front of left arm!” Vicente instructs. “Switch your stance if you switch arms!”

I gasp, turning my body with the staff and trying to shove Vicente back. He ducks under my arms and the staff hits my shins. I pitch forward, the pain reverberating through my legs.

“Do not strike half-heartedly. Calculated strikes only,” he says.

I swing again, switching legs as the staff moves from right to left hand.

“Good,” Vicente commends. He pants as we hold our stance. “I’m sorry about yesterday.” He shoves me back with his staff. “But this type of training isn’t just about your magic.”

I watch as he twirls the staff around in his hand. I try to mimic him. My fingers bend and wrap around the wooden base of my staff. I start to twirl my staff.

“Constanzo wasn’t born with magic,” he says.

“I know,” I say. “But if I can defeat him with magic, why bother learning this?”

Vicente morphs into a blur of light. He dashes to the right, then the left. He moves so quickly I can no longer see his staff. Pain stabs my side and before I have time to react, I feel another stab of pain on my other side. Another bout of pain blossoms on my chest and I fall to my knees. I groan, feeling the crunch of grass in my mouth.

“Constanzo is well versed in hand-to-hand combat. And he has magic,” Vicente breathes out. “Using magic against him is the obvious choice. He’ll be looking to combat you with magic. If you can get close enough, he won’t expect you to fight close range.”

Vicente swings again. To my surprise I actually manage to get a few good jabs in. As expected, I still come out with more bruises than him. I’m sweaty and gross by the end of the day and I have to grip the staff tighter as it slides between my palms. Vicente swings low and I thrust

my staff down to shove his staff back. I twirl it, the way I saw Vicente do earlier, and bring my staff down on his shoulder.

Vicente flinches back. “Ow,” he smiles, rubbing the spot.

I try not to smirk too much.

He shakes his arm out. “What you did yesterday was impressive.” He says it so casually I almost think he’s offering me a slice of toast or saying something about the weather. “There are ways to fight like I’m teaching you and still use magic.”

“Like what you did earlier,” I say, recalling his quick movements, the blur he became as he fought me.

He hums in agreement. “Do you know about Dreamscapes?” he asks.

I nod. “I’ve heard stories,” I bite the inside of my cheek.

“The concept is the same. The energy and magic it takes to perform a Dreamscape, to walk through a state of unconsciousness, is the same used to move quickly like that. You walk through time, essentially,” Vicente says.

“Dreamscaping isn’t easy,” I tell him. It’s rare for brujas to pull it off.

Vicente nods. “Neither is this,” he signals to the staff and his movement.

For weeks I focus on my footing, on the way my hands grip the staff, on the way Vicente easily maneuvers away from my jabs. I have more bruises on my body than I can count and each day I find a new one I don’t remember feeling.

As the days progress, Vicente and I gather more and more of an audience. Ago and Mia have taken to sitting outside and watching me train. Angie has sat out there in the early mornings sometimes, too, but not as often.

Mia joins in on occasion, but Vicente is good at keeping her a bay. “I’ll teach you this move tomorrow,” he’d say, or “Learn balance and then I’ll spar with you.” But the growing audience is making me anxious.

“Time to lose the training wheels, don’t you think?” Vicente teases. He’s been trying to get me to Timewalk for days now. But every time I try, I can’t keep my focus on the actual fighting, and he wins.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and grip the staff tighter. “Not yet,” I huff out. But groans from the crowd make me falter.

“Come on, Lorena!” Mia cries out. “You have to try again at some point!”

Vicente swings at me. I barely lift my staff fast enough to stop his attack. I feel the skin of my brow pinch as I concentrate. I watch Vicente’s feet move seamlessly, as if he’s walking on air. I watch the way his arms barely lift above his shoulders as he flicks the staff around, effortlessly. I grow envious. It comes so easy to him. I want it to be easy, too.

I plant my feet further into the ground. I shift my gaze to meet his. He’s already looking back. I pull on my magic, slowly one piece at a time. I calculate my moves. I’ll go left. Vicente moves to attack again but instead of waiting for his attack, I strike first.

I try to imagine how the Dreamscape happened the first time. I thought it was Constanzo that caused it but what if it was me? What if I somehow forced him into my dream? I picture confronting Constanzo again and my stomach clenches. Then, the magic starts to unfurl too fast. I lose my grip on it and I try to reel it back in, clamoring at invisible strings.

But it’s too late.

Vicente flies back, going a few feet up into the air, and landing with a sick thud.

Silvia yells Vicente's name but I watch his form on the ground, unmoving. I drop the staff.

"Mijo!" Silvia yells. "Vicente, are you okay?"

I lean closer, inspecting to see if he's breathing. His chest moves slowly.

Vicente slumps onto his back with a groan. "I'm okay, Ama," he tells Silvia. "Just give me some room."

All I can do is stand there, mouth agape. "I'm so sorry," I finally say.

"We'll try again another day," Vicente groans, gingerly picking himself up off the ground.

Silvia wraps an arm under him and shoots me a quick look before leading Vicente away.

Ago comes to stand beside me. "Hey," she nudges my shoulder. "He's fine. It's okay."

I shake my head.

I leave the staff at my feet and walk away, in desperate need of a shower.

I skip dinner later that night, my hunger replaced by the weight of my failure. If I can't get my magic under control then I have no chance at getting close enough to Constanzo to stop him, or to get the answers I need. I yank my hair back into a messy bun and lay back on the bed. The sheets smell old but there's a faint hint of rose in them. It reminds me of Mom. My breath catches. I miss hearing her voice. I miss the simple magic in her touch, warm and comforting.

"I miss her, too," Caro's voice disrupts the stillness in the room.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Of all times for her to appear, I wish it wasn't now. "Go away," I tell her, rolling over.

It's quiet for a moment. "I can't," Caro says.

I sit up. “What do you mean?” I grab the blanket at the foot of the bed and yank it over me. “It’s easy. You go poof and sit by a lake or something. Watch the afterlife sun set or some shit,” I say.

“I can’t go to el Otro Lado,” Caro says.

I speak louder so she can hear through the thick blanket. “Of course you can. Listen, you’re forgiven or whatever you need to hear. You can cross over now.” This isn’t real anyway. She’s a figment of my imagination conjured up in my loneliness and the knowledge that if Caro were alive instead of me, she would have already stopped Constanzo.

“Lore, this is more than just me having unresolved issues. You summoned me. You need to unsummon me.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Make time.”

“Did you know Mom found a way to get rid of my powers?” I ask suddenly.

We’re both quiet for a long moment.

Caro breaks the silence first. “Yes,” she says. “What Mom was doing, it... it’s not right. It’s what got us killed.”

“Don’t blame Mom for this!” I rear up in rage. “I’m so sick of this!” I say, pointing at my skin. I gesture then to the room around me. “None of this is right, Caro! Look what’s happened! How can you think there is still good in *any* of this?”

“Because there is a natural order to this world, Lorena! When will you realize that?” The edges of Caro’s figure fizzles and cracks with energy. “Santa Muerte made us in Her image. She gave us these abilities for a reason. You would not be able to do the things you can if it weren’t for Her blessing. Isn’t that reason enough to believe? If not in good then in yourself?”

I shake my head again. “I don’t believe that. The things we can do, the powers you conjured in life, we shouldn’t be able to do any of this.” *And maybe Constanzo knows how to rid the world of this magic once and for all.*

“No!” Caro yells. She jolts forward and tries to grab me but her fingers morph and billow through my body. When she steps back her arms are withering into puffs of smoke. “You can’t do this, Lorena. Please,” Caro pleads.

I shove myself out of bed, towering over her fading form. “You have no idea what I’m going to do,” I say. Even I don’t know what I’m going to do, or how. But I know that Constanzo knows something, and I intend to find out what that something is. “Go away, Caro. And don’t come back.”

I head to the training grounds again, leaving the room and Caro behind.

There's a comfort in lying beneath the stars I haven't felt since my family died. I must have missed so much and it's not like I can stare up at the sky and have it speak to me. I need to relearn its language.

"Mind if I join you?"

Vicente plops down beside me. He rests his arms on the tops of his knees and looks up at the sky. I wanted to be alone, but the moment he sits and looks up at the stars, I quickly realize I didn't want to be alone after all. I follow his gaze.

"We're having a meeting with the covens tomorrow," Vicente says. "And Mom extended the invitation to other covens around Matamoros."

"We need to be careful," I say. "Too many brujas start moving and Constanzo will notice."

Vicente hums. He shifts suddenly and lays himself against the grass next to me. I can feel his heat emanating through the small space between us. He pulls his hands behind his head. From the corner of my eye I notice the bulge of muscle running from beneath his shirt toward his wrist. The corded muscle flexes as he gets comfortable. He points to the moon. "Looks like she's in her last quarter."

I tilt my head. "Should have a new moon by next month," I say.

We lay there in comfortable silence watching the stars with the moon in her last quarter phase. The wind ruffles the ends of my hair and tickles my neck. I sigh. Here underneath these stars I can almost pretend everything hasn't changed. I look at Vicente beside me. The low curve of his nose is more noticeable like this. He has freckles, too. They splatter the tops of his nose and cheeks. I almost expect them to glisten and flicker like the stars.

In another life, we would be like this but better. He would be a normal boy I'd see every Sunday at church. One day our mothers would meet and become friends. They would pair us together because that's the obvious pairing. One mother had a son. Another mother had a daughter. What else were they supposed to do?

I wonder if I'd resent them for it.

"I'm not mad at you, you know that, right?" Vicente says, throwing out of my reverie.

I shift on the grass. "I know," I say. But I'm glad he said it regardless. "I am sorry about it, you know that, right?"

He tilts his head at me. The corner of his mouth lifts. "I know."

We slip back into silence. I feel my eyelids drooping but then Vicente pokes my arm.

"I want to show you something," he says. He pulls me up into a sitting position. I cross my legs and wipe the embedded sleep from my eyes. "Give me your hands," he says.

He places my hands in his. His warm callouses rub against my own. "Close your eyes."

A part of me doesn't want to and not out of defiance but because I don't want to shut my eyes off from the image of his brown, scarred face against the black-blue haze of the night sky. I close my eyes anyway.

"Has anyone ever told you that you think too much?" he asks.

I open one eye. "Yes."

"Try to clear your mind. Think less. Feel more."

My resistance is a knee-jerk reaction. Sometimes I wonder if there's a part of me that doesn't know how the act of *feeling* works. I know patterns and facts.

Vicente's hands grip mine tightly. "Think less," he whispers.

"It's not a matter of thinking less," I say back.

Vicente opens his eyes. He slowly lowers our joined hands. It's almost like he can see the battle inside me because he nods once and squeezes my hands. "Did my mom tell you what happened to my dad?"

I shake my head.

Vicente swallows. "He wasn't a brujo."

I don't miss the past tense there. "You don't have to," I say.

"I want to. He was a carpenter. Loved building things and knowing how something was structured. He'd build things only to take them apart and do it all over again. But he was a man of Faith. It's like he knew what needed deconstructing and what needed faith. I like to think that when it came to my mom he believed in his Faith. He knew what she was and he didn't care. He said he loved her for who she was, not because of her powers." Vicente waits when he notices his mother's silhouette through the kitchen window.

Silvia's hair is down for once and it cascades past her back, over her shoulders. She shoves it back several times as she hunches over the sink, scrubbing at dishes. She wrings her hands on a dishtowel and then she's out of view.

"Dad still went to church. Mom went with him sometimes. When they let her." There's something dark that lingers on 'they,' but I don't say anything. I wait and let Vicente continue.

"They thought my mom had bewitched him," he says. His glossy eyes return to the stars.

I'm tempted to do the same but as the water pools in his eyes, I can see the stars reflected in them. "What happened?" I say, softly.

"They said it was a bar fight. That dad was drunk and got into it with the wrong people. But my dad never drank. He hadn't touched a bottle since I was born. He liked to gloat about it and now that I know the reason, I wish I could tell him how proud of him I am. The people of

Bancaria killed my dad. They slit his throat because of who he loved and left him to bleed on the streets.”

I close my hand around a stalk of grass. I open my mouth to say something, to tell him how sorry I am that that happened to him. But I stop. I yank the grass out from the roots. He doesn’t want my sympathy. I suddenly understand how this kind of rage works. I had been so scared to feel sadness or to cry because I worried I would never stop.

Vicente grabs my hands again. “When we use our magic, it responds to high levels of emotion.”

“Think less,” I mumble. “Feel more.”

“Exactly. You can decide what that feeling is. But whatever it is, use that to fuel your magic.”

I knew my magic was inexplicably tied to my emotions, even if Mom tried to tell me otherwise. And perhaps that was a huge reason why I stayed away from magic. But maybe this is how to control something I always thought was uncontrollable.

I don’t have to ask Vicente what emotion he uses. But it does make me wonder. “Why did you agree to work with Constanzo? Be a spy, I mean.”

I’m only slightly aware of how Vicente inches closer as we settle back into the grass and watch the moon ebb across the sky.

“Constanzo made himself into a brujo and when I think of my dad and how he was human, I wonder what kind of brujo would he have been if he was given the kinds of magic we have. I know he wouldn’t be someone like Constanzo.”

I nod once. “Your dad would want you to stop someone like Constanzo.”

“No,” Vicente says. “My dad would want me to show humans that not all of us with powers behave like Constanzo does. This is how I do that.”

I watch his face go through the motions. He looks conflicted. I can relate to that. “Where does he think you are? Constanzo, I mean,” I ask.

Vicente crosses his arms. “Scouting for new locations in Hidalgo since you rendered the last warehouse useless.”

“How can you—” I break off, thinking hard on my words but I shake my head, unable to fathom how he could secure locations for Constanzo that house stolen girls and dead bodies and drugs.

“I am not often back here in Bancaria,” Vicente says, voice darkening. “So, I’ve taken to using other methods to appease the guilt.” His hands clench into fists.

I grip them into my own, running my thumb along his veins until I feel his hands relax.

We spend a few more minutes outside enjoying the cool night air. When the cold chases us back inside, Vicente stops just shy of the door. He touches the inside of my arm. “I hope there is peace at the end for us.”

He’s the first to wish me peace after everything, and I latch on to those words. I nod and head back inside, desperate for a hot shower and a good night’s sleep.

Silvia's dining area is jam packed with unfamiliar faces the next evening. The girls I brought with me to Silvia's decide to stay in their rooms, not wanting to intrude in a private magical matter. I can't blame them and I almost wish I could join them. Or at least have Ago next to me. But Ago wanted to stay with the girls in case any of them were feeling uncomfortable with so many unknowns in the house.

