Ojos Que No Ven

by EndlessExistentialCrisis

Summary

There were just some things that death couldn't prepare you for.

Héctor Rivera was about to experience that firsthand.

Notes

I've had the idea for this fic since I first saw Coco and it was originally intended to be a one shot, but it quickly developed into something bigger. Bear in mind that I've only seen Coco twice, so some details/characterization may not be quite "up to snuff," so to speak, but I'm trying my best! (and I'll be updating earlier chapters as the story progresses, if need be) I'm also not a native Spanish speaker, so I'm definitely open to advice from those who are. ^^
Premature Reunion

Getting summoned to the Department of Family Reunions on any day other than Día de Muertos was incredibly uncommon—and even more uncommon was the fact that Héctor had been called in alone, firmly instructed that he was the only member of his family that was to come to the station.

It was his second time getting a summons, the first of which had been when Coco had passed on and joined them, but... everyone had come to receive her then. Not just him. And that had been a joyous occasion, a day of long-awaited reunions and tearful apologies and assurances. He hadn’t felt anything that day like the deep-seated, gnawing sense of dread he was feeling now.

The operator had told him it was urgent. She’d also told him that it was imperative that he be the only one to come, absolutely non-negotiable. No clue as to why, but the poorly-concealed remorseful undertone in her voice told him all he needed to know to get him out the door and sprinting in the direction of the marigold bridge. There’d been no time to explain what was happening to the rest of his family. He only hoped they’d understand the hasty goodbye and request for them to stay put he’d shouted over his shoulder as he ran.

He arrived at the Department of Family Reunions wide-eyed and winded, having run full speed from his home to the station without stopping. Muttering a curse under his breath, he doubled over, hands braced on his femurs as he forced his breathing to slow to a respectable speed before entering the station, approaching the entrance to the family reunions department, and tapping his knuckles against the doorframe. A woman appeared in the doorway, the same skeleton he assumed he’d spoken with on the phone, judging by the knowing look on her face and the hint of trepidation in her eyes.

“Thank you for coming, Señor Rivera,” she said with an incline of her head, stepping back from the door to allow him inside. She shut the door behind him before motioning for him to follow her. “Forgive me for not being able to give you much notice or explanation over the phone. This was all very sudden, and we needed to get you here as quickly as possible.”

Héctor nodded, glancing around the hall she was leading him down. It was poorly lit, and the walls were decorated with sporadically placed and noticeably dusty paintings—imitation Frida Kahlo pieces, he noted absently to himself. “It’s no problem, señora. But, ah, am I allowed to ask what’s going on now?”

The clerk looked over her shoulder at him and sighed, clearly unhappy. “You do realize that there are only two primary reasons for being called here, yes?”

He nodded again, slower this time as phantom pangs of fear shot through his abdomen. He could hear the forced calmness in his voice as he spoke. “Issues related to Día de Muertos—such as not being able to cross—and the arrival of someone from your family.”

“Correct,” she replied. “And given that it is no longer Día de Muertos, I’m sure you can imagine why you’re here.”

The only person he could think of that might have arrived was Coco’s daughter Elena, and he wasn’t sure why they’d need just him to welcome her unless she’d specifically requested it. He reluctantly rejected that idea and the split-second relief it had brought him. It was a difficult line of thought to think on, considering how young and healthy everyone else in the family was, and that he’d seen them just a few weeks ago. Everyone had been fine. No one had been sick. They’d all been happy and carefree and—
Well, alive.

They came to a halt at the end of the hall, in front of a door without a label or name of any kind indicating its purpose. She shifted out of the way and gestured at it. “Go on in and take a seat. Someone will be here to attend to you shortly.”

Héctor did as he was instructed, stepping into the office and shutting the door quietly behind him. It was a plainly decorated room, with just a desk, a few chairs, and a potted plant in the corner. A large window with a view out to the city and a small desk lamp were the only sources of light. He stepped further in and sat down in one of the chairs in front of the desk, taking his hat into his hands and fiddling with it anxiously.

Minutes ticked by. He fixed his gaze on the door behind the desk, waiting. Waiting. Waiting. The door finally opened after what felt like an eternity, a stocky, uniformed skeleton stepping into the room and taking a seat behind the desk. He looked to Héctor—his face unreadable—and folded his hands in his lap. Héctor returned his hat to his head and mimicked the officer’s posture, swallowing dryly, finding that he wished someone would just tell him what was going on. Get it over with. Break the news.

“There’s someone here for you,” said the officer. “Someone we weren’t expecting to receive so soon.”

Ah. There we go.

“He still hasn’t woken up yet, but it shouldn’t be much longer now.”

Wait.

Wait.

He. He still hadn’t woken up.

“The circumstances that brought him to us aren’t all that uncommon, especially for his age, but we had no reason to suspect that he’d be arriving, especially so close to his previous visit.”

Oh no. No no no no no—

The officer continued to speak, but Héctor heard none of it. His face went blank, mind moving as if in slow motion as he began to process, began to finally understand what was going on, why he was here.

It couldn’t be. It couldn’t. It was too soon, far too soon for him of all people to be here. Just weeks ago, he’d been okay. Smiling, laughing, singing, dancing in circles around the other members of their family as they’d made their way to the graveyard—

He swore he was going to be sick.

The sound of snapping brought him back to the present moment. Eyes locking on the officer’s face, clear horror evident on his features as the officer stood and motioned for him to follow, clearly aware that anything he could say to Héctor would mean nothing to him now. He shakily got to his feet, haltingly stepping towards the door, the sound of his bones clacking against the hardwood floor nothing but a distant noise compared to the ringing in his ears.

No.
The door opened, and the officer stepped inside.

No.

He did too.

No.

And though Héctor Rivera was no stranger to death, none of his experiences with dying and the Land of the Dead could’ve prepared him for what awaited him inside.
Waking Up

Chapter Notes

So first off, allow me to yell for a second: YOU GUYS ARE ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL??? Seriously, I wasn't expecting this kind of response to the fic when I first posted it but man a l i v e you've all been so sweet and funny and kind and???? I'm deceased????? It's been so fun getting to talk/yell with you and seeing how the story's impacting you and just. Goodness me. There aren't enough words to describe how grateful I am for all of you, or how often I've stared at my screen just... grinning like an absolute IDIOT because you're all amazing and WOW I LOVE YOU GUYS
THANK YOU FOR BEING SO LOVELY

Ahem. I'm good. I'm fine. Totally fine.

Secondly! These initial chapters are probably going to be on the shorter side (though this chapter's slightly longer than the last, which is fun!). Currently just trying to get the stage set, get certain pieces in place, etc. etc. but hopefully soon, chapters will start to increase in word count.

And as always, please tell me if you see any glaring errors in my usage of Spanish vocab. I'd definitely appreciate the assist. ^^

The room itself was unremarkable. Plain wooden floors. Faded wallpaper on the walls. A single light hanging from the ceiling, casting a spotlight on the one thing in the room he was so desperately trying to deny the presence of.

Maybe if he shut his eyes and opened them again, he’d wake up. This was just a nightmare. It had to be.

He tried it, squeezing his eyes shut, counting to five. This wasn’t real. This wasn’t happening. He opened them.

Everything was just as it was before he’d closed his eyes. It was real. It was happening.

Héctor stumbled back a step, bracing himself against the doorway as his legs threatened to give out beneath him. Under the light of the lamp was a table of sorts, not unlike the examination tables you’d find in a doctor’s office. On the table was a boy, a boy that he wished he didn’t know, wished he didn’t recognize. He hated himself for how much he wished it was someone else’s boy lying there, how much he wished that it was all just a big mistake.

There was no mistaking him, though. It was Miguel.

He was lying on his back, hands folded and laid to rest atop his ribcage, eyes shut, mouth set in a frown—not one of anger or sadness, but a neutral expression. Unawareness. Just like being asleep. He looked a little taller than he had been two years ago when they’d first met, but only slightly—he hadn’t yet hit his growth spurt, like he said he hoped he would soon in the letter he’d left for Héctor just a few weeks ago. His face, though now quite literally skeletal, still had the round cheeks and wide eyes generally associated with childhood. Just a boy. So young, so full of hopes
and dreams, now all left unfulfilled...

Héctor forced himself to move closer.

He could see that Miguel’s clothes were ripped and tattered in places, bones showing through the holes in the fabric and forcing Héctor to accept that this wasn’t some sort of sick, cruel, elaborate prank. Even now, seeing him so clearly and certainly not alive, he’d still tried to reason his way out, find some other explanation for it all. But there was none.

Miguel, sweet, gifted, wonderful Miguel, was just as dead as him and everyone else in the Land of the Dead.

Voice thick with emotion, he spoke. “What happened? Why does he look so...?”

“Broken up?” the officer replied from where he stood on the opposite side of the table, finishing Héctor’s sentence and getting a nod from him in response. “Car accident. He was walking his little sister home from the plaza where they’d spent the afternoon listening to the mariachi. She got away from him, wandered out right into the path of a moving truck. He managed to push her out of the way, but...” he sighed and shook his head. “It was moving too quickly. Didn’t even see him. The driver wouldn't have even known he'd caused a death if it hadn't been for all the witnesses that were there.”

The signs of the accident were present in Miguel’s bones, many of which were still in the process of refusing, filling up the broken spaces and reconnecting until they all were as white and smooth as they had been before he’d died. A narrow crack crept from the bottom of his jaw to under his eye, where it splintered out like a spiderweb across the surface of his skull. Héctor watched, mesmerized, as it slowly sealed, gradually erasing itself like it’d never been there at all.

“And his sister?” Héctor managed to ask, eyes still fixed on Miguel’s face where the faint beginnings of calavera-like markings were starting to form in places where the fractures had sealed.

“Alive and unharmed, save for a few scratches. She was removed from the scene before she could see anything, menos mal.” The officer took his hat from his head in reverence, holding it over where his heart had once been.

Héctor nodded slowly, eyes still fixed on Miguel’s face, only partially registering what had been said to him. The patterns that were appearing bore a strong resemblance to his own, though instead of the oranges, yellows, and purples that streaked across his face, Miguel’s were coming in in vivid shades of reds and blues that were occasionally interrupted by bits of bright green—another trait they shared.

The fact that their markings were so similar would’ve delighted him under any other circumstance.

“I should’ve...” Héctor began, but his voice rebelled against him, emotion threatening to overwhelm him and keep him from speaking. He tried again. “I should’ve brought some clothes with me. New clothes. For him. Not these, these ripped, dirty.... no. Not these.”

The officer turned sympathetic eyes to him and shook his head. “There was no way for you to know, señor. You can get him some as soon as you get him home.”

“Home,” Héctor murmured, reaching out and gently running his thumb over the starburst-like symbols on Miguel’s cheek. Yes. Home. This was his home now. No more running from their family or hurrying to beat the sunrise. No more blessings given through marigold petals. No more
visits on Día de Muertos and getting to watch him grow and share his music with the world. No more handwritten notes or sheet music left on the ofrenda for Héctor to see and bring home in the basket full of offerings meant to make up for all the years he’d spent alone. No more.

No more.

The short skeleton said something that once again didn’t register in Héctor’s mind, walking away from the table and towards the door. It clicked shut behind him, leaving Héctor alone with the silence, his grief, and Miguel’s unconscious, regenerating form. All he could do was stand and watch, watching with detached curiosity as faint golden light shown from underneath Miguel’s torn hoodie—one that was so similar to the one he’d worn before that Héctor couldn’t help but wonder if it was the same jacket—as his ribs started to meld together again. He lifted a hand to Miguel’s head and ran his fingers over his hair, smoothing it all back into place in slow, light motions. His other hand found one of Miguel’s, hoping that the sensation of a familiar touch would be a comforting one when he awoke.

After all, he knew what it was like waking up here alone. He wouldn’t dream of putting his chamaco through that.

Minutes ticked by, but Héctor didn’t notice, much too preoccupied to be aware of the passage of time. Soon the glow began to fade from Miguel’s ribs, the final, smaller breaks in other bones beginning to close as the process drew towards its end. The bits of color on his face grew more pigmented, the minute differences between his and Héctor’s patterns becoming visible. One such minute difference was a single dark spot above Miguel’s lip on the left side of his face, a dot that wasn’t mirrored on the right. Just like the beauty mark he’d had, the one that shifted positions slightly when he grinned or laughed or showed off the dimple he had in his left cheek but not his right that he’d been so proud of.

