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*They say El Corazón has two hearts:
the black thing in his chest
and the one he wears on his sleeve.*

—TALES OF THE DEOS,
FELIPE THOMÁS SAN JUSTINIO

This is a love story.
At least, it was, before my sister sent me to hell.
Though technically, Los Lagos isn't hell or *the* underworld. It's another realm inhabited by creatures, spirits, and wonders I'd only read about in my family's Book of Cantos. The place where I was kept—where my whole family was imprisoned by a power-hungry witch—*that* was as close to hell as I hope I'll ever get.

But that's another story.

"Lula, you ready?" my sister Alex asks.

I stare at my open closet and can't find the socks that go with my step team uniform. I rifle through bins of underwear and mismatched socks and costume jewelry.

"Lula?" Alex repeats, softly this time.

For the past seven or so months, Alex has been extra everything—extra patient, extra loving, extra willing to do my chores. She means well, but she doesn't understand how suffocating her attention is, how the quiet in her eyes drives a sick feeling in my gut because I'm trying to be okay for her, for our family and friends. I think I've gotten pretty good at faking it. But sometimes, like now, I snap.

"Give me a minute!"

I don't mean to snap. Honestly. But everything that's come out of my mouth lately has been hard and angry, and I don't know how to make it stop. That's not who I am. That's not who I was before—

Rose, our younger sister, walks into my room wearing long sleeves and jeans even though there's a heat wave and it's mid-June. Rose has the Gift of the Veil. She can see and speak to the dead. Spirit magic runs on a different wavelength than the rest of our powers, and being so tuned-in to that realm means she's always cold. Rose takes a seat on my bed and picks at a tear in the blanket.

"Can I go to the pregame with you and Maks?" she asks me. "I've never been to one before."

"No," I say.

"Why not?" When she frowns, her round face gets flushed. Sometimes I forget that underneath all her power, she's just a fourteen-year-old kid trying to fit in.

"Because," I say, digging through my laundry. "It's just for the team. You can drive to the game with Ma and Alex."

"And Dad." Rose's voice is a quiet addendum.

Right. Dad. After seven years of being missing and presumed dead, he's in our lives again. It's an odd feeling having him back, one we all share but never talk about. He has no memory of where

he's been and, even if we can't say it out loud, maybe we've moved on without him. Alex was always the one who said he was gone for good, and perhaps deep down inside, I thought that too. But I always corrected her. I was the one who *believed* he'd return, because sometimes false hope is better than being completely hopeless. I believed in lots of things once.

“And Dad,” I say.

The three of us exchange a look of unease. There are too many things that are unsaid between us. I wish we could go back to being loud and rowdy and something like happy. But it's taking longer than I thought.

So here are the things we leave unsaid:

One, we're brujas. Witches. Magical BAMFs with powers gifted by the Deos, our gods. A house full of magic is bound to cause some friction, and after what Alex did, there is plenty of friction.

Two, my sister Alex cast a canto that banished our entire family to a realm called Los Lagos. She got to traipse across its magical hills and meadows with Nova, the hot brujo we never talk about, and her now-girlfriend, Rishi.

Meanwhile, I was trapped in a freaking tree. A big, evil tree. I was surrounded by all-consuming darkness and, even though we're home and safe, I still feel that pull, like something is sucking at my soul and my light and this house is too small and crowded, and I don't know how to make this fear stop. I don't know how to get over it.

Three, I can't stand looking at myself in the mirror anymore.

I took all the mirrors in my bedroom down, even the one that was on my altar to keep away malicious spirits. They don't need the mirror. One look at my face and they'll be scared off.

“Ready when you are,” Alex says again, her guilt radioactive.

Technically, *technically*, the attack that left my face hideously disfigured with scars was Alex’s fault. I’m a terrible sister for thinking it. Forgive and forget and all that. But the malosucros that came looking for her attacked *me*. Their vicious claws raked across my face. Sometimes, when I’m alone, I can smell the rot of their skin, see the glow of their yellow eyes, feel their presence even though they’re long gone and banished.

To be fair, Alex has scars from the malosucros too. Right across her heart. But she can cover them up. I can’t.

Not naturally, anyway.

Having a sister who is an all-powerful encantrix has its benefits. There are a million problems going on in the world, and here I am, worrying about scars. But deep down, I know it’s more than the scars. I’ve been called beautiful my whole life. I’ve been aware of the way men’s eyes trailed my legs since I was far too young. The way boys in school stuttered when they spoke to me. The way they offered me gifts—bodega-bought candies and stolen flowers and hand-written notes with *yes/no* scribbled in pencil. My aunt Maria Azul told me beauty was power. My mother told me beauty was a gift. If they’re right, then what am I now? All I know is I left fragments of myself in Los Lagos and I don’t know how to get them back.

So I turn to my sister, because she owes me one. But before we can get started, my mother knocks on my open door, Dad trailing behind her like a wraith.

“Good, you’re all together. Can I borrow you guys for a minute?” Ma asks. She rests a white laundry basket against one hip and waves

a sage bundle like a white flag. “I want to try the memory canto on your father before we leave. The sun’s in the right—”

“We’re busy,” I say, too angry again. I don’t like talking to my mother like this. Hell, any other time I’d catch hands for speaking to her like that. But we’re all a mess—guilt, anger, love, plus a lot of magic is a potent mix. Something’s got to give, and I don’t know if I want to be here when it does.