I try to fall into the background of things, but everyone here seems to know each other, making me stand out like a sore thumb. Silvia finds me and navigates me through the crowd introducing me to different brujas from the villa and some from neighbouring towns. There is a mixture of men and women in the crowd wrapped in shawls and heavy leather coats. I finally manage to break free from Silvia and find a spot at the back of the room. Vicente comes to stand next to me and we watch his mother command the room. Everybody turns toward her, even the men take their cowboy hats off and place them in their laps.

There's a certain charge to the room as Silvia stands there, hands held in front of her, shoulders pressed back. The white blazer she wears is striking for two reasons. It contrasts so nicely with her darkened skin and sleek black hair pulled into a tight ponytail, but it's also our colour of mourning. Then she speaks.

"Welcome, fellow brujas y brujos," she says. "We have met before to discuss the matter of Eric Constanzo."

Everyone shifts in their seats, daring glances at each other.

"We believe that Constanzo has found a way to extract magic from brujas and brujos. We are not sure why or what he's doing with all this stolen power."

The room slowly erupts into chaos.

“What do you mean?”

“How do you know?”

“He must be killed!”

Silvia handles the crowd, saying the right things like ‘we have this under control,’ and ‘we’re stronger now,’ and ‘this fight can be won.’

“We should have done something sooner,” says someone in the crowd. Everyone quiets at that.

I see this room full of brujas, beings of magic that have always lived hidden in the shadows, too afraid to live openly among the humans. To see them cowering from those shadows because of one man and what he has accomplished fills me with an unbridled discomfort. Since when did the responsibility of one human man’s actions fall to us, the persecuted?

Heads swivel towards me.

I notice Vicente’s eyes on me, too. Had I said that aloud?

“You think we should not act?” someone asks.

“Who is she?” I hear someone whisper.

“No, I think we should act. But this isn’t just our fight,” I say. I hesitate to go on.

Vicente grabs my hand and gives it a quick squeeze. I’m momentarily reminded of our conversation out on the lawn, and of what he has dealt with to bring him here. Losing his father, wanting to do right by his father, becoming a spy for his father, are all facets of Vicente that make him strong and beautiful. But that weight shouldn’t be only his to carry. Humans hurt his father. And it is humans who hold just as much blame for what Constanzo has become as we do.

“Humans should be fighting this with us,” I say.

There's a clamour at the end of the room. "Are you suggesting we work with the humans? Es ridículo," a woman says. Her brown curls are wild around the frame of her face and she tightens the shawl around her shoulders.

"I know you're all scared. But we would be stronger with them fighting on our side."

"The humans are powerless. We'd only be getting them killed," says the same woman.

Silvia raises her hands. "Familia," she says. When everyone has returned their attention back to her, she looks at me. "The covens are right, Lorena. We won't have human blood on our hands this time."

I bite my tongue, even though I think they're making a big mistake in disregarding how many humans would want to see Constanzo gone.

"The intel my son has brought us tells us where Constanzo will be tomorrow evening. He's meeting with drug leaders from Brownsville and we think he means to expand his territory into U.S. soil," says Silvia.

The curly-haired woman breaks apart from the seats. "If he crosses over into U.S. territory he will expose our magic. The Americans won't understand the nature of our craft. We'll be in even more danger."

"The Lazaro coven volunteers to lead an attack," a man says rising from his seat.

I grip the sleeve of Vicente's shirt. "An attack?" I whisper to him.

"These aren't kum ba yah meetings, Lorena. We need to come up with a plan to stop Constanzo," he whispers back.

I know this. And yet, hearing men and women raise their hands and vow to join the fight churns my stomach.

“I will go,” another woman says. She passes her tiny baby off to the man beside her. The baby stirs and fusses and the man tries to shush her back to sleep. The baby cries.

I shake my head.

“Santa Muerte will look kindly on your valour. We will atone for our sins.” Silvia places her hand on the woman’s shoulder as she approaches the other volunteers. Silvia raises her arms above her head. “Thank you all for coming. Go in peace.”

Brujas and brujos start to shuffle out of the room. Something is eating at the pit in my stomach. Vicente moves away from me. I see Ago’s face peeking from the stairwell.

“I will go, too!” I say.

“Lorena,” Ago says. She stands from the stairwell. She approaches me carefully. “You could die if you do this.”

“This is not a game, Lorena,” says Silvia. “And I’ve seen your training. Trust me when I say you’re not ready.”

“Then I’ll be ready,” I grit my teeth.

“By tomorrow night? Not likely.”

“If she wants to join the fight I say we let her,” says the woman, her crying baby back in her arms. The young child’s cries subside.

“I am sending trained brujos to fight. I will not have your blood on my hands, too, Lorena. I am sorry,” Silvia says.

“But you asked me to join you. I will be ready when the time comes. I promise,” I say.

Silvia tenses. “And if you’re not? If you are not strong enough to go up against Constanzo and his forces?”

I clench my jaw. “I have to be. So I will.”

Silvia sucks her bottom lip into her mouth and narrows her eyes. Just when I think I've lost this battle, she inhales sharply. "Very well. You all leave at sundown tomorrow."

As Silvia leaves the room, the rest of the brujos following after her, the woman lags behind. She jumps lightly on the balls of her feet and rubs a hand down her little girl's back, eyeing me over the top of her head. She nods once before leaving the room.

"Lorena, you can't be serious," Ago says in hushed tones. She squeezes my arm, her wild eyes begging me for something.

"They're risking their lives for something my mom helped Constanzo do," I say. It's the first time I say it out loud but hearing the clear-cut words, I realize I have as much responsibility in this as any other bruja. My mom found a way for Constanzo to gain more power. Whatever happens next is on me, on the Santiago line. My mother, warm and soft, but hard as steel, she had her reasons for working with Constanzo, but along the way I know she did what she could to help anyone who came knocking at her door. She performed acts of kindness with her magic, too. I won't let this define her legacy. I will be better.

"You have no regard for your own life," Ago snaps.

Behind Ago, I see a shadowed look cross over Vicente. He heard me. He understands.

I cup Ago's face. Closing my eyes, I lean my forehead against hers. Her cool breath fans over my face. I'm grateful she doesn't understand my reasons. I wouldn't want her to understand this harsh, cold feeling.

But Ago grabs hold of my shoulders. "I know I can't stop you," she says. "But then I want you to promise me something."

I gulp. "What is it?"

"Promise me that you will come back."

The look in Ago's eyes reminds me of Mom's steel and Caro's fierceness. Maybe Ago understands more than I give her credit for. I try to breathe past the lump in my throat and the tightness in my chest. "I promise," I say. Even though I'm not sure it's a promise I can keep.

Later that night, it's just me and the men and women who volunteered for the mission crowding Silvia's office. Silvia doesn't look the same as the last time I was in her office. She doesn't look kind and approachable. Her shoulders are hunched forward as she presses her fingers into the open map of Matamoros on her desk. Her eyes are still narrowed. She spared one kind smile to the little girl who cried as she was pried from her mother's arms and taken back home. She will sleep tonight without her mother. I almost make a vow to bring her mother back to her, but I've learned not to make vows dealing in life or death again.

Silvia goes over the plan multiple times. A black van will be waiting for us near the river's alcove at seven tomorrow evening. The van will take us to the outskirts of Matamoros. We will take the rest of the way on foot. The walk from the northern parts of Matamoros to the border is about fifteen miles. We are to use the brush as cover. The brush has dried over, I tell Silvia. I have walked past the Matamoros border to know that the dry heat of this last summer also dried the lush greenery Silvia had been hoping to use for cover.

"We can use the river," someone says. It's the woman with the small child. I imagine the child will cry itself to sleep soon enough.

"And the bridge," I say. "It will offer a good vantage point until we strike."

"Yes, that's a good idea," says Silvia. She's all business but I detect a hint of pride in her gaze.

The plan is simple, says Silvia. We are to immobilize Constanzo's men then take Constanzo. A man among us has been tasked with using his powers to subdue Constanzo.

“The toxin should keep him inoculated for several hours,” he says.

“How many?” asks Silvia.

“At least four hours.”

Silvia casts a look. I meet her eye contact.

“Good,” she says.

“He has brujos among his guards,” I tell them.

Silvia nods. “Yes, Vicente has informed us.”

Vicente, who has been quiet through the entire meeting pushes off from his spot against the wall. “He keeps the brujos as his personal guards. You won’t need to face them until you get closer to Constanzo.”

And just like that, our plan is set. There is no discussion as to what Silvia, or the other members of her coven, will do with Constanzo once they have him. But I figure one step at a time.

I spend the rest of the night training.

“Think less,” I mumble. The staff flies out in front of me. Strike. “Feel more.” I pivot to the right. Strike. I hear the crunch of grass somewhere behind me. I twirl with the staff and for a moment it feels like I’m flying. I think I feel my feet coming off the ground. Then I land. The thud of my feet is the only indication that I flew. I ride the high. I twist at the hip. The staff arcs. I strike.

Ago sits crisscrossed on the ground.

It’s hard to ignore her glare.

“You know, you could at least not glare at me when I’m training,” I say.

Ago plasters a fake smile on her lips.

“Thanks.” I shake my head as she goes back to glaring.

After a while, the sound of the backdoor catches my attention. Mia steps out and joins Ago on the grass.

“You here to glare, too?” I ask.

“Not really,” she says. “I mean it sucks you’re going but it’s also pretty badass.”

Ago smacks Mia upside the head.

“Ow!” Mia cries.

I snicker. When did they get cozy enough to reach head-slap-friendship status? My smile fades. I don’t have time to regret or hate the choice I made to focus on training and learning more about my powers rather than get to know my cousin. The irony makes me smile bitterly. I watch the two of them banter and laugh. Ago reaches across to nudge Mia’s shoulder or poke her side several times.

I train to the low-pitched sound of their laughter. I rush forward and jump as I strike. I feel a breeze beneath my feet every time and that feeling of flying eggs me on. I want to fly higher. I throw the staff into the air. I race after it. I jump. The ground disappears from my tiptoes and I step higher on a cloud of air. I grip the staff in my hand again, meeting it partway through the air, and when I land, I stab the staff into the ground.

I’m panting into my arm, still crouched with the staff making its kill in the grass.

“Holy shit,” Mia cheers.

I ease my grip on the staff. I let myself slide down on my knees and laugh. It seems ridiculous to laugh but I do and the feeling frees something inside my chest. I breathe easier. I turn toward my friends. Mia smiles ear to ear and claps her hands together. Ago, though still not

happy that I'm risking my life, smirks. And behind them, I see Vicente standing on the back patio. He smiles once, nods, and then he's gone.

When I stand, I don't try to restrain my excitement. I laugh louder and yank the staff up and out of the grass. My legs spring up with a renewed energy. The tips of my fingers buzz and crackle when they touch the staff.

The more I use my magic the more I feel it changing me.

I'm starting to think that may not be such a bad thing.

The night feels heavier than it should. Where I would think the stars are beautiful and luminous, I start to cower under their light. My fellow brujos and I crouch walk through the stalks. Our feet sink into moist grass. The rushing sound of the river masks our steps, for now. I pull my black jacket tighter against me and crouch lower. Mosquitos chomp on the skin of my cheek and neck as I move. I give up swatting them away in favour of keeping my hands open and ready to strike. The walk to Matamoros border takes longer than we anticipate so we're hauling ass to stay on schedule. The blade at my hip jostles against me, the hilt bumping into my elbow with each step. I only hope it isn't making as much noise as I fear.

Vicente dropped us off with a quick *be safe* whispered into the dark nearly half an hour ago. I can't help but miss his presence. Before we set out on our walk, Vicente put the car in park and grabbed my wrist.

"I wanted to give you this," he said. He handed me a long and narrow item. It was clothed in a thick black covering. "I wasn't going to give it to you unless you completed your training." I think back to last night's triumph. "But even if you hadn't, I still want you to have it."

I slowly reveal the sharp, black edge of a blade. Its lacquer reflects off the overhead light and I run a finger over its smooth edges. It can't be any bigger than my palm, I realize.

"Our ancestors fought with obsidian blades. They're not as common now, obviously," he says and I think of how Constanzo's men favour guns in battle. "But I like to think our ancestors impart with us their own wisdom and power when we fight with these."

I grab the blade by the hilt. I hold it up to the light. It's surprisingly light in my hands. A current goes through me, making my palm itch. For such a tiny weapon, it holds such powerful energy. I fasten it through the loop in my jeans. "Where did you get this?" I ask.

"A few miles up the hill on the outskirts of town," he says. "There's a cave there. I only took how much I needed to make it."

"Wait, you made this?" I resist the urge to give it back to him.

Vicente hums under his breath as he examines his handy-work.

I place a hand over his on the steering wheel. It forces me to lean forward too much and I have to balance on my bent legs to make sure I don't topple over. But I keep my hand steady. "Thank you," I say.

We stare at each other for a moment. He moves forward then stops. He opens his mouth. "See you later," he says through a tight smile. I hadn't expected him to say something so causal, but it feels better than being given a blessing.

Just before I'm out of the van, I feel him tug the bottom of my jacket. I face him.

"Be careful," he says.

I join the rest of the witches in the dark. We tuck ourselves further into our jackets, hiding faces and hands in the thick fabric. When the roads get too loud, or the overhead light of a chopper is too bright, we lay ourselves flat against the grass. Each time, I say a quick prayer to Santa Muerte.

We had all said our blessings earlier that night on Silvia's front steps. We joined hands under the moon and prayed for guidance and protection. I thumbed the empty space at my neck where Caro's protection amulet used to lay. I left it under Ago's pillow. Even so, it doesn't stop

me from seeking blessings now in the pit falls of mud and grass. I just want us to make it back alive, in whatever shape that may come in.

As we pick up our pace, fields blur together in black and green messes across my vision. I almost get comfortable sinking into the mud to hide when the scene changes. Matamoros Bridge is up ahead. It's dimly lit. There are a few cars sitting idly on it, waiting for border patrol to clear them through into the U.S.

We cower underneath the bridge and let ourselves sink into the river until we are shoulder deep in it and move steadily, slowly. All the haste from before is replaced with soft motions. I try to move with the current. But everyone else is trying to swim through the waves. The crash of water against bodies is making our movements too loud.

A brujo steps forward, hand outstretched. He slowly closes his hand into a fist above the water and all together, the water calms.

We move again but this time the water is too still, too silent. We're making too much noise. I turn my head at the sound of a branch snapping.

"Stop," I whisper harshly. Everyone halts. When no other sound comes, I nod my head. The brujo releases his hold on the water, probably agreeing that the lack of current isn't masking our movement enough. I try to move with the water again. Each cress is a step forward and soon, the bruja beside me with large curly hair pulled back into a ponytail copies my motion. One by one we move together.