They’d been on the trolley on their way to the talent show when Héctor truly noticed it for the first time. He must’ve said something that had really amused Miguel, because the boy broke into a fit of laughter so intense that he’d doubled over and clutched at his stomach.

“Ay, easy there chamaco! Don’t hurt yourself!” Héctor had said, reaching over to pat Miguel on the back when his laughter turned into a coughing fit. Miguel lifted his head and rubbed at his eyes, still giggling despite the coughs, his smile so wide that the dimple was clearly visible. He noticed Hector looking at it and shifted his smile so it disappeared, then brought it back again.

“Dimple, no dimple, dimple, no dimple. Pretty neat, huh?” Miguel grinned up at him, the dimple returning.

“Pretty neat indeed, chiquito. You should do that for the talent show instead,” Héctor teased, nudging Miguel with his elbow. “It’s way more impressive than anything de la Cruz can do, so I’d say you have a shot.”

Despite his devotion to de la Cruz at the time, Miguel couldn't help but snicker, an infectious sort of laugh that Héctor couldn't help but join in with. They’d both laughed then, the lights of the city passing them by and the breeze ruffling their hair as music from the plaza drifted up to greet them.

He gripped Miguel’s hand as the memory faded, eyes squeezing shut in an attempt to keep himself from crying. Not yet. Not yet. There would be more than enough time for that soon, but he didn’t want his tear-streaked face to be the first thing Miguel saw when he opened his eyes—something that he knew could happen at any moment now that his transition from life into death was complete.
As if on cue, Miguel’s ribcage started to rise and fall as he slowly began to breathe again, eyelids fluttering, a shudder running through him and making his bones rattle quietly against each other. Even in death, the boy was made of music and music was made through him. His great-great grandson, through and through.

“Miguelito,” Héctor whispered, his voice as warm and comforting as he could possibly make it. “Rise and shine, mijo. Everything’s okay now. You’re okay. Papá Héctor’s got you.”

“Papá... Héctor?” came Miguel’s soft reply as he gradually opened his eyes, going slowly to let them adjust to the brightness of the light above him. “What’s going on? Did I... did I get myself cursed again?”

Héctor let out a shaky breath, giving Miguel’s hand another squeeze and brushing the long, dark hair on his forehead away from his eyes. “No, Miguel, no curses. You’re... you’re here for good this time.”
Hey all! First off, let me once again start us off by yelling about how wonderful you guys are! YOU'RE REALLY WONDERFUL, OKAY? I LOVE READING YOUR COMMENTS AND INTERACTING WITH YOU ALL! IT'S GOOD STUFF MY DUDES! ;u;

Secondly, a lovely archive user by the name of Dawnieserix drew Ojos Que No Ven's first piece of fanart!! Check it out!! Look at how precious Miguel is! https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/370995697048354817/391053622055665666/Untitled151.png

You should definitely check out their rationale they left in the comments on why they chose those markings for Miguel. It's super cute, you guys. I died?? I'm still dead??? Go give them some love! <3 <3

Aaaaand as always, feel free to correct me on any Spanish dialogue errors you see!

There were few things that Héctor wished he could forget more than the expression that had fallen over Miguel’s face then. Formerly bright, joyful brown eyes now looked up at him full of disbelief, shock, and fear, all traces of evidence that he’d ever smiled before completely erased from his features. The hand that he was holding was limp, unmoving—cold, hard, and stiff, so unlike the way they’d been when he was alive. Warm. Full of life, always moving and accentuating everything he had to say.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Everything was just so wrong.

To Héctor, it felt like nothing would ever be right again.

“What?” Miguel asked after a long, heavy moment of silence, his voice so quiet and tremulous that it was a marvel he was able to speak at all. “Papá Héctor, no, there, this has to be a mistake—here, here’s a marigold petal. Take it. Give me your blessing so I can go home. Please.” He pushed himself upright and pressed a stray petal he’d found on his coat—one that must’ve stuck on him when he was brought in—against Héctor’s chest, small skeletal hands wrinkling the fabric as they urgently tried to pass the petal to him. Miguel noticed for the first time how his hands had changed and began to panic, eyes wide and breath shallow. He tried handing the petal to Héctor directly, prying open his fingers and pressing it into his palm. “I’ve already been here too long. I need to go, I need to get back before it’s too late! Papá Héctor, the blessing, please!”

Chest aching at the sight of his grandson in such distress, Héctor carefully took Miguel’s hands and held them between his, brushing the wrinkled petal aside. “Chamaco, listen. You’re not cursed.”

“I, I have to be. There’s no other way for me to be here—I need to get back to Coco, she’s all alone in the marketplace, she must be so scared—”

“Miguel—“
“What if she gets kidnapped? Or lost? Or something absolutely horrible happens to her and it’ll be all my fault because I’m not there to protect her, to keep her safe, to keep her from—”

“Miguel, listen—“

“I need to get to her! I can’t stay here any longer! I can’t! If anything happens to her while I’m here, I don’t know what I’ll—“

“Miguel.” Héctor’s voice broke as he took the boy’s face into his hands, forcing Miguel to look at him. “Escúchame. Please, mijo.”

Miguel stopped moving, looking at Héctor with wide, pleading eyes—eyes that practically begged him to tell him it was just a mistake, or that he was just dreaming. That this wasn’t true, or real, or anything permanent. That everything was going to be okay, that he could go home right now and it’d be like he’d never left.

He wished he could tell him all those things and have them be true.

But he couldn’t.

So he went with the only other thing he could think of. The truth—or an abridged version of it. It wouldn’t do him any good to hear the full version right now. Too soon, too traumatic. The events surrounding his death would come back to him in time and on their own anyway. That’s how it had gone for him—he could only assume it’d be the same for his boy, as much as he wished that Miguel wouldn’t have to relive the event in both his waking moments and his nightmares over and over and over—

Stop. Focus.

“There was an accident,” Héctor explained, voice low, moving his hands from Miguel’s face to his shoulders, holding him steady. “You saved Socorro from getting hit, Miguel. Pushed her out of the way just in time. But you... well, you...”

Silence fell between them again as his words died in his throat. He couldn’t finish the sentence. He just couldn’t do it.

“I... I died.”

Miguel, however, could.

And hearing him say it made Héctor feel much, much worse somehow.

The two of them stared at each other for a long, silent moment before Miguel’s eyes welled up with tears and he lurched forward, burying his face against Héctor’s shirt with a sob, clinging to him as if his life—or rather, his lack thereof—depended on it. Héctor folded his arms around the boy and pulled him close, pressing his face into Miguel’s hair in yet another attempt to keep himself from crying—an attempt that failed completely, he quickly discovered.

There wasn’t anything he could do or say to make this any better, Héctor knew. Yet he hoped that him being here, even as teary and broken-hearted as he was, was a comfort to Miguel—even if just a little bit.

He was just so, so glad that he could be here for him. Waking up here alone... he wouldn’t dream of letting his grandson go through that.
He’d never have to go through anything alone ever again.

They were like that for some time, sharing in their mourning, holding each other as those massive initial waves of grief washed over them. How long, exactly, neither could say for certain—time had had no meaning to them then, not when it felt like their world was falling to pieces around them. Long enough, though, for Miguel to wear himself out and nearly pass out when the adrenaline wore off and he finally realized exactly how much pain he was in. Going through such a traumatic accident had had an obvious impact on him, even if his wounds had all healed. The aches from his death remained—as they would for some time. Héctor hoped for his sake that his pain wouldn’t last long, but he remembered with perfect clarity how horrible the phantom pains from his death had been—the way his midsection had hurt, even though there was nothing there that could hurt anymore. Miguel’s case was exceptional in the fact that all of him had been impacted by the accident—bones, organs, everything. He would be feeling that for a long time to come.

Oh what he’d do to take that pain away from his boy.

Oh how he wished he could.

Héctor, knowing full well that Miguel wasn’t in any shape to be making the journey to their compound by foot just yet, decided that it would be best for him to carry Miguel home. Carefully, he helped Miguel climb onto his back, hooking his arms behind Miguel’s knees and making sure his boy held on as best he could. Miguel mumbled a soft “thank you,” too fatigued to manage much more than that, and nestled his head against Héctor’s shoulder, hood up and bangs falling over his eyes. He wasn’t ready to accept it all yet, to see it.

And that was okay. He’d have more than enough time to see it later, when he was ready. He had all the time in the world now.

He stepped out of the back room, into the office, then into the hallway, maneuvering each door shut behind them with his foot before setting off down the corridor. Things had seemed so much simpler when he’d walked down it the first time. Just a poorly lit hallway full of shoddily rendered Frida Kahlo knockoffs and a looming—but not yet justified—sense of dread. No despair or soul-crushing grief. No dried tear tracks that refused to completely fade. No Miguel, now reduced to bones and shallow breaths, so much lighter and less substantial than he’d been such a short time before.

Not now. Not now. There would be time for him to focus on his grief once he got his boy home. That was his top priority—get him home, get him settled, then break the news to everyone else. He didn’t want them to see Miguel without him having the chance to warn them first. The boy deserved the warmest welcome they could muster, and they certainly wouldn’t be prepared to do that if they just... showed up. No, they needed to do this right. It was the least they could do for him after all he’d done for them and the rest of their living family.

He took them through the Department of Family Reunions as quickly as possible, not at all in the mood to deal with the sorrowful, all-too knowing looks they were sure to receive from both the workers and the patrons that crossed their path. They thought they understood. Somehow, though, he wondered if that was truly the case. The rational part of his mind knew it to be true—death in all its forms was a difficult thing to deal with, and it often struck unexpected people at unexpected times. The emotional part of his mind, though? It told him very few of them truly understood what this felt like, to have someone so young, so gifted, so kind and loving just... taken. There was so much he had wanted to do. So much he hadn’t yet seen. It wasn’t a fair assumption at all, but really, nothing about any of this was fair. He felt he was entitled to a bit of unfairness himself. They all were, Miguel especially. He made a mental note to tell him so when things began to settle
down a bit more.

A cool breeze not uncommon in the Land of the Dead greeted them as he stepped out the main entrance and walked down the stairs, providing relief from the stagnant, warm air that typically filled the station on its busier days. It helped relieve at least a little of the tension that had settled behind his ribcage, and he hoped it brought the same relief to Miguel—who seemed to be on the verge of falling asleep, the poor boy.

“We’ll be home soon, Miguelito,” Héctor said, shifting so Miguel sat more comfortably. He got a quiet, muffled mumble in reply, confirming his suspicions that his passenger would likely be asleep before they got to their destination. Just as well—he was going to need all the rest he could get for the journey he had ahead of him. The grieving process wasn’t an easy one, after all. Never an easy one.

Thankfully, once they were far enough from the station, people began to pay them less and less attention, too preoccupied with their own errands and lives to be bothered with the two of them. It made the journey less uncomfortable, not having to deal with all of those eyes—eyes that thought that they knew what they were seeing, thought they understood what this felt like—watching them, witnessing their pain. Pain that made even the bright, brilliant colors of the Land of the Dead seem dull and faded, a kind of ache that he hadn’t felt since he’d died and left behind everything he’d ever cared about, one that he’d hoped he’d never have to feel again and that Miguel would never have to experience. So much for that, he thought bitterly.

Soon the crowded, noisy streets began to widen and the crowds of people lessened and lessened until only the occasional straggler, like them, remained as the district changed from commercial to residential. Delicate strains of music filled the air, coming from the mouths of women attending their gardens, from the band of old friends gathered on a porch where they played pieces they’d composed long ago, from the group of small skeletons playing a game with a jump rope. He couldn’t have picked a better neighborhood for their family if he’d had the chance, what with the way that music seemed to play at every hour of the day, even deep into the night when lone guitarists or harpists stayed up to play to the moon. He knew Miguel was going to love it, and he looked forward to hearing his songs join with those of their neighbors as soon as he decided he was ready to play again.

By the time they made it to the front gate, Miguel was fast asleep. A blessing, since he would be less likely to overhear any potential comments or exclamations of surprise if anyone happened to be there to greet him. Quietly, he nudged open the gate and peered inside, only to come face to face with Imelda. She didn’t look entirely pleased, to say the least.

“And where,” she said, her hands on her hips, “have you been? Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“It’s late,” he replied, clearing his throat when his voice came out unusually raspy. “And I really, really need you to let me in quietly. You can scold me all you want for running off later, but I need to take care of something first.”