Mom throws the sage stick on top of the clean laundry, scratches her head with a long, red nail. Her black-mascara rimmed eyes look skyward, as if begging the Deos for patience. She makes to speak, but Dad places his hand on her arm. She tenses at his touch, and he withdraws the hand.

“We all have to pull our weight around here,” Ma tells me, a challenge in her deep, coffee-brown eyes that I don’t dare look away from.

“Dad doesn’t,” I say, and feel Rose and Alex retreat two paces away from me. Traitors.

“He’s trying. You haven’t healed so much as a paper cut since—”

I widen my eyes, waiting for her to *say* it. *Since Los Lagos. Since the attack.* But she can’t.

“You have Alex,” I say, turning my thumb toward my sister. “She’s an encantrix. Healing comes with the package.”

“Lula...” Ma pinches the bridge of her nose, then trails off as my father tries to be the voice of reason.

“Carmen,” he whispers, “let them be. It’s okay.”

But my mother doesn’t fully let up. “How much longer will you keep having your sister glamour you?”

Alex looks at her toes. Not even the all-powerful encantrix can escape being shamed by our mother. I might be just a healer, but I match my mom's gaze. We share more than our light-brown skin and wild, black curls. We share the same fire in our hearts.

"Until it stops hurting," I say, and I don't let my voice waver.

We share a sadness too. I see it in her, woven into the wrinkles around her eyes. So she just hands me a black bundle—my uniform socks—and says, "I'll see you at the game."



"Close the door," I tell Rose after our parents head downstairs.

I sit cross-legged on my faded flower-pattern rug as Alex prepares for the canto. Since she embraced her power, her brown eyes have tiny gold flecks, and her hair falls in thick, lustrous waves. She even wears it loose around her shoulders, and I think it's because Rishi likes to twirl it around her finger when they think we're not looking. There's a light inside of her. The light of an encantrix and a girl in love. I hate to say *I told you so*, but I did tell her so. Magic transforms you. Magic changes you. Magic saves you.

I want to still believe in all those things.

Rose cleans up my altar, sneezing when she breathes in layers of dust. She lights a candle for El Amor, Deo of Love and Fervor. Beside it, she lights a candle for La Mama, Ruler of the Sun and Mother of all the Deos.

"When was the last time you cleaned your altar?" Rose asks, wiping her fingers on the front of her jeans.

I only shrug and lie back on the floor. She sits at my feet and holds my ankles. This isn't for magic. I think she's just trying to comfort me in the only way she knows how. Alex kneels right over my head. A year ago, Alex kept her power bottled up. Now, she calls on it easily. She pulls the smoke from the candles, elongating it between her fingertips like a cat's cradle until it encircles the three of us like a dome.

Next, Alex rips the head off a long-stemmed, white rose and sets the petals in a bowl. Our magic, our brujeria, isn't only about putting herbs together and chanting rhymes. Anyone could do that. This canto has no words, but the sweet hum my sister makes as she sifts through the rose petals. The rise of her magic fills the room, settles along my skin like silk.

One by one, she places each petal on my face. She hums until she's covered every inch of pearlescent scar tissue and I'm wearing a mask made of roses. She pushes her power into the rose mask, and slowly, it takes on her magic. The petals heat up and soften, melting into my scars like second skin.

I'm never ready for the next part, but I grab on to the carpet and brace myself. Glamour magic requires pain. I hiss when it stings like hot needles jabbing into my flesh.

"Maybe we should stop," Rose tells Alex.

I shake my head once. "I'm okay. I swear."

Alex keeps going, holding her hands over my face, waves of heat emanating from her palms. I breathe and grind my teeth through the discomfort.

"There," Alex says.

The earthy sweetness of roses in bloom fills my bedroom.

Nothing coats the senses quite like roses do. Alex and I lock eyes, and there is so much I want to say. *Thank you. I'm sorry. Are you okay?* Her face, right where my scars should be, darkens with red splotches. I recognize the recoil of healing magic—bruises and wounds that match the person being healed. Working magic comes with a cost. The cyclical give-and-take of the universe to keep us balanced.

She never complains though. She smiles. Stands. Busies herself with her phone.

I go to my dresser and I pull out a round hand mirror that I got at a garage sale for a dollar. It's a dull metal but makes me feel like the Evil Queen from Snow White. When I was little, I used to root for Snow, but lately, I feel the queen was way misunderstood. Women with power always get a bad rep.

My mood changes instantly when I look at myself in the mirror. I feel like I'm bound to this bit of magic that gives me back a part of myself, even if it's superficial. The scars are gone. The Bellaza Canto is stronger than a glamor. When I touch the area where the four claw marks are supposed to be, there is nothing there but flawless, sun kissed skin.

"Mirror, mirror," I whisper to my reflection, tilting my face from side to side.

I grab my favorite pink lipstick and apply it. It's a coral pink that brings out the honey brown of my skin and make my gray eyes stormier. I fluff my mane of black curls and rub my lips together to make sure my lipstick is even. I wish I could make this feeling last. For now, I'm going to enjoy it until the next time.

"Thank you," I tell Alex, and press a sticky kiss on her cheek.