Constanzo's meeting point is five miles east of the bridge. It's a hidden alcove where the border meets another neighbouring town, one much smaller than my villa up the hills of Matamoros.

We clear the waters beneath the bridge and soon, the dim lights are nothing but a faint haze in the distance. We can afford to move more freely now, but most of us remain huddled next to one another, as quiet as we can make the journey.

Suddenly, someone shouts. I see a brujo on the outskirts of our cluster start thrashing. The water surges up loudly and for a moment we are too stunned to move. The brujo from earlier, the one with an affinity for water, outstretches his hands again.

“I felt it!” the boy shouts. His voice rises as he thrashes his hands and arms in the water, frantically searching the area around him.

“¿Qué pasó, hermano?” a woman beside him asks. “What is it?”

I take a step toward them when something heavy knocks against the backs of my thighs. I jolt forward with enough force to sink into the water. I rear up, breaking the surface with a gulp. I’m breathing heavily as I search the water around me. But I see nothing.

A girl from our group squeals. “Something touched me!”

“Everyone calm down!” the brujo says, the one who calmed the water. His hands are still outstretched and slowly he places his open palms over the water.

“Stephan, do you sense it?” the curly haired bruja next to me asks. The woman with the child left behind.

Stephan’s brows pinch forward as he concentrates. “Give me a minute, Suzanna.”

I wipe the back of my hand over my mouth but the murky river water still hits the back of my throat. I resist the urge to cough.

Then, a few feet in front of us, I see them.

They’re thick and black and not as wispy as I remember them being. I can hear their hissing rising steadily. I grip Suzanna’s arm next to me. “Do you see them?” I say, but I must

have said it too low because she doesn't respond. I say it again, loud enough for the whole group to hear me.

They all look ahead of us, but no one says anything.

Suzanna takes my hand. "What do you see?"

I open my mouth to answer when someone else in the group says, "I don't see anything."

I freeze. The cold feeling of dread is one I haven't felt since I first saw the oscuros.

Constanzo's oscuros.

There's a loud splash to our left and everyone turns. The boy from earlier, the first one to feel it, goes down. He sinks beneath the water and a few people lurch forward to grab him. I watch as they try to race after him. One hesitates to submerge themselves and the other nosedives in. We wait a few painfully chilling moments. The woman who went after the young boy resurfaces. She comes up empty handed.

"Oscuros," I finally say. "They're Constanzo's oscuros."

"You can see them?" Stephan shouts. His jaw ticks behind his lips and he wads through the still water to grab me. He yanks me forward. "Where are they?"

I watch the oscuros circle us. Stephan follows my gaze. I shake my head, "they're everywhere." I gulp, realizing I am the only one who can see them.

Why me, Santa Muerte?

"Okay, everyone move!" Stephan says, dragging me forward. He angles me in front of him and pushes me forward.

I move but I don't feel like I'm moving myself forward. If I could, I'd run out of the water.

"But what about Pietr?" a younger girl asks, the one who went searching for the boy.

“We can’t wait around to be taken next,” is all Stephan says.

I give the girl a soft glance. Suzanna wraps an arm around her shoulders and we continue on. Every so often I think I feel something in the water, but no one stops to identify it. The oscuros continue to circle us.

Suddenly, one of the oscuros strikes out at me.

With barely enough time to yell for help, I sink beneath the water.

I kick out, trying to swim toward the surface again. But the oscuro wraps itself around my ankles and yanks me. My hands grab at it but it’s like sifting through soft butter and the oscuro slips through my fingers and tightens its hold. Through the dark water I can’t see the oscuro as I could above water. But its eyes stare back at me in its luminescent yellow colour. Another oscuro plummets into the water. It wraps itself around my throat. I claw at it but fighting it only makes it tighten its hold. I continue to thrash and kick out.

The oscuros continue to drag me away and I’m not sure if it’s lack of oxygen but I think I smell ash. I’m dizzy and my muscles feel heavy and light at the same time. I watch my hands floating in front of me.

You started the fire that night.

I never got to perform my ascension ceremony. I never wanted to perform it. But I think of how fire and heat has followed me ever since that night in my home. If I did start that fire that burned my home down and killed my family, then maybe I never needed to properly ascend. Maybe none of us do. Maybe it’s just something we do to uphold traditions that have lost their relevance.

I know what Santa Muerte has gifted me and I don't know if I'll ever be okay with it – with having a power that killed my family - but right now it's a power that can save my life. And it can save the other brujas and brujos still heading toward the fight.

I close my eyes. I begin to pray. *Santa Muerte. Guide me.* My chest swells. Warmth spreads down my arm and to my fingertips. I reach a hand up toward the surface. *See me.* I open my eyes and watch the fire spark. Veins of bright red slither down my arm and I feel it pulse along my neck.

I panic at the sight, only for a moment. It moves quickly through my body and I feel it move. It thrums along my chest and down my abdomen until my entire body vibrates. My hand becomes cloaked in flames. I stretch farther and a cool breeze caresses my flaming hand. I've broken surface.

When I look back down, the oscuros have moved. They don't tighten like I fear they will. They loosen. The oscuros shrivel and writhe against me and as they peel themselves off my skin, chunks of their stringy bodies fall away and sink below us. I don't wait for them to strike back. I kick and kick until I tear the surface of the water and breathe. I gulp, cough up the excess water in my lungs and gulp again. A pair of strong hands grips my shoulders and yanks me. I meet the solid mass of a chest as I struggle to breathe.

"Are you okay?" Stephan asks. He places his hand over my chest.

In one quick push, water rushes up my lungs. I claw at Stephan's chest.

"It's okay, it's okay," he soothes.

I throw up the rest of the water in me. I try to breathe through my nose and I notice the hot pain in my throat has gone. I look up at Stephan, his face shrouded with what looks like concern or maybe it's pain. "Thank you," I say.

He lets me go and I lift my arms out of the water. My skin is pale. The red veins are gone. When Stephan looks back at me, there's no indication that he saw the red veins. But I'm not sure.

"We need to keep moving," he says. "The oscuros may return."

"They will have told Constanzo that we are coming," I say.

"It might be wise to go back, Stephan. We can regroup. Catching him by surprise is our only advantage," says Suzanna, coming up behind me.

Her curls have come apart from their tie but her angular cheekbones look more striking. The light gold in her eyes is almost an exact match to Stephan's, I notice, as they stare each other down.

"We stick to the plan," Stephan says.

I decide to put my foot in my mouth. "I agree with Suzanna. We should go back."

"If you want to go back, then go. No one expected you to get this far to begin with."

"Stephan," Suzanna hisses.

I stare at them, then at the rest of our group. They shuffle awkwardly but don't say a word. I put my head down.

"Let's move," Stephan finally says.

I follow him because turning back on my own would find me dead a lot quicker than oscuros in the water.

I try not to let the fact that everyone here seems to think I'd be the first one dead during this expedition sink too deep. Instead, I try to twist this into a positive – because I have made it this far. But still, the fact that my own people didn't believe I could do this hurts something deep inside me.

“Don't let him get to you,” Suzanna says, nudging my shoulder and kicking me from my thoughts.

I spare her a glance. “Kind of hard not to when he's leading this mission,” I say.

Suzanna pauses. “He lost his wife a year ago.”

“Constanzo?” I ask.

Suzanna nods.

I watch Stephan lead the helm, his shoulders sunken forward. I understand, of course I do. I remember something Vicente said to me not that long ago. I know I'm not the only one who lost something to Constanzo. But is that everyone's excuse for doing stupid things?

Suzanna laughs beside me. “Maybe it is,” she says.

I chuckle softly, realizing I said it aloud.

“My brother has always been an act first, ask questions later kind of guy. It often gets him into trouble,” Suzanna says.

I nod once, right in my assumption that they were related. The resemblance when they stand near each other really is uncanny. “Let me guess, you balance him out?”

“Hmm, yes, I suppose so. Not by choice, however.”

That gives me pause. I wait for Suzanna to explain.

“Unlike my brother, Santa Muerte did not bless me with active powers.”

I almost trip in the water. “Then what are you doing here?” I start. I fumble to say the words again, in a less blunt way. “This is dangerous. You could get hurt.” I ramble.

Suzanna laughs and places a hand over my arm. “The same can be said for anyone on this journey.”

Technically she’s right. But I try to picture her going up against Constanzo with nothing but her fists. The image doesn’t end well.

“We both volunteered because we both have a responsibility here, no?”

I look at her. She searches my gaze and its intensity makes me want to look away. I don’t.

“I was with Stephan’s wife when she was taken. Elena had been studying the old ways of our ancestors. She was quite the historian, she was. She told us about an old cave that our ancestors use to use as a place of worship. She said they would craft divine weapons with the obsidian there, too. Elena wanted to find this cave. Stephan thought it would be a waste of time, that time and weather would have hidden the cave by now.” Suzanna pauses. “I agreed with him.”

I wonder if this is the same cave that Vicente mentioned, where he found the obsidian.

“We didn’t find any sort of cave, as expected. And on our way back, the main road into town was blocked off by Constanzo’s cartel. I told Elena we would have to wait for the roads to reopen. I don’t know if it was her frustration over the cave or what, but she got angry. So angry. She said she would not wait another second on account of that man. We tried to sneak past his men. We almost made it, too. But when I turned around, Elena wasn’t behind me anymore. She had one of Constanzo’s men in a vice grip. She was choking him. I thought she was saying something to him but before I could hear it, more men were on her.” Suzanna stops talking.

We're both quiet for some time.

"What could I have done?" she asks, her eyes blank. "So I ran away."

I let the sound of the water sloshing against us be the only response.

"Stephan says it wasn't my fault. But I know part of him blames me." Suzanna shakes her head suddenly. She squares her shoulders and stands taller. "Like I said, we're here out of a responsibility. Don't let them take that from you."

I can hear the guilt in her voice, even years after her trauma, and I want to tell her she couldn't have known it would end like that. I want to tell her there wasn't anything she could have done differently. Elena made a choice.

I stare at the faint red glow in my hands.

"We are approaching," Stephan says, breaking the silence.

Suzanna gives my hand a quick squeeze before going to stand beside her brother.

All the anxiety I kept bottled up the second we got out of the van rears its ugly head. We step out of the water and into the thick brush beside it.

The brush is thick enough to mask most of our bodies, but we lay ourselves flat and crawl through the half-broken stalks. The wind picks up and I'm struggling to keep from shivering. Seems odd to have such strong winds when the weather has been relatively warm for weeks. I want to tell Stephan that it must be a witch doing this, but it wouldn't change anything. The alcove is well hidden but as we twine up a small hill, forced onto our feet to move quickly, I see a line of black cars. Their headlights are on and faced away from us. I see multiple black silhouettes. I know one of them has to be Constanzo.

The field stretches in waves of green and yellow. We move slowly through the stalks, twisting and turning our bodies to not cause too much of a wave through the field. If they stare too long out into the field, they may pass the movement off as wind.

Or not.

The sound of car doors slamming shut makes us halt. We're within earshot of the meeting and we need to be extra careful as we approach. They may know we're nearby but they don't know exactly when and how we'll strike. It's a small advantage, but one we won't give up.

"She looks a little rough around the edges," someone says. It's not Constanzo, that much I know. Their voice grates and twangs in weird areas.

"I assure you; her appearance does not reflect her performance." This voice purrs when it speaks, letting the last syllables hang in the air. That's Constanzo. "Emmanuel, bring the rest out, would you?"

Heavy footfall follows, then the car opening. There's a high-pitched squeal. I dare a glance. A young woman lies face first in the dirt. Her hands are bound. There's a piece of cloth wrapped around her head and stuffed in her mouth. Her body looks pristine though her clothes are tattered and muddy.

I clench my hands into fists. My nostrils flare as I lay back in the grass.

"Spread out," Stephan whispers. "Wait for my signal, then we attack."

We fan out. I creep low in the grass until I'm in a spot safe enough to watch but not be seen. Four other girls are laid out on the ground.

"Where's the other half?"

Constanzo tugs at the cuffs on his wrist but they don't look an inch out of place. Nothing about him does. It unsettles me.

“The Seer decided you get half now and the second half when your end of the bargain is upheld,” Constanzo says.

“No!” the man shouts. “That’s bullshit! We agreed! Eight girls for clear passage to hide your product in our warehouses.”

Constanzo chuckles. “Yes, and the when was never discussed. You will get them once we are done.”

Who’s the Seer? I thought Constanzo answered to no one? My feet slide against the rocks and I press myself into the dirt, praying no one heard.

“No,” the man says again. He looks like a junkie being denied his fix. “Get that bitch on the phone, let me talk to her. I’m done dealing with her errand bitch boy.”

Constanzo taps the sharp point of his boot in the dirt. He walks forward, though it resembles a prow. The man has some sense to back away, but Constanzo isn’t letting him go far. In a blink, Constanzo strikes out.

Constanzo licks the tip of his fingers and for a moment I think I see actual claws. He huffs out, “I hate working with Americans,” in Spanish and his men chuckle along with him.

The man nearest Constanzo pulls the American to his knees, yanks his head back and exposes the man’s neck.

“Let me make myself perfectly clear,” Constanzo starts. And then I know I wasn’t imagining it. A claw slowly retracts from the underside of his nail. Constanzo draws his nail down the thick slope of this man’s neck. A red line follows closely behind. “This is a business deal, not a playground for wild children to throw tantrums. If you want to act like a child,” Constanzo says, digging further into his neck. The man yelps on the ground. “Then you will be punished as a child should.”

It happens quickly. One moment it's a single red line on his neck, and in the next there's blood everywhere. It pours out of him and Constanzo watches as the man grabs uselessly at his neck. He slumps forward. Dead.

Constanzo wipes his hands on a cloth. "You," he says.

I sink back quickly, thinking he means me.

"Y-yes, sir?" A lanky man takes a hesitant step. He glances briefly to the dead man on the dirt.

"What's your name?" Constanzo asks.

"D-Donovan, sir."

"You're in charge now, Donovan. You will get the rest of the girls we promised you once the job is done. Understood?"

Donovan nods quickly. "Yes."

"Excellent," Constanzo says, grinning widely.

A scream pierces through the air and I shrink back before recognizing the cry.

"Santo, no!"

My fellow brujos and brujas charge forward. I grapple with dirt and wet grass under my hands, desperate to join the fight.

The night fills with light and energy. Bright blues and stark white lights beam across the field. The charged air makes my hair stand on end and I watch with fascination the way my kind fights. They arc their arms above their heads and slam them back down. Their magic flies out, unbridled and unrestrained. It's beautiful. And terrifying.

But Constanzo and his men don't react. A current of electricity flies through the air and hits one of Constanzo's men in the chest. But instead of going down, the man disintegrates into black smoke. The black smoke slithers away, yellow eyes glowing.