He must’ve looked worse than he realized, because Imelda’s expression turned from one of mild annoyance to one of concern as she sighed and placed a kiss on his forehead, moving to hold open the gate for him. “Ay, mí corazón. It’s fine. Come inside.”

“Just… turn around, if you could. Please. I’d rather tell all of you at the same time than have to go over it all again.”

Confusion mingled with concern on her face, but she did as she was asked, turning her back to him
and stepping aside to let him pass. Héctor thanked her, hurrying off in the direction of their living quarters before she had a chance to inquire further. Explaining what had happened more than once was just something he couldn’t do right now. Once was far too much as it was.

Far too much.

Knowing he likely wasn’t going to be getting much sleep tonight, Héctor decided that it would be best to put Miguel in his bed while he went and broke the news to their family. He’d been working on preparing a room for Miguel, but, well… he hadn’t expected that it’d need to be used so soon. There was still much work he had left to do on it, so for now, his and Imelda’s room would work just fine. He snuck past the others’ rooms on the off chance that any of them were inside and shut the door behind them, doing his best to shift Miguel from his back into his arms without waking him up. He then lowered him onto his side of the mattress, pulling the comforter up under Miguel’s chin and running a hand over his hair one more time before turning to leave and confront the others.

“Rest now, chamaco. I’ll be right back. I promise,” he said, pulling the door shut behind him with a click.
The sun had started to go down some time ago, but Miguel just couldn’t bring himself to go home. The music in Mariachi Plaza was too infectious, too captivating, and seeing the way Socorro delighted in all the sights and sounds only made him want to stay longer. It was his favorite place to be, he found—no matter the time of day or the weather, he felt at ease here, and it filled him with joy to see that his little sister felt the same.

However, it was definitely past her bedtime, and he could already hear the stern-yet-affectionate voice of their abuelita scolding him for keeping Soccoro out so much later than she was supposed to be. He was more than willing to be on the receiving end of all the scolding in the world if it meant he got to see her take stumbling steps in time with the music and try to sing along at the same time, though. Music moved through her as it did through him—and he knew a certain someone who would be delighted to hear about this, to know that his love of music hadn’t just passed on to Miguel, but to her too.

He couldn’t wait to tell Papá Héctor all about it. Next year’s Día de Muertos couldn’t come soon enough.

“Okay Coco,” Miguel said as he stirred from his musings, rising to his feet and stretching. “Time to go home now. Mamá and Papá are waiting, and you need to get to bed!”

Coco stopped mid-step and turned her head to shoot a pleading look at her brother, her big brown eyes full of clear longing to stay and listen for just a while longer. He knew that look, remembered just how often his eyes had reflected that same longing he’d felt time and time again whenever he was deprived of music. He couldn’t help but giggle. Coco didn’t know how lucky she was to be able to grow up in love with music without having to hide it.

And, he thought to himself, she’s lucky to have a big brother who loves music just as much as she does—if not more!

“Come on, don’t look at me like that! I’ll bring you back after school tomorrow, okay? We’ll spend the whole afternoon here, I promise.”
Her face lit up at that, her dark curls bouncing as she nodded enthusiastically. “Promise! Promise!” She held out her hand to him expectantly, waiting for him to make their agreement official. Such a little businesswoman she was turning out to be!

“Sí, sí, mi patito. I promise!” Miguel laughed again, twining his hand with hers and giving it a firm shake. “Now come on, let’s go home.”

Miguel tried to pick her up, but she firmly refused, wiggling around in his arms until he set her down again. She was at that stage where she could walk perfectly fine with a little bit of help, but she still looked a bit like a drunken sailor—stumbling around, flailing her arms, that sort of thing. But now that she’d discovered that she could walk (mostly) on her own, she wanted to do it all the time. And with how happy it made her, how proud she looked when they made it home, how could he deny her?

So he settled on taking her hand, just to make sure she didn’t take a tumble and get hurt—because if she did, he knew he’d never be able to forgive himself, even if it was just a scrape or a bruise. She was too precious to him for that.

Things were fine and good for those first few minutes on their journey back home. It was still light enough that they wouldn’t have any difficulty seeing, especially with all the street and porch lights, and there were plenty of other people milling about and enjoying the cool evening air. A gentle murmure surrounded them, full of distant laughter and muted conversations of those nearby. It was peaceful. Everything was right in the world.

And then Miguel stumbled, noticing that his bootlaces had come untied.

He stopped and went down on one knee, letting go of Socorro’s hand. “Hang on for a second, hermanita. Stay by me while I fix this, okay?”

Coco did as he’d asked for a moment before something across the street caught her interest. Something shiny, the kind of something that looked like it could be used to make noise—maybe even pretty noise, like the noise her brother made when he played for her. She decided then that she definitely needed to investigate. She wanted to make pretty noise for him too, maybe even with him.

She glanced to Miguel, then across the street, then back to him one more time before she turned and started to take fumbling, bumbling steps in the direction of what had captivated her interest. Right into the middle of the street.

Typically, the only kind of traffic that this part of Santa Cecilia saw was foot traffic—vehicles weren’t seen frequently in this part of town, being as there was little need for them with how close at hand everything was. And yet, in a cruel twist of fate or irony or just plain, old-fashioned Rivera family bad luck, there was a truck coming down the road towards Coco.

And it was going very, very fast.

Miguel heard it before he saw it, the rumble of its tires against the stone streets, the growling of its engine. He looked up from his shoes, and it was as if the world began to move in slow motion. The headlights were growing brighter, brighter, brighter, yet Coco didn’t see it—and judging by the looks of it, the driver didn’t see her either.

He began to move before his mind even registered he was in motion. His untied laces forgotten, he got to his feet and ran, ran until he had almost caught up to her, until she was just about in his arms, and the truck was right there, so close he could feel the heat of its inner workings on his skin, the
smell of it filling his nose and making his eyes burn—he was crying, wasn’t he. He was crying.

His fingertips made contact with her back then, pushing her out of the way, forcing her to safety. He couldn’t grab her. He wouldn’t take her with him. She would be safe. She would be okay. Everything would be okay. It would, it wou—

The world shuddered.

His fingertips, her back, pushing her away, to safety. Can’t grab her. Won’t grab her. Just safety now. Coco is safe. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay—

The world shuddered.

Why was he doing this again? Why again? Please, please not again. Don’t make me feel that pain again, please please please don’t make me look at this or feel this again please I just want to—

The world shuddered.

The world shuddered.

The world shuddered.

The world shuddered.

Miguel woke up screaming, the taste of blood in his mouth, the sickening, stifling scent of gasoline in his nose, and with pain burning its way through every bone in his body.

Héctor had never been in a room so quiet yet so full of people before, especially not a room where he’d been the one to cause the silence or where everyone was staring at him with such despair-filled eyes. It wasn’t something he ever, ever wanted to experience again.

Coco took a step towards him, her voice wavering. “Papá, you… you’re sure it’s him?”

He couldn’t meet any of their eyes, instead letting his head fall into his hands as he nodded. “It’s him,” came his weak reply, his voice still hoarse and throaty, barely more than a broken whisper at this point. “There’s no doubt in my mind. It’s him.”

Silence fell over the assembled Rivera family again, but it was quickly broken by Óscar and Felipe, who seemed to have worked themselves into a panicked frenzy—their typical response to crisis, one that he’d seen many times before. Despite this, their ability to finish each other’s sentences perfectly remained.

“But how? He was so, so—“

“Young! So much younger than any of us when we—“

“Died. How can this be possible, Héctor? What—”

“Happened to him?”

“It was a car accident,” he answered, hopefully for the last time. He really didn’t want to have to think about what Miguel went through, but he couldn’t help but envision it every time it was mentioned aloud. Once had been far more than enough. Too much. “Little Socorro was in danger. The person who was driving didn’t see her—or him, when he jumped in front of it to push her out of the way. The officer told me it was over in an instant, but... I just… I hope he was right.”

Of course, everyone responded to the revelation of how Miguel had died exactly as one would
Rosita let out a stifled sob, turning quickly to Victoria who held her and rubbed her back absently, her usually keen, knowing eyes watery and unfocused as she tried to process what had been said.

Óscar and Felipe had visibly wilted, all of their energy leaving their bodies as they faced the reality of what Héctor had told them—of course he’d know it was Miguel. They’d just hoped that maybe… somehow… he’d been wrong.

Julio and Coco were keeping each other upright with their arms wrapped around each other, Coco’s expression showing that she was trying to keep it together but slowly failing, tears spilling out of her eyes and down her cheekbones. That was her boy, who she’d known since he was born, who had saved her memories of her papá from fading away to nothing, who had been there for her every day even when he had schoolwork or chores to do.

Her boy. Héctor’s boy. Everyone’s boy. The boy they had so eagerly looked forward to seeing again once he’d lived a long, full, successful, and happy life. Not so soon. Not like this.

Imelda was the first to find the words to speak. Her voice, normally so strong and full and confident, was soft and unsteady—fighting against her and all her efforts to remain composed. “How is he?” she managed, laying a steadying hand on her husband’s shoulder.

“How is he?” He took a breath and let it out, forcing himself to keep breathing despite the emotions that threatened to overcome him. “He’s sleeping now. I don’t imagine he’ll be up for a while.”

They all fell into silence again, every one of them responding to this in their own private ways—some less private than others. Yet all of them continued to struggle with the idea that Miguel was here for good now. He wasn’t going to leave them again. While this was something they’d all been very much looking forward to… they’d never dreamed it would play out like this.

How odd it was to mourn for someone who was with them.

Though really, how could they not, given the circumstances of how he’d come to be among them?

All of a sudden, it was all too much for Héctor again. He needed to go be with Miguel now, to the quiet of his and Imelda’s room so he could just… not have to think for a while. He got to his feet, moving from the spot he’d taken on the edge of one of their workshop tables and standing at his full height—or what would’ve been his full height, if not for the way his shoulders seemed to slump against his will, as if the weight of the grief he carried had manifested there. They all seemed to understand without him even saying a word—that, or maybe they were all too caught up in their own grief to notice him leaving. He couldn’t seem to bring himself to care. He understood what they were feeling—maybe even better than they did, as odd as it sounded to admit. He shook his head and sighed, turning to leave.

Imelda, however, noticed him get up and took his arm, moving so she was in front of him. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder. When she pulled back, his shoulder was wet. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder. She didn’t say anything, instead pulling him into a tight hug and pressing her face into his shoulder.

“Thank you, mí amor,” Héctor mumbled in reply, leaning forward and gently kissing her forehead.
“I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Get some sleep, if you can. You’re going to need it.”

He nodded and smiled weakly, knowing full well how right she was. Grieving was never easy, and he wasn’t going to be grieving alone. Miguel needed him to be there for him, needed someone to guide him and love him and show him that things would be okay again someday, even if they didn’t feel like it.

He just had to keep telling himself that everything was okay first.

It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.

Héctor was awake and on his feet in an instant, startling from the place he’d fallen asleep beside the bed, his lower body on the floor while his arms and head had rested on the mattress next to Miguel. Miguel had just let out the loudest scream he’d heard in a long time and had bolted upright, hands clutching at the sheets, chest heaving, tears pouring out of his eyes as he frantically scanned the room and tried to figure out where he was. He was in shock, Héctor realized.

Not knowing what else to do, he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Miguel into his arms, holding him as close as he could. “Miguel, chamaco, hey, hey, listen to me. It’s okay. You’re alright. You’re safe. I’m right here.” The scream Miguel had let out turned to pained sobs as he clung to Héctor’s shirt, holding onto him desperately as he curled against him—his lifeline, his protector. Safety. Home.

“It’s going to be okay, mijo. It’s going to be okay. You’re safe now. Papá Héctor’s got you.” He gently smoothed Miguel’s hair down as he’d done the night before, his hand moving in slow, practiced motions. “Just a dream, Miguelito. Just a dream. It can’t hurt you now. I promise.”

Even with his assurances, Miguel continued to weep, still too overwhelmed from what he’d seen to be able to calm down. A nightmare, he could only assume—one likely related to how he’d died, and a brutal one, at that, judging by how strong of a reaction he was having. There would be time to unpack it later, when Miguel had calmed down enough to recall it without bringing too much distress on himself, when he was ready, but… he suddenly realized he needed to calm down too.

Héctor Rivera wasn’t a violent man by nature, but in that moment he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it would take his entire family to hold him back if he ever met the person who had done this to his boy.