“Gross,” she mutters, wiping it off. Then she picks up the decapitated rose stem and bowl of unused petals. “Let’s go, Rosie.”

My phone chimes and my heart flutters when I see Maks’s name on the screen. I’m outside.

I analyze the message as I put on my socks. His texts get shorter and shorter every day. Part of it is my fault for being so distant. Ever since Los Lagos, shadows seem to leap around every corner and crowds make me feel as if I’m sinking, my head barely above water. Nothing puts a big, fat hex on a social life like the fear of monsters only I can see.

“Today will be better,” I tell my reflection, slipping into Maks’s letterman jacket before I run down the stairs.

“See you at the game!” my mom shouts.

I wave as I zoom out the door and into Maks’s car parked out front. The minute I’m outside the house, I can breathe again. When I’m around Maks, I don’t have to think about magic, and I’m ready to sink into the comfort of his humanity.

“Hey,” Maks says, not looking up.

He fiddles with the radio stations, but they’re all staticky. He ends up plugging in his phone. His personal coach doesn’t believe in kissing, or anything else exciting, on game day. I want to believe that’s why his voice is distant and that’s why he isn’t reaching for my hand. But seeing him fills me with a sense of need—the need to be my old self. The need to be happy. So I press my lips on his cheek and leave the pink imprint of my mouth.

“You’re in a good mood,” he says, thick, black brows knitting in confusion, and I’m bothered that he sounds so surprised. His knee shakes a little, and I place my hand on it to try to comfort him.

He always gets nervous before games. But he's the best goalie the school has seen in years. Nothing gets past him.

"Last game of the year. It's a big deal." I smile when he looks at me at me before putting the car on drive. Relief washes over me when he takes my hand in his and kisses my knuckles, then speeds down the empty Brooklyn street.

"We've beaten Van Buren like six hundred times, but they're still a solid team." He squeezes my hand once, then lets it go.

"You okay?" I ask. As a healer, I can sense the tension knotting his aura. He's always nervous before a game, but today it's worse than usual. Maybe I'm feeling the residual magic from Alex's canto. My magic *has* been way off.

At the red light, he turns to me. His hair is combed back at the top and his edges are freshly buzzed. I brush my fingers at his nape, where the barber didn't brush off all the stray hairs.

"Lula," he says my name like a sigh.

He turns to me again. I can't tell what he's searching for, but when I look at him, really look at him, I remember why I fell for him. The sweet, caring boy whose smile made me dizzy. I always keep a sprig of hydrangeas on my altar because they remind me of his eyes.

We both start when someone honks behind us, and he faces the road again.

"I was thinking," I say, trying to make my voice low and playful, but I end up feeling silly, "we could do something after the game. Just the two of us."

"I already told the team they could party at my house. My parents are on a business trip, and my sister's already at Uki camp for the summer."

I shouldn't be annoyed, but I am. I tell myself he's just tired. He's been practicing extra hard. He's going to Boston College on a soccer scholarship and wants to be at the top of his game.

"We haven't really been alone in a while," I say.

"That's not my fault."

"It's not my fault either. Look, I don't want to fight."

Another red light. He shakes his head, like he's dispersing the thought he just had.

"What?"

"I'm just saying"—he sighs and flicks on his turn signal—"we haven't been *alone* because you never feel like being alone. You've been so off, and I don't know what to do anymore."

"I told you about my dad coming back. And the break-in."

I watch the red light, the people at the crosswalk. We're a few blocks away from school. I recognize a couple of girls from my team by their black-and-red uniforms. A woman dressed in all black trails behind them. She holds a cane that glints in the sunlight, and with every step, her jewelry swings from side to side. She wears dozens of necklaces made of glittering gems and wooden beads. She glances at us in the car, and I swear I've seen her before. For a flash, the dark eyes take me to a place of my nightmares. My skin is hot, and when I close my eyes, I picture the shadows reaching for me with their claws. I grip the car seat so my hands will stop shaking.

"I know you have family stuff," Maks says, thankfully unaware of my tiny freak out. "I just—I'm not sure how to say it. You're not the same person you were two years ago."

Two years.

Maks and I have been dating for two years. That's two years of dates. Two years of *I love yous* and *I want you forevers*. Two years of going to sleep reading his messages, of hearing his voice just before I drifted off and dreaming about us together. Maks wasn't the first boy to tell me I was beautiful. But when he said it, when he kissed the inside of my wrist and wrote it over and over again, *You're beautiful. I love you*, I believed him.

I roll down the window. My scars burn and I flip down the sun visor and double check that Alex's canto is holding up. There I am. I look like the old me even if I don't feel like her.

Maks pulls into the school parking lot behind the gym and puts the car in park. He taught me how to parallel park even though I don't have my license. It's a weird memory, but it pops into my head as he unbuckles his seat belt and holds the steering wheel with a white-knuckle grip.

"Maks." My voice is small because I know what comes next.

He breathes in long and deep, as if to steady himself. "I think we should break up."

2

*El Corazón falls in love over and over,
trying to make his two hearts whole.*

—TALES OF THE DEOS,
FELIPE THOMÁS SAN JUSTINIO

Please, don't make a scene," Maks says softly.

The school band recognizes Maks's car and cheer as they board the big, yellow-cheese buses. The parking lot is full of students, faculty, and parents dressed in Thorne Hill Knights colors, ready to caravan all the way to Queens Village. My body flashes hot at the thought of getting out of the car to join them.