It's an illusion. "Stop!" I yell. "This isn't real!"

I notice a crying Suzanna a few feet away. The body she's holding, Stephan's body, evaporates from her grasp. A black tendril slides down her arm. She gasps and flinches away. "Where is he?" she asks. I scan the clearing for Stephan and come up empty.

The oscuros hover above us, sliding together and coming apart, multiplying in the air. Something churns inside me. "We have to go back," I say. I take one step back.

The oscuros charge into the ground. They burrow themselves into the dirt and an eerie silence chills the air. Everyone stays still.

"Maybe they just left?"

I shake my head. I feel a low rumble coming from beneath my feet. It starts slow and then the ground shakes violently. "Run!" I yell.

We slide down the hill and roll to a stop. I grip Suzanna next to me. "Get up," I say.

The ground tears apart in front of us. Dirt flies up into the air. Rocks tumble back down like falling stars and Suzanna and I can do nothing but wait it out.

"Such bold and unexpected moves," a voice says. Constanzo stands on the other side of the ripped-up earth. The oscuros slide up from the ground and wrap themselves around his torso. "Lovely to see you again, Lorena."

"What did you do with Stephan?" Suzanna cries out.

Stephan emerges, hands bound and face half bloodied. One of Constanzo's men, one I recognize from the warehouse, shoves Stephan forward.

Suzanna grips my hand. “The plan doesn’t change,” she whispers.

I squeeze her hand once and feel another brujo at my back. We huddle in closer. I plant my feet a little wider. “This has to stop, Constanzo,” I say, my throat tightening around his name.

Constanzo seems surprised to hear my voice for a moment. He recovers, clearing his throat and tucking his hands into his pockets. He tilts his head. “What does?”

“Killing!” I say. “Killing witches for power. Innocent lives lost and for what? So you can fuel your insane obsession with us?”

Constanzo’s eyes widen. “It’s not an obsession,” he says it, almost like he’s offended I would think so. “I have spoken to the Goddess of Death. I am on my right path.”

“The right path? How is killing innocent witches a right path?” I ask.

“I’m giving the people a choice,” Constanzo says. “I imagine you would have loved to have a choice in this life, wouldn’t you, Lorena?”

I answer him in silence.

“Let’s be honest with each other. It’s a little elitist to assume that you or any other bruja has a right to magic. Anyone and everyone should have a choice.” Constanzo holds his hands up.

“You’re a plague to our kind,” Suzanna shouts.

A bolt of electricity zings past my face and hits the ground behind us.

I’m teleported back to my high school. I see Manuel and I hear his harsh voice and feel his hand flying across my face. *You’re a plague on this earth. You and your kind.* Maybe Constanzo isn’t wrong. Maybe if I had been given a choice in this life, maybe if we all had a choice, things would be different. There would be less hate.

Wind shoves my hair out of its tie and I try to keep myself upright against the onslaught of magic swirling in the air. A bolt of electricity stabs the ground, sending several brujos flying back.

Through the chaos, Suzanna charges toward her brother.

A ball of electricity hovers above us, growing and growing in energy. I recognize the smell of this magic. It's the man from the church, the one who attacked Ago.

He clenches his hands into fists and I see him start to bring his hands together. Just before he sends another blast, I run forward. I nearly knock Suzanna down in my haste but I bend into the ground and hold my hands up. I don't have a clear idea or any semblance of how to use my magic in this moment. I only think of one word. Stop.

A barrier of fire extends from my open palms.

When his electricity meets my barrier, the sensation travels down my arms and makes me shiver despite the sweat on my brow.

"Santo," Suzanna breathes out.

"Climb," I tell Suzanna and the others behind me. We can't let Constanzo keep the high ground. Suzanna must agree because she urges the other brujos to follow. Every step up the broken hill, I can feel my barrier wrapping itself tightly around my people. It curves and expands around their feet and I try to focus on the push and pull of the barrier, not the shock I get with each blast of magic.

Once we reach leveled ground, I drop the barrier. I heave a breath and Suzanna and the other witches charge forward. I pull my obsidian blade from its sheath. I charge into battle with them.

Energy crackles between my fingertips as I charge. In one hand I hold the blade up high, and I call on my magic with my other. Heat sprouts in the palm of my hands. I close my fist and fire spreads up the length of my arm. I gasp, reel my arm back, and it's like I'm flying through the air.

The man who attacked Ago has the decency to look afraid, even if for a moment, and when I land, my fist of flame strikes the side of his face. He yells as the side of his face blisters and burns.

A blast of energy hits me from behind. Something grips the back of my head and yanks. I yell, grappling at the hands on my head. A flash of lightning strikes the area by my feet. The force of it throws me back and whoever is holding on to me goes soaring with me. I roll to my side.

Suzanna lies on the ground at my feet, also hit from the blast. Several other brujos tumble to the ground.

A tunnel of wind circles around us. The air thins and I claw at my throat, eyes bulging. Suzanna does the same until she sees Stephan at the edge of the hill. She crawls toward him slowly, the wind picking up.

I hear the click of a gun nearby. Then several more follow. No. Please no. I take a step forward and open my hands toward my people, ready to shield them when I'm thrown into the air. I'm lifted several feet into the sky and in a blink I'm slammed back to the ground. Grass and dirt spreads on my tongue. There's something metallic there, too. A clean pair of shoes comes into view as I lift my head slowly.

"You made a mistake coming to me tonight," Constanzo says above me.

My ears ring as I rise to my knees. “You have to be stopped.” I blink to clear my blurred vision.

Constanzo kneels beside me. “You want to stop what you don’t understand. Let me show you what I’m trying to do.” Constanzo holds his hand out for me.

I vaguely hear the fight going on around me. Suzanna is still on the ground. Stephan’s eyes are wet. “You’re killing people,” I say. *My people.*

“I will admit, the loss of any witch is a tragedy. But sacrifices must be made,” he says.

I shake my head.

“Sacrifices are what make us stronger, Lorena. It is how we become who we are meant to be.”

I jump up, magic flying out from my hands. Heat pours out of me, sinking to my toes and soaking the grass beneath me. Flames rise steadily. I channel them into several long spires. I send them outward, haphazardly and in every direction. I don’t wait to see if they hit anything.

I raise the obsidian blade and feign left. Switching the blade to my other hand, I aim at Constanzo.

He catches my wrist easily and twists. I cry out, dropping the blade. I’m still not strong enough. I shake my head, eyes filling with tears. Have I failed? Is this it?

Constanzo turns my face up toward him. “Come with me, Lorena. Let me show you what I’m trying to accomplish, and you’ll see I’m only trying to help witches like you,” Constanzo says. There is something soft hanging off his words. “So that accidents like the one that happened in your home doesn’t happen to other witches.”

My shoulders tense under his gaze.

“Did Mom tell you what she learned?” My voice comes out low, raspy.

Constanzo nods slowly. “I can rid you of your magic, Lorena. I can do that for you. If you’d like.” Constanzo is close enough to touch me but he’s careful. His hands frame my face but I never feel a touch. “You’ve made it clear how you feel about magic. And your mom spent years trying to find a way to give you what you want.” Constanzo laughs breathlessly. “I can do that for you now.”

“My mom tried,” I say. “My magic killed her for trying to get rid of it.” I grit my teeth. I can’t hide from this truth anymore.

“Because she wasn’t strong enough. But I am,” Constanzo says.

All I’ve wanted was to be free of magic. If I never had it, the little girl from the villa wouldn’t have died from my toxin. If I never had magic, I wouldn’t have had to leave my home. I could be with Izzy, dragging her to the fields at night to study the stars. If I never had magic, Mom and Caro would still be alive. Maybe if magic never existed then Mom, Caro, and me would still be together.

But things are different now.

No matter how often I tell myself this magic isn’t right, the heat pouring off of me in waves, the energy pulling from the earth and collecting into my body, it feels more right than anything I’ve felt in years. Is that what got my family killed? Or was it my resistance?

I glare at Constanzo’s outstretched hand. Before I can strike with my magic, something sharp strikes the back of my head and Constanzo fades into black.

I wake up inside one of Constanzo's vehicles. My head is propped on his shoulder and I inhale sharply, his cool mint scent overwhelming me.

"Where the hell are we?" I try to say, but the words come out jumbled. I cough the dryness out of my throat.

Constanzo's cool eyes send chills down my spine. "We are approaching my home," he says.

The car veers right. Through the tinted windows is a huge mansion, like something Caro used to say she wanted to live in. We come in through a large, gaudy, and ornate gate. A stonewall surrounds his compound, making it seem more like a castle than a house. The stucco siding and burnt orange pillars give way to a large bleached blue door. It opens as the car pulls to a stop.

I walk on shaky legs but refuse Constanzo's help. There are two men at the front door with guns strapped across their chest. If I made a run for it, how far would I get before they opened fire?

The off-white marbled floor clacks under Constanzo's boots. The stairway off to our right is chunky and marbled. I look up at the crystal chandelier hanging from high ceilings. This home doesn't feel like Mexico.

"Clear up one of the third-floor bedrooms for our guest," Constanzo says.

Three men rush from the entry way and take the stairs two at a time. Constanzo leads us past the stairway and into a small divot in the back of it. An elevator. I try to mask my surprise as Constanzo and I, and one of his men, steps inside.

"And you are?" I ask him.

He looks at Constanzo instead. When Constanzo looks away, he replies, “Jorge.”

The ride up is silent but I have so many questions about where we are and this compound. I notice a seldom amount of guards around. There were a few by the entrance and then there’s Jorge, who hasn’t left Constanzo’s side since I first saw him at the field. The reminder of the field brings an ache to my legs. I struggle to hold myself up, to keep my shoulders back.

“You will be able to rest soon enough,” Constanzo says softly.

His light tone startles me straight. The elevator bell dings and I exit slowly behind Constanzo and Jorge.

Instead of marble flooring, bright red carpet runs throughout the halls. The windows are tall and narrow and stained. Their vibrancy draws me in immediately. Every wall has a painting hanging on it. I see portraits of brown faces with flowers and big skirts with cowboy boots. I see suns and stars and moons and oceans. The third floor feels like a different home compared to its entrance.

Constanzo stops at one of the doors. He twists the rusted knob. “I shouldn’t have to tell you what will happen if you try to run,” he says. “Rest and tomorrow I will show you that what I am trying to accomplish here isn’t as evil as you think.”

He holds the door open for me and I step past him. It’s a massive room with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, dark wooden end tables on each side of the bed, and a vanity near a bay window. The bed looks twice as big as any bed I’ve ever slept on. I run my fingers over the sheets. They’re silky.

“There are extra blankets in the closet if you get cold,” Jorge says.

I notice Constanzo is not standing outside the door anymore. Jorge is all that is left and I look around the room awkwardly. Should I thank him for showing me to my room? For telling

me about the extra blankets? Not long ago we were willing to kill each other. I was willing to burn him and any other of Constanzo's men with my magic. Now he's giving me blankets in case I get cold.

"I will be back tomorrow morning to escort you to breakfast," he says. And with that, he closes the door.

I peel off my shoes. My feet reek of swamp water and dirt. My jeans have dark stains on them, which I hope are just grass stains. My hair is a frizzy mess balled up behind my head. There is a door beside one of the bookshelves and I open it hoping to find a washroom.

Bright orange tiles line the bathroom floor, reminding me of Mom's kitchen. Mom loved bright colours, especially orange. The shower stall is practically singing my name. I throw my clothes off in haste and fiddle with the shower knobs to get it to a nice warm temperature before climbing in.

My legs shake as I lean against the cool marble wall. I don't remember feeling this cold when I walked into the house. But I can't seem to stop shivering. I sit down in the middle of the shower and try to relax. It's a moot point, though, and I lose track of which is my tears and which is shower water.

I try to avoid my face in the mirror but even in passing, I can tell my face looks leaner, more cutthroat. The dark circles under my eyes are deeper than usual. I ignore it and examine the glass bottles on the bathroom vanity. They have no labels. One bottle is bright amber. Another is light pink. I lift the glass to my nose and blink, almost dropping the bottle. I lift the other one. I stare at the pink liquid, confounded.

It smells like Mom. The other smells like Caro. Why would Constanzo have bottled perfumes that smell like Mom and Caro in here? Maybe to comfort me? I shake my head and leave the bottles there.

On my way out of the washroom, my foot hits something heavy tucked into my pile of dirty clothes. I shove the jeans out of the way and find the obsidian dagger Vicente made for me.

But how? I thought I lost it on the field. I cradle the blade to my chest and place it underneath a pillow on the bed. The blankets Jorge told me about are thick, wool blankets that I lay out over the bed.

Finally laying down on soft sheets emphasizes the ache in my muscles. I somehow manage to sleep, one hand gripped over the blade's hilt.

The next day finds me still feeling exhausted and fatigued, but I dress myself in my swampy-smelling clothes and wait for Jorge. I eye the bottles of perfume in the washroom and debate dousing myself in the familiar scents. I'm sure if I was anyone else I'd find the familiar smells comforting in an unfamiliar place. But it seems too personal to me.

Breakfast consists of freshly-made waffles and fruit. The golden layer smothered by fresh strawberries and blueberries remind my stomach just how hungry it is. But when I spot the pot of steaming chilaquiles and café de olla in the corner, my mouth salivates.

I take my dish plate from the dining table and dump a spoonful of beans, rice, and chilaquiles onto my plate. I notice eggs cooked underneath the red chili of the chilaquiles. I leave a small space for some fruit, too. I barely make it back to the table before I'm digging in. The fried corn tortillas soaked in red salsa fill my mouth and nostrils with pure bliss. The fresh cheese taste exactly the same way my mom would make it. Mom was always good about leaving extra queso fresco on my plate.

I freeze when there's a cough beside me. I look up and see Jorge standing above me with a plate of his own.

I had allowed myself to completely forget where I was. All for a plate of food. I scold myself as Jorge sits at one end of the table.

"Shall we say grace?" he says.

I swallow my chilaquiles down. "Of course," I say.

Mom, Caro, and I used to say prayers after meals, not before. But all the same, I tuck my hands together.

Jorge begins. "Santa Muerte, we give thanks for the meal You have provided and aided in preparing. Please continue to protect and bless us. In Your name, amen."

He takes the seat beside mine.

I grab a piece of toast from the center of the table. "So what is your affinity?" I ask.

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

I shrug.

"Air," Jorge says. "I can command the winds. It's rare we have a fire user in the compound," he goes on, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

"But you have had fire users here? How many do you have?" I try not to seem too eager but Jorge is no idiot.

He smirks. "Nice try."

I contemplate my next question a few times. "Did Constanzo make you?" I say. "Give you powers, I mean."