Even if what Miguel had just experienced was just a dream, that didn’t change the fact that he’d had to go through the event that’d caused it—and that he was having to live through it again so soon. And that it wouldn’t be the last time he’d relive it, either. He knew that from personal experience. He’d had to feel that gut-wrenching pain over and over and over again, had to relive the way he’d fallen to the ground, thinking only of how much he’d wanted to go home to his family, how much he missed his wife, his daughter. All the regrets he’d had.

Miguel did not deserve this.

As such, Héctor was determined to give his boy the best afterlife he could, if only to somewhat make up for all that he’d lost, for everything he’d had to feel and see and experience, for everything that took his life and his living family away from him. Whatever he wanted, Héctor would give it to him. Anything at all. It was the least he could do for the one he cared about so much, the one who had saved him from disappearing forever, who had brought their family back together, who
had righted his old wrongs.

He deserved every good thing. And he'd be damned if he didn't let Miguel know this and do everything he could to make that a part of his reality.

It was the least he could do for the boy who meant so much to him.

Before long, after further soothing and gentle words from Héctor, Miguel managed to relax enough to breathe normally again. “I’m sorry,” he croaked as he slid out of Héctor’s lap and rested his head against his shoulder.

“No apologies, Miguel,” he replied as he wrapped his arm around Miguel’s shoulders. “I understand more than you know—better than most.” He paused and looked down at Miguel, giving him a lopsided smile, one caught somewhere between being happy and sad. “Sometimes, all you can do is cry. It’s the only thing that helps—and that’s okay.”

Miguel smiled back—that same not-quite-happy-or-sad smile—and wrapped both arms around Héctor again. “Thanks Papá Héctor. For being here for me. For everything.”

“You know I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” He grinned, a true grin this time, before getting up and pulling Miguel up with him, lifting the boy onto his shoulders. “Now, how about we go get some breakfast? I know quite a few people who are excited to see you!”

From his perch up on his grandfather’s shoulders, Miguel let out a quiet, tired, raspy laugh and replied, "I'd like that."

And even though it wasn't particularly loud or contagious or strong, that laugh sounded just like music to Héctor then, as imperfect as it was. Even when he was at his lowest point, Miguel was music. And neither death nor trauma, pain nor suffering, would ever be able to take that away from him.

His boy. His great-great grandson, without a doubt. Through and through.
It was just as he was about to step out of his and Imelda’s room—Miguel, of course, still perched on his shoulders—when Héctor realized he’d forgotten something very, very important.

“Ayyy Miguelito, where did my mind go?” he exclaimed, reaching up and pulling Miguel off his shoulders, holding him out in front of himself and giving him a once over, brows furrowed. “I completely forgot about your clothes!”

“My clothes?” Miguel asked, looking puzzled. He glanced down at himself, an expression of understanding falling over his face as he did so. “Oh. Right. My clothes. They’re…”

Miguel’s expression went from one of understanding to one of sadness, looking forlorn as he fussed at the hem of his undershirt where it had torn and begun to fray. Immediately aware of his shift in mood, Héctor spun the two of them around, sat Miguel down on the bed, and knelt down in front of him.

“Just a little dirty, that’s all! Nothing a quick change won’t fix! Though of course, I’m sure Mamá Imelda will be more than happy to mend them for you, if you’d like,” he added hastily as he saw Miguel pulling his hoodie tighter around himself. They’d be happy to get him new clothes, if he so chose—but of course they weren’t going to make him get rid of the ones he already had if he didn’t want to. That would be cruel, to take the last remnant of his life in the Land of the Living away from him.

Hearing that brought the little smile back to Miguel’s face, grateful for the reassurance he hadn’t realized he’d needed. “We don’t want Mamá Imelda to get mad at you for letting me make my first appearance dressed like this, right?” Miguel laughed—ah, what a precious sound!—then looked at Héctor with a hint of doubt in his eyes. “Though honestly, Papá Héctor… I’m not entirely sure that you’ll have anything that’ll fit me.”

Slapping his hands against his femurs, Héctor snickered and rose to his full height, turning to face
his dresser. “Well, prepare to be amazed chamaco, because I can assure you—there’s gotta be at least one thing in here that’ll fit you! Maybe even several things!” He pried open the top drawer and peered inside, humming to himself as he dug through his once-neatly folded stacks of dress shirts and trousers—some of which he pulled out, examined, then scoffed at and pushed promptly to the bottom of the drawer, while others he looked at thoughtfully, peaked over his shoulder at Miguel, then nodded as he set them aside.

This went on for several more minutes before Héctor finally seemed to be content with the selection he’d found… which consisted of one dress shirt, one pair of pants, a set of suspenders, and a bright red necktie not unlike the one he usually wore, the rest of the items he’d set aside having proved to be too bulky for Miguel’s frame—even though Héctor wasn’t exactly a big-boned person to begin with.

“You see? Told you I’d find something!” he said with a grin as he set them down beside Miguel. “Now, you get changed. I’ll be waiting right outside the door for you, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll hurry.”

“No rush, no rush. Just let me know if you need anything,” Héctor replied as he stepped out, pulling the door shut with a soft click behind him.

Now truly alone for the first time since he’d woken up yesterday, Miguel stood and looked over the clothes Papá Héctor had given him. A plain white button-up shirt, brown trousers… both of which were too big for him. He couldn’t help but giggle as he held the shirt up to his torso. Oh yeah, definitely too big. Still though, it was better than nothing. He was certainly grateful to his grandpa for trying, and for loaning him his clothes in the first place.

He made quick work of sloughing off his old clothes and slipping into the new set, taking extra care to not look at himself or accidentally run his fingertips over any part of his now-exposed skeleton. He wasn’t ready for that yet. Just being aware that his bones, which had once been inside his body, were now on what could be referred to as the outside—for lack of a better word—was… unsettling, to say the least.

To be honest, it was upsetting. Extremely upsetting—bones! On the outside! Just bones! No organs, no muscles, no skin—

He decided then that he’d try to think about this fact as little as possible for as long as he could, instead refocusing on the matter at hand—the current state of what he was wearing. Just as he’d thought, everything was much, much too big on him. The shirt’s sleeves hung down past his hands, the cuffs of the slacks bunched up around his ankles while the suspenders did little to help them stay up.

“Um, Papá Héctor? We have a little bit of a problem...” he called, prompting Héctor to poke his head in from outside. He took one look at Miguel, tried to stifle a giggle behind his hand, but failed and broke into a full blown laughing fit.

“¡Mí chiquito! You’re—you look—“ he shut his eyes and took a long, deep breath, let it out, forced a serious expression onto his face, and stepped back to study Miguel’s temporary outfit with more critical eyes. “Y’know, you actually look pretty good.”

“Pretty good? ¡Deja de mentir, Papá!” Miguel threw an arm into the air as a goofy smile spread across his face, one hand still clutching to the waistband of his slacks to prevent the very likely possibility of them trying to slide down. “You think this is pretty good?”
Héctor laughed and shook his head, shrugging. “Hey, it’s better than it could be! This is an easy fix compared to what I’ve had to work with before—just watch.” He stepped up to Miguel, reaching behind him and snapping one of his suspenders against his shoulder blade, getting a startled “Hey!” and a giggle out of him in response.

“Well no wonder your pants won’t stay up—these suspenders aren’t tight enough,” Héctor said and proceeded to tighten them accordingly. It brought the slacks up higher than they were meant to sit, but... well, they were up! “As for your sleeves and pant legs, they just need to be rolled up a little.” He knelt down and started rolling up the left pant leg, chuckling as he saw all the fabric he’d had to fold to get them short enough for Miguel. “Your great-great-grandpa is a bit too lanky, eh mijito?”

Miguel smiled lopsidedly as he worked on rolling up his sleeves. “More like your great-great-grandson is a bit too short—I think you’re the perfect height.”

Héctor’s hands fumbled as he tried to finish rolling up Miguel’s right pant leg, a stab of pain flashing behind his ribcage at his boy’s words. A bit too short—not yet done growing, never to reach the height he’d wanted to. According to his last letter, he’d wanted to be as tall as him when he came to the end of his growth spurt. Not to be. Never to be.

He blinked, startling out of his thoughts. Miguel hadn’t noticed that he’d faltered, thankfully. He seemed to have calmed down for the moment, a blessing considering how violently he’d reacted to his night terror. Héctor didn’t want to be the one to change that, only wanting to help his boy feel better, even if just for now.

He rolled the cuff one more time, patted Miguel’s boot—both boots, thankfully, had survived the accident just fine minus a few scuffs and small tears, a testament to the Rivera family’s craftsmanship—and got to his feet, looking over Miguel again.

“Better, better,” he said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. “It’s missing something though... something important...”

Miguel’s brow lowered in thought too, his expression and gestures a mirror image of Héctor’s own. He let out a hum, thinking, then snapped and reached for the red necktie, holding it out to Héctor proudly. “Is this it?”

Héctor snapped too, grinning, his gold tooth glinting in the soft sunlight that poured through the room’s only window. “It is! Just the thing this outfit needs!” He stooped down and made quick work of tying it around Miguel’s neck, knotting it the same way he did his own every morning, with its ends hanging down and standing out rather strikingly against the white of the dress shirt’s fabric. “Ah, there we go! Now we’re talking!”

“Better?”

“Much better. Although...” Héctor paused again, foot tapping out a practiced rhythm against the hardwood floor as he stared at Miguel pensively. There was still something missing, but he couldn’t seem to place exactly what it was. He reached up to scratch the top of his head, shifting his hat out of the way, and then it came to him. Right, of course! The hat!

He’d found it in the local marketplace last fall, a little less than a year ago. It was a straw hat like his own, though obviously lacking in the signs of wear and tear that his had accumulated over the years. It wasn’t particularly ornate in design, nor brightly colored or decorated, but it was well crafted and sturdy, something he had hoped would serve Miguel well when he arrived. He hadn’t known at the time how similar he and his grandson would continue to prove to be, nor that they’d be seeing each other so soon, but now that he was here, it seemed to be a gift that had become even
more fitting than he could’ve imagined a year ago. Almost mirror images, they were turning out to be—a bittersweet thought, to be certain, but yet somehow a comforting one all the same.

Turning on his heel, he stepped up to his dresser again and squatted down, pulling out a plain white box from underneath it. “Now Miguel,” he began, moving over to stand in front of his grandson again. “I hadn’t planned on giving this to you so soon, so it’s going to be a little big on you, but... I hope you like it, even so.”

Miguel’s eyes lit up as Héctor removed the lid and he saw the hat inside, eager hands pulling it out of the box and setting it on his head. Héctor was right, it was a smidge too big, but when he pushed it so it sat further back on his skull, it was perfect. Teeth set in a giddy smile, he threw his arms around Héctor and hugged him tight. “Thank you, Papá Héctor! I love it!”

Familiar lanky arms returned the hug before sweeping him up off the floor and placing him back on Héctor’s shoulders. “Anything for you, chamaco—anything at all. Now then! Let’s go see everyone—for real this time!”

It was a good thing that their kitchen was so big, because every member of the deceased Rivera family—aside from Héctor and Miguel, who would be joining them shortly—was currently either standing in it or passing through it, all working together in perfect sync as they prepared breakfast and got the dining room ready.

Things were considerably quiet compared to how they usually were in the mornings, though not uncomfortably so. A contented sort of silence—one full of both mutual understanding and mutual heartache—hung in the air and was broken only occasionally by a request for a cooking utensil or ingredient, or the quiet clink of silverware and dishes being set on the table in the adjoining room.

Mamá Imelda, Mamá Coco, Papá Julio, and Tía Rosita all stood at the kitchen counter, each working on a part of the meal they’d decided to make especially for Miguel’s arrival. It was a meal they’d chosen in the hopes that it would help him start to feel more at home: huevos rancheros with warm, fresh flour tortillas, and champurrado with churros for dipping—food that brought to mind memories of happy times and an inner warmth, a sort of comforting feeling that they hoped would pass on to Miguel. They wanted him to feel welcome, to feel their love, and they hoped that this too would come through in the taste of the meal they were nearly done preparing.

Tía Victoria and Tíos Óscar and Felipe, meanwhile, were busy finishing setting the table, making sure everything was where it was supposed to be, a spot set for their newest addition between where Héctor and Coco typically sat. The twins moved in tandem, easily passing cups, plates, bowls, and silverware between them without a second thought while Victoria took extra care to make sure the table settings remained consistent and organized—it wouldn’t do to have a messy, disarrayed table for Miguel’s first meal with them, after all.