I take a deep breath, anger burning a clear path to my lips. "You *think* we should break up?"

"Baby, don't—" He stops whatever he's going to say next, catching himself on the familiarity, and it's like a fist to my gut.

"*Don't* call me baby."

"Lula. I've tried." He squeezes the steering wheel. "I've tried so hard, but it's been months. I know the robbery was hard on you.

You have no idea how much I wish I'd been there to protect you.”

“And your answer is this?” I look out my window at my faint reflection. Moments ago, I was so sure today was the day everything would be better. “You can't stand the idea of spending *one more* second with me that you're doing this now?”

He turns to me, daring to look hurt. “That's not true. You should know me better than that. I wanted to wait until after graduation, but my sister said it wasn't fair to you. One minute you're fine, and then the next, you're not.”

“I'm trying, Maks.”

“What about last weekend? Remember Pierre's party? You just walked out to the middle of the street and stood there, staring into space. If I hadn't come outside, you would've gotten clipped by that car.”

I do remember. There were too many people in that house and it was too dark, so I walked outside and stared at the light of the moon. It was the only moment of peace I'd found in so long that I didn't notice the car until Maks screamed my name and pushed me out of the way. He was white with fear, holding my face in his hands until he was sure I was fine. He drove me home right away. “You have to talk to someone,” he told me. And I said, “I'm fine. I promise.”

“I'm sorry,” he says. “I really am. You're not the same person I fell in love with. You don't want to be around your own friends. You haven't applied to college. It's like your fire is gone.”

The unfairness of his words stings worse than this morning's canto. If he knew the truth, he'd surely understand. But how do you tell your *sinmago* boyfriend that the “robbery” all over the

New York news was actually an attack by a power-hungry demon witch?

I flip between wanting to slash his tires and begging him to stay with me. *I'll try harder*, I want to say. But I can't, so I just watch as the team loads their gear on the bus.

"Maks," I plead. Doesn't he understand that he's been the only constant thing in my life? "Don't do this."

He finally turns to me. His gaze travels across my face, and I wonder if he's trying to remember why he fell in love with me in the first place. "I never wanted to hurt you. But I have to do the right thing."

"The right thing?" I echo his words. "For yourself, you mean. You can't put up with me so you're bailing. Just say it how it is. Don't pretend you're making a sacrifice."

"You're twisting my words. I've thought a lot about this. I don't know how to help you and I don't think I'm good for you. So I have to make a choice. Even if it hurts us both."

"If it hurts that much, then don't do it." I hate the weakness in my voice. "We can forget about this. Just pretend it never happened."

"I care about you, Lula." He turns to me, and in this moment, I have never loved and hated someone so much all at once. "But I can't give you what you need. Deep inside, you know that. We—"

A dozen hands smack the windows of the car. I jump in my seat, and Maks curses loudly when he sees his teammates using his car like a set of congas.

"Let's go, Horbachevsky," they shout, all wound-up energy and excitement. "We got a game to win, son!"

"I need a minute," I say, pulling down the visor.

“Lula...” But when he looks at me, he falls silent.

He hands me the key fob and gets out of the car.

And that’s when I flip back to wanting to smash his car. I watch him lift his duffel bag onto his shoulder. He glances back at me twice before he makes it to the bus, where his boys greet him with fist bumps and cheers that he doesn’t return. He looks down at his feet, his lip tugging up into a crooked smile. I’ve always loved that smile.

I reach for my phone, my hands longing for something to crush. But the spike of anger dissolves into sadness, and I reach out to the first person that comes to mind. I text Alex: Maks broke up with me.

Just then, my chest tightens, and despite the warm early summer breeze, I shiver. My breath comes out in a tiny cloud. My arms are covered in goose bumps beneath my jacket—Maks’s jacket. Out of habit, I check the parking lot for shadows that shouldn’t be there. But there is only the school mascot, a knight waving a plastic sword, running back and forth in front of the bus. My intuition must be messed up. Maybe my body is just physically rejecting this breakup.

Maks’s words play in my head on a loop. *I’ve tried. I don’t know how to help you. It’s like your fire is gone.*

I think about my mother and how long it took her to piece herself together after my father disappeared. I used to watch her get ready for the day, painting her eyes and lips in vibrant colors to hide her gray sorrow. She’d stare into her mirror and say, “Don’t let them see you cry.”

Now, I repeat her words to my reflection. I press my finger

against the tight frown on my forehead. I pull a satin, red ribbon from my bag, the last piece of our cheer uniform. I wrap it around the top of my head and tie the ends into a bow. I fluff out my curls and try not to think about how Maks used to like coiling strands around the length of his fingers. I uncap my shimmering, coral gloss and softly, slowly drag it across my bottom lip, imagining I'm using it to smooth the edges of my heart. This morning I said things would be different. Maybe I can still channel the girl I was before my family's world turned upside down, before I had to hide behind a mask of borrowed magic and rose petals.

My phone buzzes with a message from Alex.

Alex: Come home. We haven't left yet.

Alex: I'm sorry. You deserve better.

Alex: I'll go get pizza and sea salt caramel?