Jorge shakes his head. "But I don't disagree with what he's trying to achieve. If there is a way to give Santa Muerte's blessings and gifts to everyone, why shouldn't we?"

Constanzo joins us then. He pulls at the cuff of his sleeves before taking a seat. I notice a few red spots splattered across.

“Good morning. I hope you slept well,” he smiles. Constanzo pours himself a hot cup of café de olla and sits across from me. “We have a big day ahead of us.” He takes a sip.

I glare at him across the table, stabbing my fork into a piece of fried tortilla.

Constanzo sighs. “I understand you are upset with me. I am sorry for how I let things unfold on the field the other night. But, please, I hate this silent treatment.”

“And what was the purpose of taking me? What do you want from me?”

Constanzo pauses, knife frozen on his piece of toast he was just lathering in jelly. “Understanding,” he says, brows bunched. He sets down his toast. “Lorena, I have worked with your family for many years now. I thought perhaps we would have grown close, you and I. I am not an evil man,” he says.

I slam my fork down. “So, underneath all the murder and drugs, you’re just a man with a heart of gold?” I retort.

Constanzo smirks, picks up a strawberry and pops it into his mouth. “Let’s leave judgment until the end of the day, yes? When you see what I’m doing and my reasons I hope you will see me differently.”

He seems so sure of himself.

“And what if you’re wrong?”

“Haven’t you seen the efforts of my work?” he says. “Weren’t your streets safer once I got there?”

“Your men are killing people on the streets. People who you sold drugs to.”

“I offer a release for them, they must pay a price. If they cannot meet that price, they should not be purchasing from me.” Constanzo leans forward. “But you cannot deny that my rules have maintained order in Matamoros.”

“So long as everyone follows them,” I retort.

Constanzo bites a piece of toast. “Of course.”

After breakfast, Jorge escorts me back to my room but the minute the door is locked shut, I feel my nerves bursting under my skin. I grab a hanger from the closet by the bed and pray I still know how to do this. Caro showed me how and I only ever used it once. I feed the hook into the gap between the door and the lock and pull the hanger toward me as I twist the knob. The door opens with a click. I step out into the hall and find it empty. I take the stairs instead of the elevator and navigate my way to the first floor.

I open several doors to nothing of interest. One was a supply closet of cleaning aids and clothes. Another was a pantry full to the brim with snacks. The last door I push on opens to a small corridor. I suddenly hear rustling from down the corridor. I step carefully inside, mindful that the floorboards creak underneath me. The rustling grows louder and I pause.

“Hello?” I whisper.

The rustling stops all together.

I take one more step.

“Hello?” someone whispers back. “Who is there?”

The door to my left suddenly sounds like it’s being clawed at. “Help,” the voice whispers again. It sounds light and airy.

I grab the knob and give it a jiggle. The door is locked. “It’s locked,” I relay to the voice. “I can’t get in. Can you unlock it from your side?”

The voice lets out a strangled cry. “No.”

I gulp. “Okay, step away from the door.” I roll up the sleeves of my hoodie. Magic flows freely up to my open palm. I let it hover over the doorknob. *Off*, I command it. A flare flies off my hands and melts the knob off the door. It puddles on the ground and I scramble to open the door before someone sees me.

Slumped at my feet is a young girl, around Mia’s age, and she’s dry heaving into the floor.

“Are you okay?” I ask, grabbing her shoulders gently.

Then she vomits on my shoes.

I quickly turn her onto her side as she continues to vomit. The red colour of it worries me but I tap my sleeve against her forehead to wipe the sweat. When she finally stops, she opens her eyes. They’re swollen and her pupils are dilated. She has sores at the corners of her mouth. Her fingertips are purple and swollen, too. Whatever is making her sick is killing her.

“Take deep breathes,” I instruct.

She does, but it comes out wheezy.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Selena,” she says.

I move the hair in her face behind her ear. “Hi, Selena. I’m Lorena. Can you tell me what happened to you?”

Selena’s eyes glisten for a moment before the tears spill out. “They took it from me, my magic.”

I hesitate. “Who?”

“Constanzo,” she says. “And a woman. I don’t know who she was.”

“You were the first success,” I say, recalling Vicente’s words.

She rears up suddenly. “They take more than your powers,” she gasps. She hits the center of her chest as if it’s causing her pain. “They take something else. They took a piece of me. Oh and it hurts. It hurts so much.” Selena slumps against me.

“Hey, it’s ok. I can take you to people who will help,” I say.

Selena shakes her head. “You don’t understand. We can’t survive like this.” She grabs one of my hands and traces a swollen finger over my palm lines. “Magic is engrained into every part of our beings. Take that away and we are empty shells.” Selena’s voice quivers.

“If my mom knew it would do this to you she wouldn’t have given Constanzo the spell,” I say, voice uneven.

“Constanzo knows the truth,” Selena says, brows furrowed. “You can’t let him do this to anyone else.”

Selena gasps loudly and throws herself out of my arms, flinging herself onto the ground. She convulses and grabs uselessly at the floor. Her chest rises and her legs twist.

“I always thought she talked too much,” says a voice behind us. Constanzo steps closer, hand closed into a tight fist. The exerted energy makes his entire arm tremble.

“No!” I say. “Stop this!”

Constanzo’s hand flies across my face. “I am being merciful. I will end her suffering for her.” Constanzo’s eyes are wild as he watches Selena twist and writhe against the floor.

With my cheek stinging, I watch the light go out in Selena’s eyes. “Santa Muerte have mercy on your soul,” I whisper for her.

“It was the kind thing to do,” Constanzo says. “She was in pain and now, she can rest. It is like I told you, Lorena. Sacrifices must be made.”

Jorge pauses in the doorway. He stares at the broken and lifeless body.

“Jorge, take Lorena back to her room and guard the door,” Constanzo says.

“Yes,” Jorge says, blinking. He moves quickly, yanking me up from under my arms. He drags me out of the room and out of the corridor. It isn’t until we’ve cleared the corridor that the smell of burning flesh hits my nose.

I take a shaky breath. “Did you know about her?”

Jorge’s jaw tightens. “No,” he says.

Selena’s screams have stopped but I hear them all the way back to my room.

By the time I am summoned to Constanzo's office, the sun has gone down and the sky reflects a dark orange and purple hue. Jorge comes to collect me from my room where I spent the entire day throwing the obsidian blade at the wall, creating about a dozen holes into the door. Turns out it's a lot harder than it looks in movies to throw daggers at walls.

Jorge takes me to the second floor, a floor I haven't been allowed on till now. He indicates a door at the end of the hall. It's colder on this floor, I note.

"It's open," he says.

Constanzo's office reeks of herbs. I notice a small black pot in a corner that is filling the room with fumes. It carries a hint of jasmine in it. It calms my nerves only slightly.

"Welcome," Constanzo greets, pulling away from his desk at the middle of the room.

"Shall we begin the tour?"

"Tour?" I grit.

"Yes. The entire second floor is where I run my experiments," he says. He grabs a set of keys off his desk and leads us back out into the hall.

"You mean where you kill innocent brujas and take their powers. What do you do with their powers?" I ask.

He locks his office door. "Depends," he answers, vaguely.

We walk three doors down and Constanzo unlocks another door. Inside are several glass bottles filled with various colours of liquid, or something just as viscous. I take a step inside to get a better look. The liquid inside glows iridescent. Constanzo lifts up a bottle and hands it to me. It's bright yellow and when I hold it, tiny charges of electricity shoot within it.

"What is this?" I breathe.

“Magic,” Constanzo whispers. He swirls another bottle full of light blue.

Off to the corner is a box full of these bottles.

“You know, as a kid I grew up next door to witches. I always thought they were fascinating. I mean, you can create something by just imagining it in your mind’s eye. You can make someone forget you with a simple potion. You can make someone love you with the right words and an elixir.” The corners of his mouth lift. “And you’re all so beautiful. Lily, the witch next door stole my heart.” Constanzo’s grip on the bottle tightens. “Her mother said she could not be with someone like me, a human. She was promised to another witch. But it’s like you say, Lorena, we don’t have a choice in what we are. I had no choice,” he says, voice trailing off. “I wondered how different life could be if we had more choices. If I could become a witch, I could have Lily.”

“But it didn’t end there,” I say, thinking of Selena.

“No,” Constanzo says. “because the magic must come from somewhere. And if I could make Lily into a human, then we could be together all the same. Choices,” Constanzo reiterates. “So many choices.”

He sets the bottles of magic aside, his voice hardening. “There’s a huge market for selling magic, it turns out.”

I turn, my hold on the bottle tightening. “You’re selling magic?”

Constanzo’s eyes lighten, his voice rising. “Yes,” he says. “At a pretty high price, too.”

Shaking my head in disbelief, I say, “we thought you were keeping it all to yourself.”

Constanzo steers us out of the room and relocks it. “Well that’s awfully selfish, isn’t it? I offer a special price for us regular humans who were not born of magic.”

I am reminded of Manuel from school and his display of magic, and his surprise.

“What about the physical price?” I ask, recalling Manuel’s shaking limbs.

Constanzo’s eyes widen. “I will admit it is an unforeseen cost. But those who have tasted the magic I offer have given me no complaints. They continue to purchase.”

“Purchasing the same magic that’s killing them,” I mutter.

“With everything in life, there are risks,” Constanzo replies. “But the selling of magic isn’t my sole purpose here. I mentioned a right path and I meant it.” He leads us to another door at the farthest end of the hall. “Are you familiar of the story about old earth and its many moons?”

Is he aware of the big event coming? I try to maintain a neutral face. “A children’s story about moons fighting with each other. Yes, I’m familiar.”

Constanzo slides the key into the lock. “What if I told you it isn’t just a story?” He turns the key. “What if I told you it wasn’t really moons fighting each other, but celestial beings with great power?” He pushes the door aside for me. The pitch-black darkness of the room isn’t at all inviting. “And what if I told you that those powers did not just go away when they were forced apart by Santa Muerte?”

I gulp, stepping inside.

Black ink is splayed across the floor in a specific pattern – a sort of half-star form with lines running across it. There are unlit candles at every point and dried herbs.

Dark red stains stretch across the black star. It coats the herbs and fills the room with a metallic taste when it hits my tongue, as if the blood is still fresh.

“Three moons, three celestial beings, three great powers and the only place Santa Muerte thought to hide them was in her own people.” Constanzo closes the door behind us.

I hear the resonant sound of the lock clicking into place. I jump at the sound, my blood pulsing. The back of my throat begins to burn.

“I don’t understand,” I breathe.

Constanzo reaches a black box, one that looks very similar to a church’s tabernacle. The golden lock slides off and he pulls two vials from them. Inside, brilliant white light glows. Energy spills out over the capped vials. I feel it raise the hair on my arms.

“Santa Muerte hid the celestial powers inside witches,” Constanzo says, eyes wide with wonder as he holds the vials closer. “Amazing, isn’t it? All this power contained in one of you.” He gingerly places them back into the black box. “They were not easy to find. There’s so many of you. But once I found the first one, the second came easier. It’s like the powers call to each other.” His wild gaze meets mine. “And once the second one was extracted, it showed me where to find the third.”

I stumble, my legs hitting the table beside me as they falter. Empty bottles shatter on the ground. The noise sounds so far away and my vision blurs. “What—” I try to say.

Constanzo hovers above me. “I am truly sorry,” he says. “But when these powers come together into one host, they can alter the very fabric of reality.” He brings his face close enough for me to feel his breath fan across my cheeks. “Imagine it, Lorena. A world where cancer is cured with magic, where wars are stopped with magic, where everyone gets a chance at power.”

Constanzo goes around to each point on the black painted star beneath me and lights each point. “My very own utopia,” he whispers. “And all with Santa Muerte’s help.”

He crushes the dried herbs before shoving them into my mouth. I gag, coughing up verbena and something citrusy. As the room spins, I register Constanzo speaking in a different

language and sprinkling something wet across my face. My eyelids grow heavy and when I shut them, everything goes silent.

I'm unsure how much time has passed, but as light and shadows take shape around me, I realize I've been moved. Sun bleeds through the open blinds and I drag my hands over my face, squinting. I swing my legs over the bed and immediately they buckle. My chest feels hollow, like something is missing inside it. I lift my hands toward my face. The tips of my fingers are numb and smeared with black ink. The memory of what happened returns in flashes.

The semi star on the floor. The candles. The herbs. Constanzo and his search for celestial powers.

I race out of bed, forcing my legs to function, and wrestle with the door. "Let me out!" I yell, hoarsely.

Heavy footfalls approach the door. I breathe heavily, waiting for Jorge to open it. Constanzo stands on the other side in his all-black suit and though part of me feels the anger bubbling under my skin, the other part of me notices the paleness of his skin and the darkness under his eyes.

"Good afternoon, Lorena. It pleases me to see you awake and alert. You have been in and out of sleep for the past two days. The extraction was a fantastic success, by the way. How are you feeling?"

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm on him. I jump, wrapping my legs around him and scraping my nails across his pale face. Blood drops blossom on his face. I'm yelling, wildly thrashing and scratching at him.

Constanzo seems too stunned to do anything as I scratch up his face, a face I begrudgingly found beautiful once. I scold myself, no part of him is beautiful.

Hands grab my arms and yank me back while Constanzo detangles himself from me. His hair falls around his eyes. “Lock her in again. Don’t let her out for anything,” he breathes.

“I will kill you for this!” I scream after him. The hollowness in my chest continues to ache.

Jorge shakes my shoulder. “Enough,” he says, once Constanzo is out of view.

I whirl on him. “How could you let him do this?” My voice breaks.

Jorge hands his head, refusing to meet my gaze. “We will not forget your sacrifice,” he says.

“My sacrifice? He took my powers against my will.” Tears spill openly as the realization sinks in.

I sink to the bedroom floor. Jorge leaves me at some point. The sun fades into darkness. I want to kill Constanzo for this. I want to thank Constanzo for this. I run my nails along my forearms. How could I think of thanking him for this? The bitter voice at the back of my head reminds me what I’ve done with my powers.

Caro and Mom’s face appear behind my eyelids.

No, I remind myself, my powers are not all destruction. I saved people with them. I found a family with them.

Cold seeps into my bones as I lay on the floor, wet from my tears and no longer able to generate the same kind of heat from my powers. I grit my teeth. I’ll find a way to get them back.

An idea occurs to me on the second day. I take the two bottles of perfume from the vanity and dump them into the bathtub. I break a big candle in half and set them on the linoleum tub. Despite the candles, there aren't any matches to light them – but I'm not even sure this'll work to begin with. I swallow the doubt and begin.

The day I made it into Aguila, I prayed in a similar way and Caro appeared. Maybe if I try it again, I can summon her or someone else to help. It's a long shot, especially considering I'm not sure it was the prayer that conjured Caro in the first place, if at all. There's also the matter of my magic. Without it, am I still a bruja?