Just as everyone was about to finish up their respective tasks, the door to the kitchen was thrown open, revealing a grinning Héctor with Miguel on his shoulders, both having to slouch to make sure Miguel didn’t whack his skull on the top of the doorframe.

“¡Buenos días, mí familia!” Héctor called out cheerfully as he stepped into the kitchen, pushing the door shut behind them with his foot. “I have someone with me that I know you’ve all been looking forward to seeing!”

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked up, faces all lighting up in their own unique ways at the sight of Miguel sitting on his papá’s shoulders—some with blatant expressions of joy etched into their features, others more reserved but still clearly pleased to see him. It only took a
moment for all of them to start talking at once, voices raising in their excitement at the sight of him. Those who could dropped what they were doing and practically raced to see who could get to him first.

His tíos were the first to manage this, eagerly lifting him off of Héctor and holding them between them in an unusual—but not uncomfortable or unwelcome—hug, jabbering enthusiastically to him in the way that only they seemed to be able to.

“Miguelito!” they both exclaimed. “How are you, mijo?”

Miguel managed to say “I’m doing good, Tíos. ¿Y ustedes?” before they started talking again.

Felipe spoke first. “Much better, now that we’ve—”

“Seen you! You’re looking really good! We—”

“Wanted to come see you last night, but—“

“Héctor,” Óscar paused, shooting an irritated look towards their brother-in-law, who could only laugh in response, “ran off before we could ask if it was alright. Completely unfair, if you—“

“Ask us, which you didn’t, but eh,” Felipe shrugged a shoulder, a gesture that was mirrored by Óscar. They looked at each other, then looked to Miguel, then back at each other and let out a long, happy sigh as they held him tighter, turning Miguel into the filling of an affectionate tío sandwich.

Letting out a strangled laugh, Miguel wiggled in their arms in a fruitless attempt at fleeing. “Tíos, you’re choking me!”

“Ay, let him go, viejos,” Tía Victoria said tersely as she approached, reaching out and pulling Miguel out of their arms—an occurrence they seemed less than pleased about. She set him down and smiled at him then, pulling him into another hug. “It’s good to see you, niño.”

“It’s good to see you too, Tía Victoria,” Miguel replied, returning the hug.

“Sorry about those two. They’ve hardly been able to sit still since they realized they were going to see you again—haven’t stopped talking about all the places they want to show you and all the questions they want to ask.” She rolled her eyes fondly, gazing over to where her great uncles were now trying to make themselves useful at the stove, earning a giggle from Miguel.

It was then that Tía Rosita hurried up to them, sweeping Miguel out of Victoria’s arms into her own with a delighted screech. Victoria let out an agitated huff, mumbling, “What did I just save Miguel from? Getting crushed to dust—and yet, here you are—“ before sighing, shaking her head, and going to stand beside Papá Julio.

“¡Miguelito! ¡Mí pobrecito!” Rosita squealed, holding him as close to her as possible. “You look so adorable in that outfit! Absolutely precious! Did your Papá Héctor loan you some of his clothes?”

He tried to reply, but his response was muffled by the fabric of Rosita’s dress, into which his face was currently smushed. Letting out a surprised “Oh!”, she let go of him, allowing him to stand normally and take a deep breath, eliciting a laugh from everyone in the room.

“Sorry, mijo,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck embarrassedly. “I’m just so excited to see you, I couldn’t help myself!”

“It’s okay, Tía Rosita,” Miguel answered, giggling. “And yes, these are Papá Héctor’s clothes.” An
idea popped into his mind, making him strike a suave pose, taking on an expression that was an obvious mimicry of one that Héctor often made. “¿Muy guapo, eh?”

Another laugh rippled through the kitchen at Miguel’s imitation. “Muy guapo, indeed! Even more handsome than your Papá Héctor himself, I’d say!” Rosita tittered, covering her mouth with her hand as she did so. She lightly brushed Miguel’s bangs away from his eyes, smiling kindly at him as her eyes scanned his face, taking in the flourishes and designs that marked his skull. “Your marks are such pretty colors, mijo—they’re so bright and vibrant!”

“Oh, they are? I haven’t, um, gotten the chance to look yet,” Miguel said, a hint of hesitation in his voice. Rosita’s gaze turned knowing, and her smile—though still kind—grew a touch more melancholy. Oh, she understood. She understood perfectly.

Just like that, though, her expression regained its typically energetic appearance. “Well, when you do get the chance,” she gave his shoulders a gentle squeeze for emphasis, “you really should take a look. I think you’ll like what you see.”

Giving him a little wave and a wink, she turned and moved to take up her position at the countertop again as the final touches to their breakfast were made, motioning for Papá Julio and Mamá Coco to go greet Miguel.

Mamá Coco was the first to break away from the counter, her smile wide and eyes watery as she gazed upon her great-grandson with fondness. Her expression was reflected on Miguel’s face, eyes welling up with tears just as hers were. They were in each other’s arms in seconds.

“Oh Miguel, mí corazóncito...” Mamá Coco whispered as she held Miguel close, “how good it feels to be able to hold you like this again.”

Miguel knew he couldn’t reply without bursting into tears and didn’t want to make the rest of their family any sadder than he knew they already were, so he nodded instead, pressing his face against her shoulder, getting as close to her as he could. She hadn’t held him like this, her arms so strong and certain, since before she’d started to display the effects of old age—a time so long ago Miguel had been afraid it would fade from his memory as he’d grown older. And her voice, so full of energy and vibrancy and just so her, the gentle yet sure cadence of it filling many of his earliest memories, now no longer a thing from days past but something he was privy to in this moment, something he’d have the chance to hear for countless days to come.

Being here with her, with all of them, Miguel felt the heaviness in his chest lift in a way he hadn’t been sure it ever would again. And even though he knew it was a temporary feeling, that he’d no doubt be feeling low again sooner than he’d like, it was comforting to know that relief was possible, and that someday everything wouldn’t ache the way it did now.

“Your Tía Rosita was right. You have beautiful markings,” she said softly, having leaned back to look at him, soaking in the sight of him after not being able to see him clearly for so long. “They’re almost identical to Papá’s, and it seems you and I have a few marks in common that we got from him, too.”

He looked over his shoulder at Héctor—he found he was looking at the both of them with obvious love in his eyes—who nodded and smiled fondly. “She’s right, chamaco. It’s striking how similar we are.”

Hearing this brought a grin to Miguel’s face, knowing that he bore the same marks as two of the people he loved most in the world. He turned back to her, eyes shining with pride as he finally managed to speak. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Mamá Coco.”
“I know you wouldn’t, cariño. And neither would we,” she responded, pulling him into her arms again. Papá Julio came over to them then, laying a hand on each of their shoulders before embracing them both, having wanted to give them a moment before approaching.

“We’re glad to have you here with us, mijito,” Papá Julio said in his soft, timid voice, “even if it’s not the way any of us wanted things to go. We’re just glad that we’re lucky enough to be able to see you everyday—and that we won’t have to worry about you accidentally getting cursed again.”

Miguel couldn’t help the snicker that came out of him, shaking his head. “No, no more curses for sure, especially now that I have all of you watching over me.” A pleased murmur went through the kitchen, punctuated by a few exclaimed agreements from their more vocal family members, each one causing Papá Julio to flinch just a little.

Mamá Imelda clapped suddenly, two short but plenty loud claps to draw everyone’s attention to her and silence the murmuring—netting a more pronounced flinch from Julio in the process. “Callense, callense,” she said, letting her gaze drift around the room until they’d all sufficiently quieted down. “I know we’re all thrilled to see Miguel, but the food is going to get cold if we stand around here much longer. Get it on the table and get ready to eat, alright?”

Everyone nodded and did as they were told, pulling themselves away from Miguel and gathering the food from the kitchen, being careful to carry it all into the dining room. Miguel tried to help, but Mamá Imelda stopped him with a hand on his shoulder, turning him to face her. Her often-stern expression had been replaced with one of clear care and love, her eyes and smile softer than Miguel had ever seen them before.

“We know this isn’t where you’d choose to be, and it’s not something any of us wanted to happen so soon, but we’re glad to have you with us even still, mí conejito.” She raised a hand to his cheek, cradling it gently, her thumb passing over the marks on his cheekbone much like Héctor’s had the day before when he’d first seen him. Miguel leaned into her touch, grateful for the soothing feeling of her palm against his face. “It doesn’t feel like it, I know, but things will work out in the end. You have an entire family’s worth of people who are here for you and will do anything to help as soon as you ask—just don’t hesitate to ask, okay?”

“Okay, Mamá Imelda,” he replied, feeling beyond grateful for all the love he’d been shown by his family, and feeling welcomed and at home in ways he hadn’t yet thought possible.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good. I’ll hold you to it.” She leaned down and placed a kiss on his temple, ruffling his hair lightly as she drew back. “Now come on. Everyone’s waiting for us, and I’m sure you’re hungry.”

He was surprised to find just how hungry he was.

It wasn’t until later in the day—after two more meals, his first sunset in the Land of the Dead, and plenty of time spent being doted on by his ever-eager family—that Miguel was able to slip away and catch a breather on his own. He scaled the roofs of their compound until he reached the highest one, one that granted him a sweeping view of the rest of the city as well as the moon nearing the top of its arch through the sky. He breathed in the cool night air, a familiar yet foreign sensation now that he no longer had lungs with which to breathe, yet found he was able to anyway.

Don’t. Don’t think about it right now. In with the good air, out with the bad.
He was surprised when instead of just his breath leaving his mouth, inaudible and ephemeral, his voice found its way out with it.

The lyrics he found himself singing were familiar, a song he’d heard many times during all his trips to Mariachi Plaza. It had been released a long time before he’d been born, yet he’d grown attached to it, humming bits of it to himself when he caught sight of the moon, singing its verses when no one but the moon and the stars were around to hear.

The song spoke of family, of loss, of death—and though its words didn’t quite fit with his own situation, he couldn’t help but feel a connection to it then, singing it to the moon the way he had when he’d been alive, nobody but the lights in the sky above to hear him.

Or so he thought, until a familiar voice began to sing with him after the first chorus.

Héctor peered up over the edge of the roof, his voice rising to mix with Miguel’s as he pulled himself up and sat beside him, the thermos and two cups he’d hooked into his belt clinking together as he settled into place. Miguel didn’t miss a beat, his voice only growing more confident now that his grandfather had joined him. Their voices and respective tones melded together perfectly, each taking turns between harmonizing and singing the melody as if they’d practiced this a thousand times before. Both of them poured their souls into what was being sung and were rewarded for it tenfold.

It was beautiful. Transcendent. Indescribable, really. And it was over all too soon, leaving Miguel to face his reality once more, and all the aches and pains that came with it.

They sat in silence for some time after it had ended, a reverent, respectful sort of silence. Miguel was the first to break it. “I didn’t know you knew that one.”

“You learn a lot of things, being one of the forgotten,” Héctor replied as he unhooked the thermos and cups from his belt. “That song was one of them. I was frequently asked to sing it after I’d heard it enough times to perform it well.”

“It’s a good one,” Miguel said quietly, turning his eyes up to the moon. “I would sing it sometimes, especially when I was feeling sad or lonely.”

Héctor glanced over and saw the glossiness in Miguel’s eyes, feeling that familiar deep ache return to his ribs at the sight. “Everyone has a song like that, I think. I know I do.” He sighed and unscrewed the thermos’s lid, pouring its contents into the two cups and handing one to Miguel. “Horchata,” he explained when Miguel looked at it skeptically. “Made it myself. Thought you might want a little something to drink before heading to bed.”

Miguel’s eyes lit up as he took the mug of horchata. “How’d you know this was one of my favorites?”

“Oh, just a hunch,” came Héctor’s answer from behind his cup, which he sipped from before continuing. “It’s one of my favorites too—so I guess you could call it a lucky guess. Or wishful thinking. Either, really.” He laughed. “I’m just glad I was right.”

Miguel laughed too, a welcome departure from him looking so lost, so heartbroken. The horchata seemed to lighten his mood further, though it also made him sleepy—another blessing, Héctor supposed. It was getting late, and the sooner he got him to bed, the better. He prayed that his boy’s mind would be free of nightmares tonight, that he’d be able to rest; to dream happy dreams, even.
He hoped beyond hope that it would be so.