Part of me wants to listen to Alex. A long shower and an evening of eating my weight in cheese and ice cream sounds amazing. But the old Lula wouldn't shrink away and hide. I text Alex back, I'm fine.

Maks might be right about some things. I have changed. But my fire isn't gone. Not completely. I can still fix this. I can make him see that we need each other.

I search deep inside for some of the fire Maks says I've lost and try to remember that I am made of magic.

I get out of the car, lock it, and pocket the key fob. The two buses are lined up and ready to go. Those staying behind wave good-bye, whistling between fingertips and shouting calls of good luck.

"Lula, come on!" My friend Cassandra waves from open bus

door. Her black skin shimmers with the dusted glitter she likes to wear to the games.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and run toward the bus. The doors sigh closed behind me, and Manny, the bus driver, nods in my direction as I make my way up the aisle. The air is thick with excitement and a mix of perfumes and perspiration from two dozen bodies that makes my nose itch.

Because I'm the last one on the bus, all the seats are taken except for one. I stand still for too long, and people look at me. Cassandra gives me an *everything okay?* face. Number twelve, Ramirez, looks me up and down, then smiles as if he hasn't been checking me out. Number twenty-three, Samori, waves from his designated seat in the back as unofficial DJ. A couple of girls from my step team whisper behind freshly manicured hands, their eyes sliding between Maks and me. Do they already know? How am I supposed to sit next to him for an hour?

Heat burns my cheeks, works down my neck and across my chest. I have the urgent need to turn back, to steal Maks's car and drive it back home. But Manny closes the doors and starts the engine.

"Lula," Maks says, gesturing to the empty spot beside him. "It's the last game. This is still your seat."

I take a steady breath and take the seat next to Maks, the same one I've had for nearly two years—the captains of our squads, side by side. Have the seats always been this cramped, or am I now noticing because I'm doing everything possible to keep my body from touching his? I take off the jacket I'm wearing and quietly place it on his lap. From the corner of my eye, I can see him clutch it and turn to me.

“I was going to let you keep it,” he says softly, maybe even hurt.

I turn my knees away from him so they’re in the aisle. It’s hard to look at him and know he doesn’t want me. A cry forms in my throat, but I push it back and say, “You wanted this. I’m giving you what you want.”

My phone buzzes again, cutting off whatever Maks is about to tell me.

Alex: On our way. I feel his bad vibes from here.

Alex: There’s still time to come home.

Me: No, I have to get through today.

I wait for her to answer, but Coach starts his pregame speech.

“All right, boys and girls,” he says in his thick Brooklyn accent. “It’s easy to tell you that this game’s in the bag. We’re undefeated, but so are they. We’ve still got something they don’t—the best damn team I’ve seen in years, and I’m freaking old as dirt.”

Everyone laughs except the two of us. Maks leans forward and his arm brushes against mine, warm and familiar and unbearable.

“It’s been a pleasure being your coach,” he says. “I want you to know how proud I am.”

“You’re not going to cry on us, are you, Coach?” Samori asks playfully.

“Shut it, Sam,” Coach barks. “All right, Manny. Let’s get this show on the road!”

There’s a volley of hoots and whistles. No one stays in their seats like they’re supposed to. A couple of the guys brought confetti poppers for the end of the game but are starting to set them off as the bus driver turns onto the highway, and Samori holds his hand-held speaker up so music fills the entire bus.

“Asses in seats,” Coach warns, staring at his phone. He’s so clueless when he’s going over plays, he wouldn’t even notice if the whole soccer team started stripping down to their underwear.

The chill from earlier returns to my skin, and I reach across Maks to shut the window. As I sit back down, Maks holds the jacket out to me.

“You’re cold,” he whispers, leaning into my ear because it’s so loud around us. “Just wear it.”

I shake my head. I remember the first time he gave me his jacket. We were in the middle of the hallway and he held it out for me. It was too big, but it smelled like fresh grass and his earthy soap.

“Lula!” Ramirez turns around in his seat, his big, brown eyes only look at me. “You dropped this.”

He holds a red ribbon with fingers folded against his palm. I touch my hair and realize mine must’ve slipped off.

“Thank you,” I say, and will myself to return his smile.

“You guys going to the prom after-party in the city?” Ramirez asks.

My heart squeezes painfully. I play with the red ribbon in my hands. Thinking about prom makes the last pieces of my old-Lula facade deflate. I spent weeks combing through thrift stores for the perfect blue dress. I picked it because the wildflower-blue color matched Maks’s eyes. My tongue is so dry I fear my next words will turn into sand. I should’ve listened to Alex and gone home. My phone rings half a dozen times, but I just let it buzz in my purse.

“Yeah, man,” Maks says overenthusiastically. “See you there.”

I watch Maks.

Maks watches me.

“Please stop staring at me,” I whisper.

He leans back and lets go of a long sigh. I can’t read his furrowed stare or the way he runs his fingers through his hair to give his nervous hands something to do. Is that regret?

He reaches for my hand, then hesitates and pulls back when he realizes what he’s doing. “I’m sorry. I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

Around us, the other boys are dancing in their seats like we’re in the middle of a parade. My team stomps their feet, clapping their hands to the chant, “Let’s! Go! Thorne! Hill!”

My pulse quickens at his words. Does that mean he still wants me?