Hours and hours pass, the sun comes and goes, and nothing happens. Another piece of my heart cracks when I relent, draining the perfumes that smell of Caro and Mom, throwing the candles away and contemplating what comes next.

I'm invited to dine with Constanzo the next day. This is it, I tell myself, and I tuck my obsidian blade beneath my arm sleeve and fold my hands as I walk with Jorge, into the elevator, and to the dining room where Constanzo waits for me.

My stomach flutters with nerves. I need to be strong. Sweat collects on my palms.

Constanzo sets an empty plate down when I enter. He's dressed in a white button up untucked from his dress pants, sleeves rolled, and hair uncombed. "Thank you for joining me," he says, though we both know I never had a choice.

He gestures to an empty chair for me right beside him. There are two main entries into the dining room and Jorge is at one of them. Even if I manage to stab and kill Constanzo, Jorge won't let me get far. Neither will Constanzo's men guarding the compound. But I don't care about the rest of it, so long as I kill Constanzo.

He pulls the chair out for me and with my knees bent, I strike.

The blade slips into my hands and I charge at Constanzo, blade pointed up. He moves in a flash, gripping my wrist and twisting it.

I yelp, my grip on the blade loosening.

“Stop,” Constanzo says but I realize he’s talking to Jorge, who has moved closer. To me, Constanzo bends his mouth beside my ear. “I wouldn’t do that. It would be a shame to have to kill you now, after everything.”

With my wrist twisted and blade slipping between my fingers, I feel the last of my hope slipping, too. Then two more figures enter the dining room.

Constanzo follows my gaze. “If you kill me,” he says, nonchalantly, “my men have orders to kill them.”

I wince. “How did you find them?”

Constanzo strokes my neck. “We have our ways.”

I let out a shaky breath. “We?”

My hand begins to shake, the pain overriding my thoughts. I’m stunned by how much it hurts, having gone through worse and not being so weak like this. It must have been my magic, I realize.

“Feels odd, doesn’t it?” Constanzo whispers to me.

“What does?” I grit.

“Being human.” Then his smile widens. “Would you like to meet her now? The Seer, that is. She is eager for a proper introduction.”

He leads us to the basement, and as we descend the steps, my blood runs cold. “Lorena?

Are you okay?”

Vicente's pleas are broken and warbled by the forcefield keeping him captive.

I shake my head, not to his question but to the fact that he's here; he wasn't supposed to be caught. He was supposed to be okay. So were Ago and Mia.

Then I see her. Her long brown hair cascades down her back in elegant waves. Hands tucked into her denim jacket, she turns toward us. She no longer has glasses. The colour of her eyes have changed, too.

"Angelica?" I say.

Angelica, human girl, an aide to Silvia's coven, a college student, human. I repeat this over and over in my head but it doesn't change the fact that the person before me is in fact her. She smiles over her glass of red wine.

"Lorena, meet the Seer," Constanzo says.

My mind rushes. The man at the business meeting on the field, he said something about talking to the Seer, the one in charge. I shake my head. "But you're human," I say it, plainly.

But Angelica puts a hand on his shoulder and says, "No, I'm not. I am a bruja with a very particular skill set."

"What's a seer?" Mia asks, quietly.

Angelica cuts her a look and I rush in. "Someone who can glimpse the future through dreams. They're rare in our world. And undetectable to brujas because they don't generate enough power. Their magic doesn't carry a smell."

Angelica walks across the room. At the table, she grinds herbs before lighting a bundle of incense and sticking one side of it into a bowl. It sizzles before releasing more steam. "My mother was a bruja. My mother wanted more than this life of magic and worship. She said she wanted to see and experience new things. So she moved to America." Angelica puts the thistle

down. “She married a human, then had me. You can imagine her excitement when I exhibited no active magic. How could a mother celebrate her own child’s deficiencies?” She shakes her head in disgust.

“So you left and found Silvia’s coven?” I say.

“No,” says Angelica. She holds the bowl out for me.

I glare at it. “I’m not drinking that.”

Her lips twitch. “It will help with the pain.”

“Why should I believe that?”

Angelica shrugs. “In just a few minutes you will experience the most excruciating pain of your life. When Constanzo took your celestial magic he performed a difficult black magic spell. Its side effects will leave you feeling like you are being torn apart from the inside out.” She holds the bowl to me again. “Your choice.”

I stare at the bowl. If Ago, Mia, and Vicente weren’t here, I may have refused it. But if I die, there is no guarantee they’ll live.

I grab the bowl and tentatively bring it to my lips. I keep my eyes trained on Ago and Mia as the liquid pools at the entrance of my mouth. It barely hits my tongue when I taste it. Rosewater. I jolt back.

“Please,” Constanzo says.

I take a deep breath and toss the liquid back. It’s not as sweet as the one Mom had me drink. I cough several times as it hits the back of my throat but I swallow it down.

“Your involvement in our plan isn’t over,” Angelica says. “While you have given us a key element, we still need your help with one last thing.”

“What more could you possibly want from me?”

“As you’ve already seen,” Constanzo starts, “taking powers from witches is risky business. And the process of transferring magic into a non-magic host is slowly killing the host. We need you to figure out a way to stop that from happening.”

“How would I know?”

“We believe your mom found a way to do it. And you have been watching your mother work her magic for years. If anyone knows how, it’s you,” explains Angelica.

“Why did you lie to Silvia? Why lie to any of them?” I say through gritted teeth.

Angelica walks around the table. “When I learned about Vicente’s involvement as a spy,” she starts, smiling wickedly, “I had to step in. And Silvia has a thing for taking in lost animals.” Her sharp nails dig into my shoulder blade, while her other hand grips my twisted wrist.

I flinch.

“I have three of your allies under my roof and you have zero powers,” she says. Her nails dig in harder. “Find a way to keep the hosts alive and your friends won’t die.”

Even as she says it, I can’t deny that since she started talking, I’ve been trying, praying, for any sort of magic to materialize – to help me. I glare openly at her. “And what do you get out of this?”

Her brows furrow, like my question has an obvious answer. Her smile is surprisingly tender. “What I am owed,” she says. “Respect.”

“Maybe if we climb down?”

“It’s three stories up, Mia. We’ll die climbing down.”

“We could tie the bed sheets to make a rope?”

“You watch too many movies, you know that?”

I groan against the grating voices. Something wet lathers my face and trails down my neck. I try to move away from it. My movement feels too slow though and I end up grabbing the side of my face rather than the wet cloth.

“Are you finally awake or are you gonna yell at us again before passing out?” asks Mia.

“Depends what I’ve been yelling at you for,” I cough out.

Ago hands me a cup of water. “That we shouldn’t have gone looking for you.”

“Then, yes. I will be yelling at you some more,” I answer. “You shouldn’t have come for me.”

“How were we supposed to know Angelica was leading us into a trap?” Mia protests.

I lift my head and sit up against the headboard of the bed, muscles feeling heavy and sluggish still.

“So this is what it’s like to be human,” I groan.

“Not that great is it?” Ago says.

No, I want to say. It’s not. But I let her question fall and swing my legs over the bed, coming up to the window.

“Lorena,” Ago says. “I have to know. Did you ask him to take away your magic?”

I press my nails into my palm so hard I think they may draw blood. A new emotion washes over me, drowning out any other feeling other than shame. Tears spill onto my hands.

Ago stands beside me, her presence warm and safe. I latch on to that feeling. And to her.

A few weeks ago, I would have volunteered to give up my powers, but the truth of the matter is, I didn't. Constanzo speaks about giving people a choice yet he took mine away. I hate him for it. I hate him.

Ago brushes my hair back. "We can still make it out of this alive," she says, almost frantic. "Play along with him. Make him think you're helping."

"And when I can't give them what they want?"

Ago's face hardens. "We'll be long gone before that."

Several hours later they come for me. I washed my face and changed my clothes and agreed to the cane Jorge offered me.

Apparently, there is a lab room in the compound, so I guess I shouldn't be too surprised, considering Constanzo's experiments. I'm more surprised with how extensive the lab is. Not that I know too much about lab work or science in general. I'm better with astrophysics than chemistry or biology.

But Constanzo moves around like he's so much more at home in a lab coat surrounded by blue and green vials and herbs and microscopes than anywhere else I'd imagine him. He uses his technical precision to add the exact amount of thyme, vervain, and sandalwood into an already boiling pot of orange peel water. Mom always said this was good for protection and purification. We are hoping that by adding in bruja blood (my suggestion) and cow's blood (Constanzo's suggestion) it will make a potent potion to increase the chances of survival during transference.

"You're positive your mom never said anything about a medicine she was making for me?" Constanzo asks again for the thirtieth time.

“I’m positive,” I say with a sigh. “Mom knew how I felt about her working with you. She kept all that stuff to herself.”

Constanzo applied a sticky substance over some of the herbs and placed it under his microscope. He peered in. “How did you feel? About me working with your mom, I mean.” Constanzo looks at me from the microscope.

I almost feel self-conscious. I contemplate my words. “I didn’t like that my mom was putting her life and her family’s life in danger, and for someone going around selling drugs to my villa, to my people, and killing witches for power.”

Constanzo never takes his eyes off me. “Well it’s not going to be like that anymore.” He peers back into the microscope. I’m hoping we can find a way to save them once it’s over. That way no one has to suffer,” says Constanzo.

“But someone will always suffer,” I say. “That’s just life.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” he says.

He is so adamant that he can cure this life of its ailments that it reminds me of someone else who used to believe that, too.

“Caro,” I whisper.

“Did you say something?”

“No,” I recover quickly. “I was just saying I could use a bathroom break. Is there a washroom nearby?”

Constanzo looks at me wearily. “Down the hall and first door to the right. If you’re not back in five minutes I’m coming to get you.”

“What am I going to do?” I say, opening the door. “No more magic, remember?” Though I’m praying that even without active powers, I will still be able to contact Caro.

I lock myself in the washroom and lean against the cool tiled wall. The white lights feel too bright on me but I focus my mind on Caro. “Caro, are you there?”

I get nothing.

I pull the sleeves of my hoodie up and lean forward against the sink. I run the tap. “Caro?” I try again. I try to find the part inside me that I tap into when calling on Caro. It’s where our memories, both good and bad, are stored. It’s a part of me that will always belong to Caro. I search and search but in the place where she usually is, where the spark for connection and bonding is, I find nothing. I grab at my chest and my hand slides down to my stomach. “Caro, please,” I cry. But that hollow feeling replaces all that is Caro. It replaces all that is my magic and my faith. All of it is gone.

I shake my head and even though I know my powers are gone, I try to call on them anyway. I beg and pray but get no answer. Energy doesn’t fizzle and crack between my fingers and they suddenly go numb. When I try to say a prayer to Santa Muerte, I dry heave into the toilet until I fill it up with red and yellow chunks.

I am flushing the contents when there is a knock at the bathroom door.

“Lorena, time’s up,” Constanzo says through the door.

I wash my hands quickly and open the door. “Sorry,” I say wiping my mouth. “Stomach problems.”

Constanzo looks at me weirdly but doesn’t question it. We go back to the lab and continue our toxins. We make three different toxins but test none of them because I know in order to test them, we need test subjects, which means they’ll be transferring powers to individuals soon. Constanzo pricks his finger and is about to slip a few drops of blood into two of the mixtures when I stop him.

“We don’t know if it’ll work since you weren’t born a witch,” I say.

He grumbles but otherwise agrees with me. I prick my finger instead. Constanzo finds separate vials for each mixture.

An idea takes fruition in my mind and I consider my words carefully. “Do you think I can see Vicente?” I ask, helping him clean up the lab.

Constanzo stops. “Why would you want to see him?”

“I just want to see him, make sure he’s okay,” I answer.

“I haven’t hurt him too bad. But you have to understand, I trusted him and he betrayed my trust,” Constanzo explains.

“Of course,” I say. I try a different angle. “But I’m a different person than when he last saw me. I should explain what happened and what you’re doing for our kind. Maybe I can get him to see reason.” I’m not sure if Constanzo believes I’m actually on his side, but I do know that his fascination, or rather his obsession, for witches can be used against him.

Constanzo puts a cork into the vial tubes. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt to let you see him. But you’ll only have a few minutes.”

I force my hand over Constanzo’s. I try to keep my trembling to a minimum. “Thank you,” I say.

“I will come for you in a little while,” he smiles.

I wring my hands together back in my bedroom, trying really hard not to vomit again, especially in front of Ago and Mia.

“What if he keeps you down there?” Ago asks, assuming that Vicente is being kept somewhere down in the basement.

“He won’t,” I say.

“What if he hurts you too?”

I sigh, frustrated and try to swallow past the lump and empty hollowness creeping up my throat. “He won’t,” I say again. “Despite everything, Constanzo is still obsessed with brujas.”

“Obsessed to the point of hurting them,” Mia mutters.

“He doesn’t *want* to be hurting them though. Angelica is using Constanzo’s obsession to her benefit and surprisingly, Constanzo is too stupid to see it,” I say. “I mean, I talked him into letting me see Vicente, didn’t I?”

Both Ago and Mia remain silent.

There’s two rapid light taps at the door.

“That must be him,” I whisper. I grab hold of Ago’s hands in mine. “If I don’t make it back, take Mia and run.”

“But you just said he wouldn’t hurt you,” Ago replies.

Constanzo knocks a few more times, more rapidly, and I give Mia one last look before leaving the room.

I follow closely behind Constanzo, not wanting to find Angelica lurking around or else my efforts to see Vicente are ruined. My breath hitches as Constanzo leads me down into the basement.

I walk to the outline of the forcefield, noticing it’s intricate markings. Its crisscrossed lines and sharp turns are shape I don’t recognize, but all points converge in the center where Vicente stands.

“Don’t get too close,” Constanzo says.

I place a hand out tentatively. I'm about a foot away from touching Vicente's face when an invisible force sends a spark of electricity up my hand and through my arm. I yank my hand away with a hiss.

"It's a charmed barrier. It contains whoever is inside it and immobilizes their abilities. It will also hurt whoever tries to get in," says Constanzo. "Unless you're the one who put it there."

Vicente continues to glare at Constanzo though, deciding not to acknowledge my presence. "You and him a thing now or what?" His voice sounds disconnected, farther away than I've ever known Vicente to be.

Constanzo's eyes flinch but he straightens himself.

"No," I say. I take another tentative step. "He just wants to make the world better, is that so wrong?" My eyes narrow, imploring him to see past the words.

He stares at me quizzically. "You agree with him and his methods?"

I dare a quick glance behind me. Constanzo is at the other end of the room but I take care with my words, in case he hears. "I came to make sure you're okay," I whisper.