“As much as I love being with you, chamaco, I think it’s time you get to bed. You’ve had quite the
day today, after all.”

Nodding sleepily, Miguel got to his feet, rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand and holding
onto Héctor for extra support. The adrenaline from the day had worn off, and everything was
beginning to hurt again—the extra support was both welcome and needed if he was going to have
any hopes of getting safely off the roof and into bed.

Just letting Miguel hold onto him wasn’t good enough for Héctor, though. He knew how much
pain his boy was in and refused to let him get down on his own, carrying him on his back half the
time and in his arms the other half.

He was asleep before they even reached Héctor and Imelda’s room, curled up against his papá’s
ribs.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus note: all my love to anyone who's able to figure out what song I referenced in
the last portion of the chapter. It's one of my favorites, and while I normally shy away
from including songs in my fics (which is why I didn't explicitly name it or include any
of its lyrics), I couldn't resist putting in a nod to it in this scene. It just... fit too well.

Thanks for reading! <3
Hey all! Sorry for the long silence. I usually try to get updates out on a biweekly basis at the very least, but due to some... unfortunate circumstances involving my health over the past week or so, I was unable to meet my self-imposed deadline and get a chapter out to you sooner. Fun perks of having an autoimmune disease, no?

In other news, super fan and prolific fanartist Dawnieserix has produced an adorable portrait of Miguel! Look at it and soak in its beauty! https://cdn.discordapp.com/attachments/397925312094273536/401222176872595457/Portrait_of_a_softboy.png

And in a startling turn of events... I've posted some headshots of our two leading men to my Twitter! (disclaimer: Miguel doesn't have a set canon design in this fic, so if what I've drawn doesn't match what you've envisioned, no worries!) https://twitter.com/endlessapis/status/954556300846817280

Per usual, if you spot any major errors, point them out to me and I'll fix them right away. Also, minor cw/tw for brief unpleasant descriptions of death in this chapter—we're going to pay a little visit to some of the living Riveras, see how they're taking all of this...

Bright lights and noise, everywhere, all around her. Surrounding, all-encompassing.

Mere inches behind her, the sound of metal and rubber and stone and life colliding all at once. She didn’t know this, though. To her, it sounded like supper time, her family biting into tostadas in unison. Crunching. Crushing. Teeth against teeth, grinding down whatever was between them until it hardly resembled what it once had been.

It was a blessing that she’d fallen forward, face down. She had no chance of seeing what had made that sound so unlike anything she’d ever heard yet so eerily similar.

Her head had knocked against the road when she’d tumbled and skidded away from the truck, making everything around her disappear, the sound of the crash following her into the dark. When she opened her eyes, someone was holding her.

She couldn’t see anything, face pressed into their shoulder by a protective hand on the back of her head. They were moving. Running? Running, a skill she hadn’t yet mastered. She tried to squirm free, but no luck. Whoever was carrying her paid no notice. They kept moving.

The noise began to fade away, the sound of sirens and shouting growing distant. Her knees and elbows hurt from when they’d scraped against the ground. She whimpered.

An unfamiliar voice answered her, musical and masculine in tone. “Almost home, little one. You’ll be with your family in just a minute, okay?”

Socorro didn’t understand. Who was this person? Where was he taking her? Where was her big
brother? She tried to squirm out of his arms again, but his grip stayed steady.

She wanted Miguel, Miguel in his soft, red jacket and plain undershirt, all familiar arms and smells, not this stranger in his dark blue charro suit with its itchy embroidery pressing into her cheek.

The next thing Coco was aware of was the sound of her family’s voices, the touch of hands she recognized. Papá took her and held her close, strong arms surrounding her and holding her tight. Big, strange, hurried words passed between the man and her family—and though she knew she was safe now, she had nothing to fear, she didn’t feel safe. She didn’t understand what was happening, and for the first time in her short life, she was afraid.

The phrases that came out of the man’s mouth only made it worse, even if she didn’t understand what they meant all strung together like that.

Vehicular manslaughter. Over in an instant. Dead on arrival.

A long, long silence fell over them until a keening cry rose up in chorus and broke it, a sound that spoke of such intense heartache and despair that it made anyone who heard it feel it too.

Socorro’s memory of the next few days, while fuzzy—given her age and her growing brain’s latent inability to retain most memories—would stick with her for the rest of her life.

There were just some things that she would never forget.

Black ribbons her cousins tied to the posts and gates of their home, still even in the breeze that passed over and through them.

The feeling of being held close, her face made to turn away as her brother’s body was brought in and set to rest in the simple coffin he was to be buried in.

The vivid red of Miguel’s charro suit that their family worked painstakingly to get him into, ever more aware of just how broken and unfixable he was. They folded his hands over his chest, set his legs as straight as they could, shut his eyes.

The fluttering-then-still whiteness of the sheet that was laid over him, hiding him from sight. She was allowed to look then. She’d tried to go to him, to wake him up. He was just sleeping. Just sleeping. He had to get up. He had to.

Four pillar candles, one at each corner of the coffin. The smell of coffee and sweetbread and the sharp tang of alcohol. When she was older and had the ability to think about it clearly, Coco wondered if she imagined the faint scent of iron mixed in there too.

Personal items of his were tucked into the coffin with him. Journals full of melodies and lyrics, several sets of his favorite clothes, well-loved books with dogeared pages, his Rivera boots, size 8.5. Many things he’d treasured, all packed in to make the journey with him.

Hours and hours of darkness, strangers passing through, mumbling their way through Hail Marys and prayers of all kinds, voicing condolences that were nothing more than noise to her. Everything was just noise. She wanted music.

Mass the next day. A small service at their local church, family and friends and strangers all sitting, kneeling, standing, sitting in unison, echoing back passages of scripture to the priest. She wore black. They all did. The black ribbon around her waist matched the one woven into her braid.

Black was far too somber of a color for Miguel.
There was the walk to the cemetery, the procession of people all moving in tandem and in complete silence. She remembered trying to walk on her own, tired of being held and forced to look away. Her mamá ended up carrying her in the end anyway after she stumbled and fell, reopening the cuts on her knees.

They lowered Miguel into the ground, and there was nothing she could do about it except cry and cry and cry, small bruised hands reaching out futilely to where his body was being laid to rest.

When it was done and everyone had begun to leave, Dante appeared, pressing his nose against the freshly upturned earth and whimpering, laying down and resting his head between his paws. He glanced up and met Socorro’s eyes as her family carried her away. He understood. She knew he did.

When she blinked, he was gone.

Stupid Miguel.

Stupid, stupid Miguel.

He wasn’t supposed to leave them like this. He was meant to go on and become the most famous musician out of Santa Cecilia since de la Cruz—and since their great-great-grandfather, now that everyone had begun to learn and accept the truth. He was supposed to make music that would bring smiles to everyone’s faces, share the Rivera family history and his love of music with the world.

He wasn’t supposed to die.

He wasn’t supposed to leave his little sister brother-less and leave her tío and tía to outlive their son. He wasn’t supposed to leave his cousins—Manny and Benny, Abel, herself—behind. And their abuelita, what about her? How was she to be expected to outlive one of her grandchildren, one who had done so much for both her mother and the rest of their family? Who else was she going to learn from?

How could he do this to them?

Rosa knew she was being disrespectful. She knew that. She was fully aware of it. It wasn’t good to talk—well, think, in her case—badly of the dead, especially not the recently deceased. But she knew if she wasn’t angry, she’d be crying and she probably wouldn’t be able to stop.

She wasn’t ready to cry yet.

So instead, Rosa busied herself with chores and cleaning and work and school, the anger that masked her fear and sadness driving her onwards. Not once did she break down those first few weeks—or months, even. Time started to not have meaning anymore, after a while.

She volunteered to help clean out Miguel’s room and did it almost completely on her own, save for asking where certain things should be put or if anything should be given away. She swept and mopped and dusted whenever she was asked—and even when she wasn’t. She did the dishes all on her own. She helped cook as much as she was able. Her output in the workshop skyrocketed, yet the quality of her work never wavered, each pair of shoes as well made as the last. And when she couldn’t sleep, she stayed up and studied. Her teachers sang her praises and used her papers as examples for the rest of the class.

And as busy as she’d made herself, she forced herself to make music whenever she could find the
time. She wouldn’t let Miguel’s dream die with him, refused to let the battles he fought to get their family to accept music back into their lives be in vain.

When she played, it was almost like he was there with her. Was she any good? No, not the way he had been, but she got the feeling that Miguel wouldn’t mind that. She was making music. That’s all that mattered in the end.

It was through music that she began to feel again.

She would talk to him sometimes, when she played. Short sentences, updates on things that had happened since he’d left, how things had changed, usually no more than a handful of words. Too many more would hurt too much. She’d tried.

She wondered if he could hear her, when she talked to him like this. She hoped he could.

“I’m still mad at you,” she said one day, “for dying. You didn’t have to, you know. You could’ve stopped all this from happening if you’d just done things a little differently. Had you just carried Coco home, or checked your shoes before you left the plaza, or even if you hadn’t gone out that day… you’d still be here. Stupid Miguel, always just living in the moment…”

Another day, she spoke of his little sister. “Coco misses you. I wonder if she's fully aware of what happened. Our family likes to think she isn't because it hurts less to think about, but I think she knows. Somedays she’ll just start crying and no one can get her to stop. She eventually falls asleep and when she wakes up, it’s like nothing ever happened. She's dealing with this just like we all are, in her own way.”

Once, she told him about Dante when she realized she hadn’t seen him for a long time. “Your dog never came home again. I wonder if he found his way to you. I bet he did—you two were never apart for long.”

Then there came the day when Rosa couldn’t hold it in anymore.

“Your mom and dad… they try to act like nothing’s wrong, Miguel, but I can tell it’s all just an act. They miss you more than anyone, I think. Though that’s saying a lot, because I know everyone else misses you too. And I… I miss you. A lot. But, uh,” she scoffed and blew a few stray hairs out of her face, “if you tell anyone that, I’ll come to the Land of the Dead myself and kill you again, okay?” A broken laugh, a misplayed chord, and the first sob she’d let herself release since the accident, a sob that quickly turned to tears and uneven breaths.

She’d wiped her eyes and continued to play like it hadn’t happened, but… somehow, it made her begin to feel better, even if just slightly. Her one-sided conversations with Miguel grew less hostile and more full of laughter and affection, she began to reach out and interact with her family on a more personal level again, and she somehow found it in her to work even harder.

She wasn’t about to let anyone ever forget him, something she hoped showed through how she acted and spoke, how she tried her best and began to share her music too.

She hoped she’d make him proud.

Luisa had known people who had been unlucky enough to lose a child, but she’d never even considered the fact that she might be among them someday. It was something that was outside of anything she’d ever remotely envisioned for their family, especially not her firstborn—so full of life, of love, of laughter that it almost seemed to her like he’d never die, that he would continue to live forever and ever until the world came to an end.
That illusion was shattered that evening in mid November. A man from the plaza—a mariachi that Miguel had been acquainted with, according to Mamá Elena—brought only one of her children home to her. The other he brought news of, news no parent ever wanted to hear.

Miguel was dead.

He gave them what details he could, having seen it all firsthand himself, but she didn’t hear most of it. Her mind tuned it out, eyes becoming unfocused, heartbeat pounding in her ears. Miguel, dead? No. No, it couldn’t be—it wasn’t possible. He’d just gotten lost on the way home. It was someone else’s son. Her Miguel couldn’t possibly be—

A mournful wail had risen among them. It took her a moment to process that it was coming from her.

She didn’t remember much of the velorio, nor of the mass or even the graveside service. She was ashamed to admit it—she should’ve forced herself to remain present, to hold onto the memories and hold them close, knowing it would be the last time she’d be with her boy in this lifetime. Instead, the only things that stuck with her were fleeting glimpses. The taste of sweetbread and coffee on her tongue, dulled by her grief so much so that they began to taste like nothing to her. The incense-filled air of the chapel. The smell of freshly-turned dirt and the overwhelmingly floral scent that rose from the coronas that decorated the gravesite. And through it all, the ever present awareness that her life would never again be as it once had been.

In a way, she felt as though people thought of her as foolish for mourning. Why are you sad? Your boy may not be here anymore, but you know he’s in a better place. A happier, safer, friendlier place. He’s with people who love him and have watched over him since he was born. This isn’t a time to be sad at all.