The team’s chant gets stronger, the excitement in the air is thick with the desire to win, and I can’t help but think it’s familiar, like being at a Deathday ceremony. Except instead of summoning spirits, we’re summoning luck and courage and victory. Maybe that’s the key. My power might not be physical like Alex’s, and I might not be able to talk to the dead like Rose, but I can heal. I’ve healed bones and bruises and cuts, so why not us? Maybe I can summon love, fix the rift I’ve created between me and Maks.

I know him. I know he didn’t mean it, that he a part of him still loves me. The pressure of our lives got to us, in between us. Now I know how to make it better.

I wind my ribbon around my wrist, red as love, red as blood, red as desire. Let my magic bubble to the surface of my skin. I gasp when my power surges through me, like the slap of cold water, and I shudder from head to toe. Healing magic should be warm, but I can’t reel it back now. I breathe faster and faster, think of every kiss and touch and secret we’ve shared.

“Lula?” Maks inches closer, our thighs pressed side by side, and throws his jacket around my shoulders.

It’s working. It has to be because when I look up, Maks’s eyes are trained on me. I don’t dare look away from his face. There’s a nick on his chin I didn’t notice before. He must’ve cut himself shaving, but when I push my magic into his skin, the red cut disappears. His lips part, and we’re so close I can feel his intake of breath, the race of his heartbeat.

When he closes his hand around mine, I shut my eyes and memorize the feel of us, skin on skin.

When I kiss Maks, the world falls out of focus, everything around us pixilated except for him. The bus speeds down the highway, dozens of horns blaring, and we slide against the window. I rest a hand on his jawline, freshly shaven and smooth. I push away all other thoughts and focus on us. Whatever broke between us, I can fix.

The kiss feels like a thousand years, but it’s been seconds. I pull back to catch my breath, and he leans forward, like he can’t be apart from me. He kisses my cheek. My forehead. The tip of my nose.

“I said sit!” Coach shouts at a group of guys dancing in the aisles.

Maks starts to wrap his around my waist, but every part of me turns cold. Maks looks down at me, worry riddling his features. Our breath comes out in icy clouds.

There’s the crackle of static as the music cuts out. I stand to look around at what’s going on. Then the bus swerves, and my feet are no longer on the ground. I don’t have time to scream as I struggle

to find something to hold on to. Maks's hands grip me hard and pull me back.

“Are you—”

The screech of tires is followed by the warped crush of metal. Then, down is up. Windows shatter. Something hard breaks inside me, at first a dull, pulsing ache. The pain shoots from my belly button right to my heart, and I scream and scream as the bus spins in a flurry of broken glass and bodies.

I shut my eyes, and warm liquid splatters across my face. When I open them, blood blurs my vision. I hear my name, distant as a memory, called out until there is nothing but piercing static.

There's a final slam. My body so numb I can't move. Can't stay awake. But I know I'm alive because of my thundering heart. Maks and I lie face-to-face on our sides. I can't feel a thing but see his hand resting on my arm, giving me a tiny shake.

“Stay awake,” he tells me, choking on the blood that bubbles from his mouth.

“Maks.” Pain slams into me all at once, concentrating on my abdomen, where a metal pole stabs straight through my torso and into his chest.

3

*La Mama was lonely up in the sky,
chasing after El Papa, night into day.
Her light so great it left him in shadow.*

—THE CREATION OF THE DEOS,
ANTONIETTA MORTIZ DE LA PAZ

Look at me,” Maks tells me. His mouth is full of blood. “Lula.” Maks’s ragged voice falls away amid the screams for help and the crackle of fire nearby. I try to reach for him, but a sharp pain stabs at my rotator cuff. Every part of me fights to hurt more than the rest, so I stay as still as possible. There is one thing I can do. I search for my power, burrowed within me protectively, and picture my sister’s face. *Alex*. I shout her name in the dark corners of my mind and hope that, wherever she is, she can sense me. She has to know I’m alive. She has to know I’m still here.

I move my arm again, screaming through the ache that follows. If I can’t heal myself, then I can at least heal Maks. But my arm won’t go any farther, and the edges of my vision darken with

shadow. My throat burns, liquid choking my windpipe, the taste of a thousand coins in my mouth.

“*Look at me,*” Maks repeats.

When I do, it isn’t his face I see. It’s my own.



Voices. Familiar and strange. Angry and hopeful. Near and far.

“We can’t save them both.”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before. How are they both still alive?”

“He won’t be for much longer.”

“If we remove the boy, she might have a chance.”

“Get them on the gurney. Clear it out!”

“God dammit! I’m losing her.”

“What’s the count?”

“Forty-five dead.”

“Forty-six now.”

“Get me a crash cart!”

“Come on, Lula.”

“Lula, baby? It’s Mom. We’re all here.”

“Can you hear me? It’s Alex. I felt you. I felt you right here.”

“I’m here with you too.”

“You have to live, you hear me? You have to fight—I swear to gods, I will summon your spirit and kill you myself.”

“Miss, please, you need to leave.”

“Nurse, get them out of here.”

“I can’t. Let go of me! She’s my baby girl—”

“Maksim! Where is he? Where is my son?”

“Get them all out of here!”

“Stay alive.”

“Scalpel.”

“It’s not time yet, nena. I’m watching over you. I’ll always watch over you girls. You have a great destiny. All three of you.”