Vicente says coming dangerously close to the barrier. He searches my gaze for several long moments. He must find what he's looking for because his shoulders relax slightly. "It's not too late," he whispers back. "Take Mia and Ago and fight your way out. You're stronger than them." He nods a few times.

I hesitate and, in my hesitation, I feel that guilt resurface. "He took them," I say. "I don't have my powers anymore."

The hope leaves Vicente's eyes and he casts his gaze down. He clears his throat. "Okay, that's okay," he says. "You can get out. Do you still have the obsidian blade I gave you?"

I recall where I hid it. "Yes," I nod.

“Good. You can use that. It’s more powerful than you realize,” says Vicente. “Santa Muerte and her army used to use them. You can too.” He offers me a hopeful smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I’ll get you out, Vicente,” I say, vehemently. “I promise.”

A sad look crosses his face. It reminds me of the night on the grass as we looked at the stars.

Constanzo’s voice rises, and I feel his towering presence at my back. “Time to go,” he says.

I give him a nod and face Vicente again. “Think about what I said,” I say.

“The answer is no,” Vicente says. There is no heat behind his words.

I shake my head frantically. “But,” I say, tears pooling in my eyes, and all at once, realization dawns on me. Vicente is a blurry mess as Constanzo drags me back up the basement stairs.

Vicente doesn’t want me to save him.

It's much later in the night, when Mia's breathing has evened out, that Ago and I brainstorm a plan. Without my powers, the odds of a successful escape are low, but neither of us mentions that.

"Getting out of this mansion won't be difficult," says Ago. "It's escaping the compound that will prove difficult. There are men posted around this entire place. There were at least three by the gates."

I chew on my nails for a second. "Maybe we can provide a distraction?"

"Like what?"

I could have done it with my powers. I know this. But that's not an option anymore. I rake a hand through my hair in frustration. "I don't know. Maybe I can convince Constanzo to let me past the gate."

"Constanzo may be dumb, but he's not that stupid," Ago says. "We're better off just making a run for it." Ago hangs her head, glances at Mia, before getting up to the washroom.

"Maybe we should," I muse aloud.

Ago comes back with a wet face and I can't tell if it's from the sink or her tears but she sits beside me again.

I run my thumb along her hand. "Let's try your idea," I say.

"What idea is that?"

"Run for it."

Mia turns over in the bed. "You can't be serious," she says.

I shrug. "You got a better idea?"

Mia smiles sadly at Ago. “Maybe. But you won’t like it.” Mia gets up from the bed and starts ripping apart the sheets.

*

“You’re right,” I heave into the cold night. I grab uselessly to the wall and tighten my hold on the bed sheets. I wait for Mia to propel herself down another few feet before following suit. “I don’t like this idea.”

The bed sheets look like they’re one wrong tug from tearing and dropping both Mia and I to the gravel below, but we keep steady and we move slowly. Ago is still up top inside the room making sure we make it down safely. I told her I would stay behind to make sure the bed sheets held, but Ago refused, adamant that Mia needed me when she made it to the ground.

Mia grunts as she jumps down, letting go of the sheets, gripping the bag at her hip full of Mia’s makeshift bombs. ‘They’re more like sparklers,’ is what she said. The bottles clink but as she presses the bag tighter, the bottles settle. Mia gives me the thumbs up to continue descending.

“What do we do about Vicente?” Mia asks.

I freeze. Ago and I hadn’t told Mia that we would be leaving Vicente behind, but more than that, I forgot the obsidian blade inside. “Ago!” I whisper harshly.

“Jeez,” Mia exclaims searching the area around us. “Someone will hear,” she says.

“Ago!” I try again.

She peers down. She holds her hand out in a gesture.

“Washroom. First drawer on the left,” I say. “Blade.”

“What? First what?”

“Oh Jesús,” Mia mumbles.

I clear my throat and cup my hands around my mouth. “Drawer. First drawer. There is a blade.”

Ago’s eyes suddenly lighten. She gives me the okay hand.

It feels like she’s gone for hours and not seconds and I’m jumping on my heels waiting to see her brown waves and light skin in the window.

“Lorena, what about Vicente?” Mia asks me.

I cast my eyes down for a moment before looking for Ago’s figure again. When I can’t even get the words out, I realize leaving Vicente behind isn’t an option. “I’ll go back for him,” I tell her.

“What?” Mia starts. She grabs my shoulders and forces my attention. “You can’t go in by yourself.”

I wipe my hands over my face. “I won’t risk your life to save his. It’s too dangerous for you. They’ll be guarding the basement and without my powers...”

“What about mine?” she asks. “I can help.”

“You have no idea how to even use them,” I argue. “That’s even more dangerous.”

Mia looks at me incredulously. “I’m not leaving him,” she says again.

A heavy pressure on the sheets brings me back to the window. Ago has a leg over the ledge and a hand on the sheets. She moves rigidly out the window and when she finally lets go of the ledge, I can hear her exclaim from below.

Mia suddenly shoves me forward. “Someone’s coming!” she whispers.

We both crouch down into the bushes and I watch Ago hold completely still. The sheets sway with the wind and I grab hold of the bottom half, hoping to still it.

A man comes up from around the corner. He spits into one of the bushes across the way and pauses just in line of sight of the window and Ago hanging there. There's something large strapped across his shoulder and as he turns his back to us, I see the gun.

Mia grabs something off the ground and holds it tightly.

I tap her wrist.

She shows me a rock.

I shake my head. There's a fifty-fifty chance that'll work. Either the guard will walk away shortly or the sound of the rock hitting something will only make him suspicious. I hold Mia's hand to stop her.

She opens her mouth and I quickly put a finger against my lips.

We watch the guard check something on his wrist. He spits on the ground again. Then he walks away.

Mia releases the rock at the same time I release a breath. I signal for Ago to keep moving.

"Lorena," Mia says, "they have guns." She sucks in her lower lip but I notice the tremble.

I nod once. "I know."

Ago leaps down. "Let's go," she says.

"Did you know Lorena was planning to pull a one-woman rescue for Vicente?" says Mia.

Ago breathes heavily from the trek down the window. She pulls the blade out from her belt loop. "I thought you said we had to leave him."

What?" Mia's voice rises.

"Okay, we need to move now," I say, leading them away. I glance around the corner to check for guards.

"You were going to leave him!"

“Mia!” I yell back at her. “The best way you can help him is if you make it out of this compound alive and go get Silvia and the other witches to help. Going in with me, with no magical training, will only get you killed and I will not have more of my own family’s blood on my hands. Got it?”

She flinches back, her eyes glossing over.

We race across the gravel pathway and lay flat into the underbrush. I turn my head to face Mia and Ago. “Mia, wanna try using that rock now?” I say.

Despite her glare, she takes a rock in her hand. “Where?”

“Back towards our window. If they think we’ve escaped, we can use the chaos to our advantage,” I say.

Mia waits for another guard to make the rounds near our side of the compound. Just as he’s about to turn the corner, Mia chucks the rock toward our window and it hits the lower window with a loud clack. The guard’s gun immediately rises. He examines left then examines right in quick motions before moving forward to where the rock landed. Then he sees the bed sheets and the open window. He quickly gets on his radio.

“The prisoners have escaped,” he yells into it.

Then it’s a flurry of action. Bright white lights flash throughout the open compound. A blaring alarm makes me cringe deeper into the gravel. Boots pounding into the ground kick up dirt and gravel and the rest of us hold incredibly still. The gates have four guards on them. As the alarm rings out, we watch them scramble to and from the gates controls.

“You sure that’s going to work?” I ask Mia.

She pulls a bottle from her bag. “Did I ever question your magical knowledge?” She aims toward the gate. “Get ready to run.”

We rear up, waiting for Mia. I slide the obsidian blade out. I'm not even sure I'll still be able to move the way I trained without my powers, but even without fast movement, I still know my way around hand-to-hand combat.

"Go!" she says.

The bottle hits the metal gates and a tiny explosion goes off. The mini bomb is enough to stun the guards at the gate and confuse them as we sneak behind.

Ago and Mia use nearby rocks to knock out two of the guards. They tuck away into the brush while I handle the other two. I twist the blade from hand to hand, ducking under their punches and dealing out some of my own. My moves aren't as fast or precise as I want them, but the hits I land do the job.

I sink my blade into one of the guard's shoulders and throat punch him the way Vicente taught me to. He falls limp to the ground.

Mia is already at the gate's control panel getting the gate open when I hear my name tear through the chaos. It's deep and guttural and raw. It scares me to the very core.

I turn toward Ago and Mia. "Run. Get Silvia and the other witches. Whatever you see or hear, don't come back," I say quickly.

Mia trembles, shaking her head. "No, what about you? I can't leave you, too."

I cradle her face and wipe the dirt from under her eyes. "I'll survive," I say. "Go!"

I leave Ago with one last fleeting look – a look I hope conveys as much as I want to say: thank you for your friendship, thank you for being my family, I love you.

Constanzo emerges from the mansion with black ink written across his chest and abdomen. Angelica is close behind with her red silk dress soaked through with a dark liquid.

I interrupted their ceremony. I will no longer run, I tell myself. This is more than just saving Vicente. I grip the obsidian blade, falling into a fighter's stance.

More guards funnel out of the mansion and surround me. I jump toward the guard closest to me and plunge my dagger deep into his chest. He stops fighting immediately. I keep my momentum going and pull the blade out, twist at the waist, and drag the dagger along the second guard's arm. He hisses and tries to grab me. I pivot and feel my hand move instinctually, burying itself deep into the guard's throat.

With a different kind of magic, I turn my blade and prepare myself for the next guard when I'm suddenly flying through the air. Maybe not all hope is lost if I can do this without my powers. I smile, giddily. But then my back meets the gravel in one swift, harsh moment.

Constanzo has his arms held steadily in front of himself, glare dead set on me. From the ground, I spot the bag Mia had full of her tiny bombs. I crawl for it, hand closing over the straps just as Constanzo drags me toward him with a gust of wind.

I lose my grip on the bottle and it shatters at our feet seconds before the explosion hits. Something hits my eye and Constanzo and I go flying back. White smoke smothers us and my mother's sweet rose scent fills the air.

My head falls back and I peer one eye at the moon glowing a bright red.

When I was little, Mom used to tell me and Caro stories of the blood moons. She said they were rare and powerful entities capable of great magic. She said the first witch, Santa Muerte, was born under a blood moon. It was always just a fantasy story to me. But Caro believed in them completely. She spent hours before a blood moon fasting and praying, and then when it was happening, she'd go into our backyard woods and strip down to her underwear and dance under the moon's red hue.

I remember the first time I ever saw her do it. I remember seeing her twirling from tree to tree, throwing dried leaves into the air and dancing with them as they fell. I remember wanting to be that carefree, that at peace with who I am. So, every time a blood moon was set to happen, I would watch her from our bedroom window as she danced.

I never told her I knew.

I wish I had joined her at least once.

Wind swirls around me and I feel the sharp edge of rocks pricking my skin.

In his hands, I see the vials of white celestial magic. I can sense my magic in one of the vials. It's familiar scent and energy invigorates my bones.

"We can't waste time with this," I hear Angelica say. She places a hand on Constanzo's shoulder. "We must finish the ceremony."

No, I can't let them finish it. "You won't be able to handle all that power," I gasp out. The wind shoves me back.

"I can," Constanzo declares. His chest is littered with small cuts and dried pieces of blood.

And Angelica dips two of her fingers into the bowl at her hands and swipes the red liquid down the center of Constanzo's face.

Gripping my blade, I grit my teeth and push off of my legs and run against the wind. With his back to me, I drag Constanzo down onto the ground, sending the vials scattering across the dirt. I punch him once, his head knocking back, and again, hearing the crunch of bones.

Blood pours out from his nose and he screams. I slash my blade across his forearm before a blast of wind knocks me back again.

Rising onto my knees, I spot the vials a few feet away. I rush forward to reach them, my hands grazing the cool glass.

"Stop!" Constanzo yells, his hands outstretched. Air leaves my lungs and I gasp, struggling to breathe as Constanzo closes his hand into a tight fist.

The edges of my vision blur and turn dark but I'm conscious when Constanzo picks me up and throws me down into a white-chalk circle. Symbols are written just on the outside of it

Angelica tosses the chalk aside. "Quickly," she says. "We must finish this."

I try to stand but energy zaps at my fingers and legs. I cry out, slumping against my chalk circle.

Constanzo and Angelica talk in a language I don't recognize and the more they speak, the more charged the air around us feels.

The white celestial energy bursts from their vials. They swirl above us frantically, like fish out of water. Constanzo lifts the bowl from Angelica and tips it back over his mouth. He's drinking the blood, I realize.

Blood. Our magic is tied to our blood. I gaze up at the blood moon.

Just outside the circle is my obsidian blade. It's coated with Constanzo's blood. I tentatively touch the edge of the circle. I'm expecting the zap of energy this time and when it strikes, I force my hand to keep going. I press my teeth down on my bottom lip to keep from screaming but the pain travels from my hand and up my arm as I reach past the barrier. Just a little further. Sweat beads slide down the sides of my face and fall into my mouth. A little more.

I graze the hilt. I hold out for a few more seconds until I grip the hilt and drag the blade to me. Breathing shakily, I swipe my tongue across the blade and take Constanzo's blood into my mouth.

The taste of iron coats my tongue. After I swallow, I try my best to repeat the chants he and Angelica are saying.

A sharp pain attacks the center of my spine. I yell and fall forward. My hands burn where they touch the white chalk. I feel something moving at the base of my spine, like something melding itself to my flesh. I clutch my chest hoping to keep myself together. The moment I feel it tug harder, the more I feel myself wanting to resist. The pain eventually becomes too much and I shut my eye to it.

I see Santa Muerte in brief and quick flashes but I don't see her how I should, or how I'm used to. She looks sad. Her skull face is hanging low, her hands down at her sides. I yell out for her but she fades away in more flashes.

I force my eye open against the pain. The white celestial magic waits above us, waits for its host. I hold a hand out. Take me, I say to it. I will be your host. It slithers toward me, reminding me of Constanzo's oscuros. Maybe these are another form of oscuros. I watch them curiously as they swim closer.

One of the oscuros glows brighter. Its warmth feels familiar. It doesn't hesitate anymore. It flies past the barrier and shoots straight into me. It settles into a place within my chest, bubbling and nuzzling inside. Back where it belongs.

"What is she doing?" I hear Angelica yell.

The other two celestials circle me, examining me through the barrier. Please, I say to them. I think back to the story I heard so much as a child. I say to the two celestials, I can make you whole again.

They brighten and much like my own magic, they shoot past the barrier and inside me.