Luisa knew there was truth to this. Miguel was safe. Miguel was whole and healed and in the presence of loved ones and... well, she hoped Miguel was happy. Yet all the same, to think that these were causes for her not to mourn at all would be foolish. Knowing—or hoping that this was the case, because you never could be 100% certain of these kinds of things—that Miguel was somewhere better did help take some of the sting out of his death, but it didn’t change the fact that, unless she died prematurely as he had, she wouldn’t get to see her son again for many years. It didn’t change the fact that she was being forced to go through her life without him being a part of it. It didn’t and never would change the fact that he was taken from them far too soon—he was still so young and full of dreams, full of life just waiting to be lived.

Death was full of paradoxes, reasons to be both happy and brokenhearted beyond belief. As hard as she tried, Luisa didn’t think she would ever be happy about this, and maybe even ever again.

But she knew for Miguel’s sake she had to try. It’s what he would’ve wanted.

So she forced herself to get out of bed every morning with her chin tilted upwards and her work apron tied firmly around her waist. She called upon the strength of the Rivera matriarchal line, one that she may not have been born into but claimed as her own all the same. She took a quiet moment every morning to look to Mamá Imelda’s portrait and pray for even just a fraction of her bravery to be bestowed upon her. If anyone knew what it was like to be left behind by a loved one and have her entire life irrevocably changed, it was her.

She, just as Rosa had, threw herself entirely into her work, striving to live up to the lineage of the Riveras that had gone on before her, many of them mothers who had faced enormous losses but refused to let themselves be overcome. There were many times when she’d break into tears as she worked, the drops trickling from her eyes onto the leather of her current project, but still she
refused to bend or break, wiping them away with the back of her hand and returning to her work as if she’d never stopped at all.

Luisa made herself keep going, keep moving forward even when she swore her legs would give out from underneath her, or that her heart would shatter from the weight of her loss. She was a Rivera though, just like Mamá Imelda, Mamá Coco, Mamá Elena—a line of women who refused to lay down and be consumed by the circumstances that were trying so hard to destroy them.

So neither would she.

For Miguel, her boy, her son, she would keep going. She would live.

The pain that had come over the living Riveras seemed to come over Miguel too, though it manifested itself in its own unique way.

After the night he and Héctor had sung together on the rooftop, Miguel didn’t wake up again for at least a week, possibly longer. Héctor had begun to lose track of time, even more so than usual.

Time didn’t really have meaning here anyway.

He stayed by Miguel’s side the entire time he was asleep, refusing to leave him for even a moment. He was there for him when he woke up the first two times, and he would be there for the third no matter what.

He just hoped that he’d wake up soon.

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I forgot to mention this when I first uploaded the chapter, but Ojos Que No Ven now has a TV Tropes page!! When I found out about it.... I totally freaked out, yo. All my thanks to whoever did this! :D I'll put the link down below if anyone wants to go check it out!

http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/OjosQueNoVen
Hey all. It's been a while. I'm sorry for leaving you all without an update for so long—life had other plans for me, it seems! I've been hard at work taking care of the newest additions to my family, two darling axolotls that I got back in December (those of you who follow me on Twitter have probably seen me yelling about them quite a bit ^A^;;) In addition, I also took my first trip to Disney World this month which, as one would guess, helped keep me offline for an extended period of time. But I'm back! And I come bearing the gift of a chapter that's a fair bit longer than any of the previous ones. I contemplated splitting it into two, but I decided it worked better the way it was. And as you might've guessed from the title, you'll be meeting someone new this chapter. I like to think you'll like them... ;^)

As per usual, let me know if there are any massive errors in my Spanish dialogue—wont't be the first time, won’t be the last! Also worth noting, I've enabled comments for readers who aren't logged in as of this update. I also reenabled comment moderation, so if your comment doesn't post right away, it'll be up as soon as I can get to it! Additionally: if any of you happen to create artwork for the fic.... you should definitely show me. I promise I don't bite. <3

Imelda found Héctor right where she’d expected him to be, sitting in the chair he’d set by Miguel’s bedside—formerly his own, before everything that had happened, well, happened. He hadn’t moved since they’d discovered that Miguel wasn’t waking up, and it’d been quite a few days since that had transpired—meaning her husband hadn’t eaten or slept in at least that long.

He didn’t need to, per se, but she knew for a fact that his lack of sleep and sustenance would be manifesting in their own obvious ways. Weariness, lethargy, general low energy—all factors that were bound to make an already painful situation harder to cope with. That being the case made the fact that he was ignoring his own basic needs to such an intense degree even more alarming. They were all already worried sick over Miguel. They didn’t have the energy to do the same for him right now, as much as they wanted to be able to.

So, of course, she’d been sent in by the rest of their family to try to negotiate with him, to see if they could at least get him to take a nap or go get some air. Something. Anything.

“How is he?” she asked as she sat down at the foot of the bed, laying her hand over one of Miguel’s legs.

He turned his eyes to her, looking incredibly weary and disheartened. “I don’t know,” he replied. “Every time he moves a little, I think he’s going to wake up, but he never does. I don’t know what’s wrong, Imelda. I just don’t know.”

Héctor turned his gaze back to Miguel, reaching out and taking his hand between both of his own. It broke her heart, seeing him like this—seeing both of them like this.

Imelda reached out and lightly put her free hand on top of theirs. “Can you think of anyone who
might know how to help him, or who might be able to help figure out what’s wrong with him? Anyone at all?”

Brows furrowed in thought, Héctor glanced over at her and was silent for a long moment before realization dawned on his face. “It’d be easier if we knew what was wrong ourselves, but... maybe. Maybe.” His eyes began to glint with a mischievous light, something that, while it spelled potential disaster for her and everyone else involved, was a massive relief after seeing him look nothing but miserable for the past who-knew-how-many days.

She knew that look, though, and she knew it usually meant nothing good. It was almost like she had a supernatural sense for when Héctor was about to do something to get himself into a massive amount of trouble. Perks of being married to him, she supposed.

“Héctor, no. No, no, no,” she said, her tone clearly full of warning. “I swear, if you’re thinking anything close to what I think you’re thinking—“

Mischief now fully overcoming his entire expression, his former despair and misery nowhere to be seen, as if they’d never been there at all, Héctor leisurely got to his feet and stretched, letting out a strangled yawn as he did so. “Mm? I couldn’t possibly know what you’re talking about, mí amor. I’m just… thinking about… y’know… going to get some air, maybe taking chamaco here with me… totally not taking him to see anyone that you may or may not approve of…”

With every pause he made, he took one step closer to Miguel, slowly extending his arms towards the boy as if to pick him up, his eyes trained on Imelda in a sort of cheeky, defiant way, as if daring her to stop him. Oh yes, she knew exactly what he was thinking, but he clearly had no intention of letting her stop him.

“Héctor Rivera, I swear, if you don’t stop what you’re doing right now and set Miguel back on the bed—“

“You’ll what?” he crooned, swiftly picking Miguel the rest of the way up and returning to his full height. “Stop me?”

“Don’t try me. You know I will.”

Grinning, Héctor spun his body around so only his head remained facing Imelda, the rest of him poised to run in the direction of the door at a moment’s notice. “Not if you can’t catch me first!”

With that, he bolted out of their bedroom into the brilliant light of the early afternoon sun, speeding past several members of the Rivera clan and almost knocking them off their feet in the process. Imelda could do nothing more than sigh and shake her head fondly. It was the first time she’d seen him smile in days, so of course she wasn’t about to stop him, even if she didn’t necessarily approve of what she suspected he was about to do. She just had to trust him and hope that he knew what he was getting himself into—getting both of them into, really.

As soon as he knew he was far enough away from their home where Imelda wouldn’t easily be able to catch up with them (provided she didn’t call on Pepita for help, of course), Héctor shifted Miguel so he was carrying him piggyback-style, trying to make himself look less suspicious than he had a feeling he currently did. A heavily breathing, obviously winded man who had just stopped running mere moments ago and who also happened to be carrying an unconscious boy in his arms wasn’t exactly the most comforting of images, he knew.

He gave a quick, violent shudder. Horrific implications.
Shaking his head, straightening himself up, and making sure Miguel was situated safely on his back, he set off down the street in the direction of the nearest trolley stop. He decided that making one-sided small talk with Miguel might help their current arrangement seem a bit more natural to everyone they passed by.

“Now Miguel, I know this may all seem a little confusing and weird, but I promise, the person we’re going to see knows exactly what they’re doing... probably.” Here he laughed nervously and shook his head. “They’re an old friend from back before I met you—I think you’ll really like them, if you, ah, wake up. Which you should really consider doing, I think. They’re quite a lot of fun and it’d be a shame if you didn’t get to say hi, at the very least.”

The trolley pulled into the station and Héctor stepped aboard, moving out onto the open-air portion of the last car so he could keep talking without getting weird looks when Miguel didn’t reply. It was one thing to talk to someone who wasn’t answering when you were walking in a public place and moving away from anyone who might find you to be dubious, another thing completely when you were stuck in an enclosed vehicle.

“I first met them when I arrived in the Land of the Dead a long, long time ago, you see,” he continued, tone light and conversational as he settled against one of the railings. “They fancy themself a physician, I think—can’t say for certain how accurate it would be to call them that, but I do know that they’re wise to a lot of things that many would consider abnormal or unheard of. If anyone would know about what’s happened to you, I think they’d be a safe bet.”

It wasn’t long after that that the trolley pulled to a stop at their station, Héctor having fallen into a contemplative silence as he felt the expansion and contraction of Miguel’s ribcage against his back, steady and strong, unfaltering. That was something, at least—a comforting, steadying feeling when everything else around him felt so unstable and uncertain. He stepped off the trolley, shifting Miguel again as he took them off the platform and through several side alleys. The ground grew grimier and colder the further they went, reassuring Héctor that they were indeed headed in the right direction. Their destination was the Forgotten Quarter, where people like him—or like he’d used to be, before Miguel had entered his life—went to die a second time, surrounded by the melancholy, bittersweet companionship of others who knew with painful clarity exactly what everyone else there was going through.

It wasn’t exactly a place of happy memories for him, and he wasn’t afraid to admit that he wasn’t thrilled about going back. But if him coming here could help Miguel, he was more than willing to do it—and having the chance to see an old friend helped ease his nerves too.

He pulled his hat down over his eyes, trying to make himself look inconspicuous, his steps taking on an exaggerated version of the gait he’d walked with when he was about to be forgotten. “Just a little further, mijo,” he mumbled over his shoulder as they passed under the old, worn-down archway that served as an entrance to that part of town, feeling the shrewd gaze of a group of ragtag skeletons fix on them as they walked past. “Nothing to be afraid of—no one here intends to do us any harm.”

Despite himself, Héctor couldn’t help but scan the groups of huddled figures for people he knew, people he had spent what he thought were his last days with. It was wishful thinking, he knew, but he couldn’t help but hope that maybe he’d see the friendly smile or the kind eyes of someone he had once been close to. None of the faces were familiar, though. It was with a regretful pang behind his ribs that he realized everyone he’d known here had passed on.

A confusing combination of bitterness and gratitude flowed through him. It wasn’t fair that so many good people had been left to die all over again, so many sweet, caring people that had
deserved much more than the hand life had dealt them. It was cruel, an injustice that so few here in the afterlife truly understood—not until it was their turn to spend their last days living in squalor as their earthly memory passed on with no way for them to stop it. Oh how grateful he was for the boy he carried on his back, who saved him from such a fate as this, who restored order to their family and made it possible for him and his wife and daughter to be back together again.

He hurried on, somehow growing even more determined to get his boy the help he needed.

The search for help, however, was proving to be more difficult than Héctor had expected. He followed old familiar paths to where a dilapidated, makeshift home of remarkable size—given its location—had once stood, only to find that it was no longer there, save for the rubble of its remains as if it had been caught in a great explosion or fire of some kind—though it was the only structure in the area that appeared to have been affected, oddly enough.

“*Ariel, you idiot,*” Héctor said, sounding none too enthusiastic as he muttered a quick curse beneath his breath and kicked aside a stray piece of crumpled metal. “*What in the world did you do?*” He sat down on what had once been steps leading up to the front door, being mindful of Miguel all the while.

Given the condition in which Héctor found his friend’s previous residence, he was beginning to doubt his decision to try to find them at all. Ariel had never exactly been the most... stable of people, he’d come to realize with time. They knew much, for certain, but they’d always had a bit of an unusual edge about them, even if Héctor, in his youthful naivety, had refused to acknowledge it to himself. Their knowledge of ailments that afflicted both the living and the dead hadn’t come to them free of charge—Héctor shuddered to think of what his friend had done to gain the information they so freely practiced and dispensed on whoever they found to be willing.