“She’s tachycardic.”

“Lula Mortiz. The Deos blessed you. The Deos will always bless you. Do not betray us.”

“She’s crashing.”

“Baby, it’s cold here.”

“Pressure’s rising! She’s back.”

“Stay with us, Lula. You’re stronger than this.”

“Would you like to do the honors and close?”

“Her eyelids are fluttering. She shouldn’t be awake yet.”

“Pushing one milligram of Midazolam.”

“Lula Mortiz. Do not betray the Deos.”

4

Sana sana, the body endures.

Sana sana, the body endures.

Sana sana, the body endures.

Sana sana, the body endures.

— HEALING CANTO,
BOOK OF CANTOS

When I dream, I relive every moment of the crash. Maks is throwing himself around me like a shield as shattered glass rains down around us. The bus keeps spinning until there is silence. But when I stand over my own body lying on the bus ceiling, I know this is a more than a dream.

Two dozen broken bodies lie in heaps inside the overturned bus. Some are still alive and crying out. Others lie still. I recognize Cassandra, eyes shut but her fingers twitch with life. I move to hold her, heal her, but I'm an apparition and I pass right through her. I spin around at the sound of Maks's voice.

Maks tries to lift his hand to touch mine but he's broken. He tells my body to look at him. Begs me to open my eyes. He's still holding me, even after everything that happened.

I move on, walking through the bus and onto the scene outside. A dozen cars are rammed into each other. The second bus is turned on its side, and a lucky few are being removed from the wreck by civilians and paramedics. Red, blue, and white lights swirl all across the highway as more emergency vehicles try to make their way through. Cars try to move out of their way as best as they can, driving into ditches off the sides of the road. People leave their stalled cars and rush out to help, taking off clothes to staunch open wounds and wrap around bone jutting through skin.

That's when I notice her.

She was always there, I suppose, lingering in the edges of the dark. An omen at the crossroads.

She stands at the center of the highway, dressed all in black. Her face is pale as the moon and her eyes are black as the longest night. She's completely bald, wearing a crown of twisted, gold thorns that dig into her skull but don't draw blood. Her dress blows in the breeze and she walks with a spear, the sharp end of it a metallic spike that sparks when she slams it on the ground.

She walks right through the bus and I follow after her.

"You," I say as she approaches Maks and me.

Her inhuman black eyes find me. "You know my face."

I've never seen her before, but I know her the way I know the comfort of a sunrise and the power in my blood that allows me to heal. Lady de la Muerte. Goddess of Death and the Mortal Earth's Dawn.

She moves in slow, careful steps, like she's on delay. She motions outward with her arm. The sleeves of her dress fall back to her elbows, exposing translucent, white skin. Names appear up and down her arms. His name makes my breath catch in my throat.

Maksim Horbachevsky. The names keep scrolling, and there are many I recognize: Ramirez James. Samori Jones. Kassandra Toussaint. Maksim Horbachevsky. Noveno—they scroll too fast for my eyes to keep track of them all.

“Why did you do this?” I demand.

“I do nothing,” she says. “I collect.”

“You can’t take him!”

“That is not for you to decide. That is for the Deos to decide.”

“The Deos ask too much. The Deos have always asked for too much.”

“Watch yourself, Lula Mortiz. The Deos have blessed you. Do not betray us.”

Lady de la Muerte takes her eyes off me and turns to a boy face down on top of two other bodies. The number twelve is on his letterman jacket.

“Do not betray us,” she repeats as she lifts her spear straight in the air and slams it into the boy’s back. A great light crackles and winds around the spear, absorbing into the metal.

She’s collected his soul.



“She’s awake,” Rose says.

Her eyes are puffy and her round cheeks are flushed. She’s sitting at my bedside, carefully avoiding all the wires I’m hooked up to. Behind her, my dad and Alex snap awake from their sleep.

“Don’t try to sit up,” Alex tells me. There’s a limp in her step and violet bruises dot her neck. They’ve been healing me.

“I heard you,” I say.

“I felt you. When it happened, I mean.” Alex presses her hand on mine and looks over her shoulder nervously.

“Maks,” I say. “Is he okay?”

“Baby,” my mom says, rushing through the open hospital room door. Her skin is covered in angry cuts and fresh bruises. Dad too. I try to think of the healing cantos they’d have had to go through to fix everything wrong with me. “How are you feeling?”

“Alive, thanks to you,” I manage. My tongue is thick and my head throbs at the back of my skull.

“We’ve been healing you slowly,” Ma says. “The police want a statement.”

“Let her rest awhile longer,” Dad says softly.

I shut my eyes, tears flooding at the corners.

“What hurts?” Rose asks, looking over my body to see how she can make me comfortable. “I can push the morphine button.”

I shake my head. I don’t want any more morphine. I don’t want to keep replaying the accident. I don’t want to see Lady de la Muerte’s ghoulish face.

“When I was out of it,” I say, “I could still hear all of you.”

Alex nods, her body stiff and jittery. “We did a healing canto as soon as you were out of surgery.”

“What about Maks?” I ask again. I didn’t see Lady de la Muerte take him, but I saw his name on her arm and I remember the voices around me when I was being brought in. *He won’t live for much longer.*

“He’s in a coma,” Dad tells me. He looks older than ever. His gray eyes are heavy with sorrow and the wrinkles on his forehead are like cracks in the sidewalk.