My ears ring. My body pulses with the added energy and I feel like it's going to burst apart from my skin. It feels like when I ascended but the magic is moving too quickly inside me, desperate to find a place it belongs.

It all comes rushing to my chest.

My mouth opens but no sound comes out. The magic grows painful and I worry it's going to kill me. Maybe it is. Tears spill past my cheek. If it does, I am ready. I pray to Santa Muerte, not for my life, but that she may watch over Ago and Mia and Vicente. That she let Constanzo and Angelica's plans end with me. I pray that my family's deaths will not be in vain. I pray away the guilt over their deaths. I pray for forgiveness. I pray I will see them again.

The pain slowly subsides but it's the only indication that I'm not dead.

Did it work? When I open my eye, the blood moon has faded away. Did I fail?

I get to my feet, a renowned energy buzzing along the surface of my skin.

Constanzo charges at me, crying out furiously with blood dripping past his chin. We tumble onto the dirt. Rocks dig into my back as he presses me down. My blade lies a few feet away and I call on a small gust of wind. Bring me my blade, I command of it. It moves quickly, almost stabbing my palm as the blade flies into it.

A small smile touches my lips as I press the knife into Constanzo's flesh.

He chokes, something gurgles past his lips. "You've ruined it," he says. "I was supposed to save everyone. I was going to give this to everyone." His eyes gloss over.

"You are not giving people a choice like this," I say to him. "You are taking their choice away."

With all three celestial magic swirling inside me, I understand what Constanzo meant to do now. By giving magic to everyone, he was deciding for them. By taking magic away from witches, he was stealing their choice.

Caro once said that there is a natural order to our practice. I think I finally understand what she means.

I press the blade further into his flesh. "Go in peace."

Constanzo's eyes widen before his breath falters.

"May Santa Muerte have mercy on your soul," I say. I push Constanzo's body off and grimace as the blade slides out with a sickening slop.

As Constanzo draws his last breath, his oscuros let out a loud, deafening screech. They howl into the night at the loss of their host. The oscuros turn themselves into sharp knives and they soar through the air. I move left and right and try to jump over them but they're tricky and move in tandem to me. They nip my sides and my arms. One lodges itself directly into my shin.

I scream as I fall. Blood slides down my arms and legs. I feel something wet at my side, too. I call on the element of air. I sway the winds and use them to drag the oscuros back into the ground. The oscuros bite at the wind, more inconvenienced by the wind than anything else.

I try again, this time with my own fire. My fire in the water once hurt the oscuros. I arc my hands up and rain fire down. Fireballs fall like hail and I watch as they land on Angelica. The oscuros yell and wrap themselves tighter around her, shielding her.

Pressing my palms into the ground, I summon my own oscuros but instead of beings of shadow, I call on beings of light. My eyes follow the oscuros as they dip and move together, circling Angelica.

I aim my oscuros at her feet, trying to draw the dark shadows away from her. After a few tries, it finally works. The oscuros morph into their thin sharp knives again. I make it seem like I'm charging my magic, rubbing my hands together and slowly pulling them apart.

They charge.

I hold still.

When they are within touching distance, I hold my arms out and let them hit me. At every point they hit my body I picture my magic grabbing them back.

I let my fire burn them all up.

Angelica falls to her knees with a sob as the last of the oscuros burns to ash.

"Lorena?" I recognize the voice as Ago.

I turn, reigning in my fire. I blink a few times trying to see her beautiful face but all I see from the left side of my eye is black. “I can’t see,” I say.

“Ay dios mio,” Ago breathes out. Her attention focuses on one part of my face.

I touch a hand to it. It feels rough and textured. For some reason, I know not to ask what she sees.

Mia and Silvia crowd behind Ago. I hold a hand out to them, my body tilting. “He’s in the basement,” I tell them.

Mia and Silvia disappear from view and my stomach muscles convulse. I shove away from Ago just before the contents of my stomach go pouring out of me.

Ago runs a hand down my back. “What does this mean?”

I clutch my stomach. “It’s too much power. My body can’t handle it all.” The energy the celestial magic granted me wanes.

“Don’t touch me,” Angelica growls.

Silvia yanks her up. “We’ll let the coven decide what to do with you.” Her voice remains neutral but I can see the anger bubbling underneath Silvia’s calm exterior.

In the doorway, I see Vicente emerge with an arm over Mia as she helps him remain steady.

I sigh, “Gracias, Santa Muerte,” and limp over to them. I wrap an arm around Vicente and speak into the fabric of his shirt. “I’m glad you’re okay,” I say.

Silvia and her coven destroy Constanzo’s lab to be sure no one else will use it for taking away witches’ magic. The drive back to Silvia’s is relieving and I find myself crying in the back seat with Ago and Mia on either side of me.

I feel the magic moving inside me though I don't fully understand how it works or what it means for me. I just know I can't hold on to it forever. I need to find a way to separate them again.

And I have a feeling they won't be happy when I do.

I can hear the celestial powers whispering around me.

Nearly a week after the events at the compound and I had hoped their whispered pleas would stop. But they haven't.

They speak to me in my dreams, too. They take on my mother's face and Caro's and tell me to use them, that all the pent-up energy inside me wants to be let out. Their touches feel cold and prickly in the dream but when their words disguise themselves as my mom's, I want to give in. Okay, I want to tell them. I'll use you.

Then I wake up and the scars along my left eye burn. Silvia brought in nearly dozens of healers to help with that, but I only managed to gain twenty percent of my eyesight back. The tissue around my eye had hardened into jagged, white lines. It reminds me of lightning striking the ground.

I don't see Caro anymore – not since that night I demanded her away. I like to believe she has finally crossed over to el otro lado, but a small part of me worries she was never really there.

Most of my days are spent recovering, gaining back strength. But I tell Silvia it isn't about regaining my strength; I need time to adjust to the influx of energy. It's too much, I tell her, and we both exchange glances that tell the same story: all this energy isn't safe for one person to hold.

Her and Vicente discuss ideas on how to expel the energy inside me but I can't bring myself to engage. When I remember that night, the power that swirled around me and Constanzo and Angie, breaking through the magical barrier to redirect the celestial powers, there was another presence there that night. A bigger presence than either of us.

Maybe it's supposed to be this way, I tell Silvia. Thousands of emotions play across her face, but she inhales and pulls her shoulders back. We'll find a way to help you, she says, vehemently.

I want to believe her. I want to not believe her, too.

When I see Ago again, a sharp pang hits the center of my chest. The time I wish I could have with her explodes behind my eyelids. The time I'd take to tell her how I feel, how the light of the moon makes her skin glow like a goddess, how her bell like laughter sounds like home. And now, I settle for a smile and I wrap her into my arms, breathe in her sweet apple scent, and tell her it's okay. We'll be okay.

Over her shoulder, I meet Vicente's gaze. His narrowed eyes soften. Half of my heart pulls toward him, hoping he has found the closure he never had for his father. Hours later, when it is just him and I in my room, I tell him to train Mia the way he trained me. He hesitates, clutching the notebook full of extraction ideas for me in his hands. I wrap a hand over his. You don't owe the people you've lost anything, I tell him. I know what that kind of responsibility feels like and now I know how much darker that path can turn out. All this time wrestling with magic and wanting it gone, but not recognizing how a part of me it really is cost me more than I ever wanted to lose. You owe yourself so much more than that, I tell him.

If I'm being honest, I try to avoid seeing Mia for as long as I can. I don't want her to know what losing family to magic feels like. I don't want her to become me. Maybe I'm more selfish than I originally thought, but being around Mia makes me wonder if I was ever like her. Did I ever love magic the way she did, with that childlike wonder? I shrug thinking about it. Maybe I didn't. And maybe I want Mia to remember a time when she did. But I know I need to see her. I need to explain what this means.

Something else changed in me that night at the compound, something not magical at all. As I apply the skin salve Silvia made me, and I rest against the pillows for bed, I realize I'm okay if this is how it ends.

I fold my hands in prayer and begin reciting my nighttime prayers to Santa Muerte. I believe that Santa Muerte has a plan and if this is how my life is supposed to pan out, that's okay. So long as my family is with me, I know I'll be okay.

But there's one last thing I need to do.

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I concentrate on the image of Mom and Caro. Five candles surround me in a circle. Praying to Santa Muerte feels effortless now, like talking to the wind and knowing someone is listening. I ask her to let me see them one last time.

Their familiar silhouettes appear in clusters of shimmering light, like stars in the night sky.

As their shimmering bodies settle, the scent of roses and hazel wood filling the room, I begin to cry. "I'm so sorry," I say. I wish I could reach out and touch them, but this particular calling of a lost witch spell only works if I'm contained within the circle of candles.

Still, Mom kneels beside me. I sob, missing her comforting hugs, the way she took my fears away and gave me strength. "I'm sorry I hurt you," I tell her.

Mom shakes her head, hushing me. "It was not your fault, mija. Do you understand me? It wasn't." Her voice is clear and steady. "I thought I was helping you," Mom says in a small voice. "You've spent years hating magic and when Constanzo said he could help, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to give you a better life, Lorena. That's all any parent wants to give their children."

Caro places a hand on Mom's shoulder. "Maybe it was meant to happen this way."

I look at her through a bleary glare. "How could you say that?"

"Maybe Caro is right," Mom says. "Maybe this all happened for a reason." Mom folds her hands together, like it pains her, too, that we can't touch. "And no matter what, I am proud of the witch you've become. Remember that, mija."

I blink my tears back. Wishing for so many things and knowing none of it can be made real and knowing nothing I do now can change the past. I take a deep breath and remind myself why I did this.

"I offer up my prayers of love." I lay lavender and roses on the ground. "Take these souls in light and love, guide them to the other side, and keep them safe until we meet again. In Santa Muerte's name, this I pray."

Mom and Caro join hands, faces beaming as they breathe in this new beginning.

Finally put to rest, they vanish.

Mia

“It doesn’t look that bad,” I say. I mumble a string of curses under my breath. “Did you do something different to your hair?” I sigh heavily at my reflection. I can hear Mom’s voice in the back of my head, scolding me for making light of a serious situation. I tuck a stray curl behind my ear. It bounces back out. I can’t help using humor to deflect the severity of any situation; but this isn’t severe, I tell myself again. Lorena is fine. She’s fine.

I bring her a plate of elotes when I see her. I’m not even sure if she likes them but what Mexican doesn’t like elotes? When I enter, my grip loosens on the plate of sweet bread and I almost drop it.

Lorena sits at the vanity, her hair disheveled and the brush untouched on the seat beside her. I have to pinch myself to tell me this is real, that she’s here. When Ago and I returned to the compound that night with Silvia, Lorena could barely stand on her own. Her skin was littered with bruises and blood and I thought, I’m losing my cousin.

Brujas took turns carrying Lorena back to Silvia’s. Every time someone new got hold of her, they’d whisper prayers against Lorena’s temple. I joined them in every prayer.

She woke up halfway back to Silvia’s, her entire body convulsing in violent shakes and I helped Silvia wrap her in a blanket.

It was all I could do.

One of Lorena’s eyes looked sown shut. It could be infected, I told Silvia and Vicente. They said they would take care of it and that I should give Lorena some space to recover. Silvia was the only one permitted to see Lorena for days, then Vicente. Ago soon after. I stayed away, per Silvia’s instructions and though part of me wanted to screw that rule and see Lorena anyway,

there was something that kept me from doing it. When the thought of seeing her warmed my heart, it also made the muscles in my legs run cold. I didn't feel strong enough to see her. Not yet. So I baked. I found a recipe in Silvia's cookbooks for pan dulce and set to baking.

It was all I could do.

I hold the plate of day-old sweet bread toward Lorena. "Made you some elotes."

Lorena looks at me from the mirror.

I flinch back, gasping.

Cursing, Lorena shoves her tangled hair forward, letting it hide her face.

"I'm sorry," I say, recovering quickly. Be strong, I remind myself. "You just surprised me, that's all."

Lorena fidgets with the bristles of the hairbrush.

"Here, eat some bread. Let me help with this," I say, taking the brush gingerly. I comb through her hair gently, but the brush gets caught. "Make your head strong," I say. My mom used to tell me that when I was little, before my sister was born and Mom actually had time to brush my unruly curls herself.

A small smile touches the corners of Lorena's lips. I mirror it, happy I can make her smile even now.

I set the brush down. "It's no use," I say. "I'm going to have to come back tomorrow and brush it again."

She laughs and meets my gaze through the mirror, seeing right through me. But I don't want this to be the last time I see her. Lorena breaks a piece of bread, sugar falling on our laps, and hands me a piece.

I swallow the maïse and cinnamon sugar down. “Does it hurt?” I ask, gaze falling to the lines beneath her eye. The skin looks rough to the touch.

Lorena touches it before shrugging. “Sometimes,” she replies tightly.

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” I say.

Lorena sets her bread down. “Actually, there’s something I need to tell you.”

When my baby sister was born, I deluded myself into thinking nothing would change. But of course things did. My parents were constantly telling me what my new job was: to protect my sister. And part of me agreed. My little sister, my responsibility. But in doing so, I was shoving away my own wants and desires.

Leaving home to follow Lorena was the most selfish thing I’ve ever done – and seeing her like this, sunken, defeated, it makes me fear it was all for nothing.

I walk through the house several hours later in a daze, my own limbs numb to everything around me. Someone shakes my shoulders.

“Hey, you okay?”

It’s Vicente. He leads me back to the room I share with Ago and we find her huddled on the bed, her eyes rimmed red. She knew, I realize. Which means Vicente did, too.

I shove the stinging pain away and uncover the pointed object beneath my pillow. “I’ve been meaning to give this back to you,” I say. I hand Vicente the obsidian blade.

For the first time since I’ve known Vicente, his face falters. He lowers his head, eyes glossed over. He clears his throat and I remain as still as possible.

“I made it for Lorena,” he says. He takes the dagger delicately from my hands.

My hand feels oddly cold without it. It felt like the only thing keeping me tethered to Lorena for weeks.

“I’ll give it back to her eventually,” Vicente says, wistfully.

I nod.

I grew up believing in God and Jesus, even Saints. I believe there are extraordinary people put on this earth for a reason, and when they fulfill that purpose, they perish. But they will always be remembered. At home I have candles and pendants dedicated to Saint Jude. He’s supposed to be the patron saint of lost causes. I remember wondering what he had done to warrant sainthood in lost causes. Who does the saint of lost causes turn to when they have lost all hope?

I decide to write a letter to my mom. I tell her everything that’s happened so far, everything I’ve encountered, and I tell her all about Lorena. I tell her about the sacrifice she made to keep our town safe. I tell her I plan to stay and train to become a great bruja, like my cousin.

Lorena tells me she’s dying. But if there’s way to save her, then I’m going to find it.

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