“But he’s alive,” I say, my voice breaking. “Can we heal him?”

There’s a knock at the door followed by a man in brown leather jacket. His cigarette-stained teeth and suspicious eyes mark him as a detective.

“My sister just woke up,” Alex says. With the spine-crushing black boots she’s wearing, she’s almost as tall as the detective. “She needs more time to rest.”

The detective gives my sister a side-eye look, and I remember him. He’s the same detective that ran the investigation on our “home robbery.” When we returned nearly dead from Los Lagos, no time had passed on this realm. Windows were shattered, feathers burned into the walls, floorboards ripped right out. Yeah, a robbery. There was no other explanation that wouldn’t reveal us or our magical community. But the cops bought it, and the case was closed. Now, Detective Hill is back and his muddy-brown eyes settle on each and every one of us.

“We’re old friends now, aren’t we?” Detective Hill says, trying for charming but ending at patronizing. He looks my dad up and down, then my mother and sisters. “You’re all pretty banged up, there.”

“We were in one of the accidents on the BQE,” Alex lies.

“It’s a mess out there,” Detective Hill says, running his hands over his thick salt-and-pepper hair as he turns to me. “That’s where you come in, Miss Mortiz.”

“Yes, Detective,” I say, sounding like I swallowed a cheese grater. But the sooner he leaves, the sooner I can check on Maks.

“First of all, I’m glad you’re feeling better. It’s been a *hectic* couple of days.”

“Days?” I try to sit up but a shooting pain keeps me pinned to the bed. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Four days.”

“*Four days?*”

“I don’t mean to upset you, Ms. Mortiz,” Detective Hill says. “But there were a number of casualties and we’d like to get to the bottom of what happened. You’re the only survivor who’s awake.”

“The only one?”

Detective Hill nods gravely. “Do you remember anything?”

“How many—” I’m not sure what to ask. How many dead? Alive? But Detective Hill understands what I want to know.

“Five players and three cheerleaders are in comas. Others are out of surgery, but it doesn’t look good. The victims of the pileup behind the bus are still unconscious and the ones who walked away with broken bones say they didn’t see anything. No one has been able to give any statements, and you’re the only soul who can string a sentence together. So you can see my frustration. This accident added fifty bodies to the morgue and I’ve got no answers as to how this happened.”

“Fifty,” I repeat. Then I remember my vision. “Kassandra?”

He flips open a notepad. “Kassandra Toussaint. She goes back into surgery to remove debris from her stomach. Really rare blood type and not enough to go around.”

The machines measuring my heart rate go off like a carnival ride.

“Calm down, nena.” My mom pushes past the detective to get to my side.

I open my mouth, but it’s like I’m breathing through a straw and the rest of me is buried under cement. My mother’s hand is

warm, resting behind my neck. At first I think she's going to use her magic, but then she simply brushes my hair away from my face, blowing cool breath against my eyelids. Something about her presence calms me in ways I can't explain. I'm not better, not by a long shot, but I can breathe.

"You all right?" Detective Hill asks.

"I don't care who you are," Alex says suddenly. "But I'm going to call the doctor to kick you out if you don't have any more actual questions."

"Don't threaten me, Ms. Mortiz. I thought I'd seen the last of your family five months ago, but here we are again. It seems bad luck follows you." His tongue pushes against his cheek, like he's digging for food particles stuck in his teeth. Then he mutters, "Curious, isn't it?"

"I don't remember much," I say. "I was sitting with Maks. Everyone was listening to music and dancing, like usual. They were excited for the game."

"Does the driver always let you stand up and party?"

"What? No, that's not what I meant."

"But you said 'like usual.'"

"Yes, but—" My head aches at the temples.

"You're twisting her words," Alex snaps.

"Stay out of this, Miss Mortiz," he shouts.

My vision blurs with tears and I breathe fast because my heart is racing. Dad tries to step in, but Ma puts an arm on his shoulder, because we know it would be worse if he gets involved.

"Will you let me talk?" I shout at Alex and Detective Hill. "Yes, everyone was extra excited. It was the final game and most of the

team are seniors. Coach kept telling everyone to sit, but they didn't listen. The next thing I knew, the bus swerved and everything turned upside down."

I shut my eyes but can't stop the images from flooding my mind. *Blood and flesh and glass and bones.* "When I came to, Maks was trying to keep me conscious. Then I woke up here."

"Thank you, Ms. Mortiz. You've been most helpful. I hope you have a speedy recovery." Detective Hill looks at Alex. "See? That wasn't so bad, was it?"

I nod and we wait in silence as he slowly makes his way out the door.

"One last thing." Detective Hill turns around. "The scars on your face. They're older than the accident. How'd that happen?"

"We used to have a dog," I say, touching the claw marks raised with scar tissue. "Rabies."

We're locked in a staring match. I'm afraid that if I look away first, I'll be admitting to the lie. Who we are is cloaked in so much secrecy that when it comes time for sinmagos to believe us, we're too suspect. That's why our kind doesn't go to hospitals. We don't seek the police. We get justice ourselves, save our own, protect our magic.

I win our staring match, and it's a small victory. He looks away, eyes heavy with dark circles. He starts to leave, shaking his head as he says, "Shame. Such a pretty face."