It seemed, though, that this had all been a fool’s errand to begin with—a blessing perhaps, given the reality of the situation that Héctor had forgotten in his haste. He loved Ariel almost like a sibling he’d never had despite their quirks and owed them a great deal for all that they’d done for him when he’d first appeared in the Land of the Dead a lifetime ago, but... Miguel was precious to him, even more precious than his own life in the same way that Coco was. He wasn’t about to risk subjecting him to one of Ariel’s more dangerous whims if he didn’t have to, especially knowing that they were impossible to predict—said whims were as rare as they were frightening.

It struck him then, as he sat amongst the ruin of the place his friend had once called both home and workplace, that Ariel could very well be dead—truly, fully dead. He carded a hand through his hair with a sigh, removing his hat and holding it over his chest in reverence. He hadn’t considered it until now, somehow. Ariel had always seemed ageless, unaffected by the way things worked here, moving through their afterlife without worry even though there was no one in life who wanted to remember them. Even when he’d last seen them some years ago, during the period of his life where he’d futilely thrown himself entirely into his mission of getting across the bridge to see Coco again, Ariel had seemed the same as they always had: driven, focused, a touch off, but as energetic and enthused as always. Not at all like someone who was waiting to die, or someone that even could.

His first friend post-mortem, one who had done what they could to help Héctor feel as at home here as he could in their own unique, sideways sort of way. A constant companion until Héctor’s focus had drawn to other things, pulling him further and further away from the rest of the forgotten as he’d blindly struggled against what he’d thought was inevitable. They’d lost touch and that was that. They’d never see each other again.

At a loss for what to do, Héctor leaned forward and rested his head in one of his hands, taking a
deep breath and letting it out slowly before he let his hand fall away and looked up, only to come face to face with Miguel’s xolo-dog-turned-spirit-guide, Dante.

Startled, Héctor yelped and shuffled further back onto the step, pressing Miguel into the edge of the stair behind them. He uttered a quick apology to his unconscious grandson and turned back to face Dante once more. “You scared me, you silly dog!” he exclaimed, reaching forward and scratching him behind his ears. Dante’s tongue lolled out of his mouth, one of his back feet raising up to scratch his belly in response, earning him a chuckle from Héctor. “I’m surprised you didn’t show up before now, you know. Miguel really needs your help—and so do I. I don’t know what to do, Dante.”

Dante scooted past Héctor as he caught him up on what had happened since Miguel had arrived, pressing his nose against his owner’s cheek and letting out a soft whimper as he did so. Miguel had been through so much in the short time that they’d been separated, and Dante… Dante had failed to keep him safe to begin with. Now he was here, they both were, and they weren’t going to be able to leave this time. There was no going home, no going back.

This was their home. But it wasn’t going to be home unless Miguel was awake to share it with him.

Somehow, he already knew what he had to do.

To Héctor’s confusion, Dante leapt into the remains of the old building, pushing his muzzle against the ground as he sniffed about, his bright colors contrasting sharply with the colors of the ash and dirt and dust that coated all that remained of Ariel’s housing. “Careful, Dante,” he called, quickly getting to his feet and peering through the dim light so common in this part of the Land of the Dead. Dante, however, seemed to pay him no mind, so intent on his searching that Héctor’s words didn’t reach him. This went on for a few more moments before Dante raised his head, looked at his two skeletal companions, and let out a series of short, sharp barks, fluttering his wings in a sort of beckoning motion as he bounded out of the ruins and down a particularly damp-looking alleyway.

Héctor, fully aware that all spirit guides’ promptings were never to be ignored, double checked that Miguel was secure and followed his grandson’s alebrije as if he were his own.

Dante dutifully led them on without stopping once, his pace steady as he took them out of the section belonging to the Land of the Dead’s forgotten and back out into the main streets and thoroughfares. His ears were perked forward and his tail raised to its full height, his entire body at attention as he navigated the city as if he’d lived there his entire life. Héctor wasn’t sure where he was leading them, but he trusted Dante—he had no reason not to, and at this point he’d take any help he could get, even if he didn’t understand what sort of help he was receiving. He felt part of him stir with hope that Dante might be taking them to Ariel, but braced himself for the very likely possibility that this wasn’t the case. Whatever the outcome, as long as Miguel got the help he needed, that was all that mattered.

Imagine his surprise, then, when Dante stopped at the front door of one of the many towering apartment-type complexes in the heart of the city, an area so full of life and color after the dull dreariness of the sector from whence they’d come not long before. The technicolored hound turned to face Héctor, a surprisingly keen look in his eyes that belied a deep understanding that had thus far been uncommon for him. He blinked once, twice, and the look was gone, replaced by the typical wall-eyed expression he normally wore. Dante then stepped aside and flopped down unceremoniously to the right of the entrance, clearly implying that he would wait here for them to return, and then promptly fell asleep.

Héctor looked down at Dante, completely baffled. “Well. Alright then,” he said after a moment of stunned silence, blinking several times of his own before shaking his head again and pushing open
one of the double doors with his hip. The lobby was modestly decorated, nothing too extravagant
nor too plain, though still a stark contrast from the conditions he’d beheld not long before. A
bored-looking skeleton—who appeared to have died sometime in her late teens or early twenties,
by the looks of it—sat behind the receptionist’s desk, idly flipping through the pages of a fashion
magazine of some kind. She either hadn’t heard them enter, or didn’t care. He suspected the latter.

Straightening his jacket and pushing his hat back to a respectable position on his head, he
sauntered forward and leaned onto the desk on one arm, his other arm carefully moving Miguel to
a position that made him harder to see from where she sat, his teeth set in one of his more
charming, persuasive grins as he drummed the fingers of his free hand on the counter. “Hola,
señorita. ¿Cómo estás?”

She glanced up from her magazine, an expression of mingled distaste and disinterest on her face.
“Fine, thanks,” she replied tersely before turning her attention back to the magazine before her.

Unperturbed, he tried again. “So, between you and me, I’m…” he paused, looking around with
exaggerated caution, eyes narrowed, “… a police officer. Undercover, you know how it is,” he
added hurriedly when she raised a brow ridge in clear skepticism. “I have a warrant for someone
I’ve been led to believe is in hiding here, but I haven’t been able to find out exactly where this
person might be. You follow?”

The clerk nodded, although her expression still remained unconvinced.

Grin returning to his face, Héctor leaned further forward onto the counter. “Good, good. So, the
thing is… this person has been known under a lot of aliases, so we’re still not sure on what name
they might be using… or what apartment they’re in… or what they look like, even. That’s where
you come in though! You and your fancy, ah, thing, here,” he gestured vaguely at her computer,
stealing a glance out of the corner of his eye to gauge her reaction.

“My computer,” she corrected, saying nothing more nor betraying how she was receiving Héctor’s
improvised cover story.

Looking fully unamused, Héctor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, yes, your
computer. Okay. That’s fine. Not important compared to helping me catch this criminal, but fine.”

She leaned forward, eyes still full of clear, unadulterated doubt. “So what you’re saying is, you
have a warrant for somebody, but you don’t even know who they are?”

“Exactly!”

The girl stared at him for a tense moment before shrugging her shoulders and turning to face the
screen, her fingers resting on the keys expectantly. “Wouldn’t be the first time that the police force
was unbelievably incompetent, I guess. What do you know about them, then?”

He couldn’t believe that had actually worked.

“If our sources are to be believed, this individual has a history of working in either a medical or
physical science-related career track. That’s… all we have at this point, actually. The rest is
classified,” he leaned back, half-shrugging in an apologetic sort of way.

She shot a glare at him before turning back to her monitor, fingers unhurriedly typing in a series of
command prompts into a pop up menu. “We don’t categorize tenants by profession. Obviously.
But,” she held up a hand to keep him from interjecting, which he had definitely just been about to
do, “you’re in luck. There’s one person in particular who may match your description that’s caught
the attention of a few of our security guards. Crazy suspicious.” She clicked on a name that had popped up on her screen and quickly scratched out their information on a sticky note, passing it over the counter to Héctor. “Fifth floor. Elevator’s to your right.”

“¡Ah, gracias! I’m forever in your debt, señorita! I’ll make sure to put a good word in for you with the chief when I’m through here!” he called over his shoulder as he sped over to the elevator, eagerly pressing the “up” button more times than necessary and waving goodbye as he stepped inside.

The young woman stared after him, watching the doors slide shut, before shaking her head and turning her attention back to the magazine that had lain ignored throughout their exchange. Said exchange would go forgotten until the following week when she came into work only to be greeted by a pair of shiny, brand new Rivera-make boots—of far superior quality and style than the ones she’d been eyeing in her magazine when Héctor had come in the week prior. Attached to them was a note, written in flowing, commanding script—Imelda’s handwriting, though the girl had no way to know this: “Courtesy of the chief,” it said.

She put them on and scarcely took them off again after that, always uncharacteristically eager to tell the story of how she’d come to have them whenever she got the chance.

Back in the present moment, Héctor found himself standing in front of an unremarkable, utterly ordinary-looking door. He wasn’t entirely sure what he expected, really. Dante may have sniffed around his friend’s old property, but that didn’t mean that that was why he’d led them here. Maybe he’d smelled something else there, something that could be found here that Miguel needed—as illogical and out-there as it sounded.

At this point, Héctor fully admitted to himself that he didn’t know what to expect. He had no idea if he’d done the right thing, if he was where Dante had intended for him to go. All he could hope was that behind this door was someone who could help him help Miguel, or at the very least take him to someone who could.

But what if he couldn’t get the help his boy needed? What if he’d failed?

He felt a surge of grief go through him, anxiety welling up and filling the empty space where his abdomen had once been with phantom pains, ghostly butterflies that came fluttering back to life, unseen but erratic. He didn’t know what was wrong. No one did. What if Miguel never woke up, or if when he did, he wasn’t himself anymore? Irrational thoughts, maybe, but he couldn’t help but acknowledge them, feeling them impact his will and hope with every new dark possibility that bubbled to the surface of his subconscious.

No. No. Focus.

It’s going to be okay. Everything will be fine. It will be.

It has to be.

Feeling his resolve slowly return, he took several deep, measured breaths before reaching out and tapping his knuckles against the door. Silence. He tried again, more insistently this time. A pause, then movement. The shuffle of feet on carpet just behind the door. The turn of a deadbolt, the unlatching of a hotel lock, and the door opened.

There was Ariel, just the same as they’d looked the last time he’d seen them. Long, dark hair streaked with bits of gray, all pulled back in a messy ponytail. Glasses perched precariously where
their nose had once been. A spiderwebbing crack that spread from their right eye and across their cheek, fracturing the patterns that were inlaid there and around their eye. A smattering of stubble on their chin, something they’d always fusssed at but never actually did anything about. Just as he’d remembered them, a fading memory made concrete once more.

The skeletons stared at each other in awe for a moment, before a wide, insuppressible grin appeared on Ariel’s face. They thrust their arms straight up into the air, letting out a loud whoop, and throwing their arms around Héctor’s neck. “¡Ay, mí guapo tramposo! Look at you! I can hardly believe my eyes!”

Héctor stood in shock, not fully processing what was happening, but quickly returned to himself and freed an arm from Miguel to reciprocate the hug. “Ariel! I thought—I had no idea that you were—”

“Still here?” they supplied, letting out a loud sniff as they breathed in the faint, ashy scent that still clung to Héctor’s clothes, stepping back and gesturing for him to step inside. “Not surprising, given where I suspect you’ve just recently been.”

“What on earth happened?”

A look of fiendish delight came over them at Héctor’s evident confusion, their high, piercing laughter bursting out of them as the slammed the door shut behind them, languidly leaning back against it, arms folded over their chest. “Ahhh, you know… just a little lab accident! Nothing noteworthy enough to make the news, especially with all the other sorts of exciting things that have been going on around here lately—including your very own escapades, it seems! Imagine my surprise when I saw my dear Héctorito’s face plastered on the front page of every newspaper in town!”

Snickering, Héctor waved away the praise. “Psshhh, it wasn’t because of anything I did.” His demeanor grew suddenly somber, his joyous smile turning to one of drawn resignation. He took Miguel off his back and cradled him in his arms. “It’s all because of him. Ariel, I’d like you to meet Miguel.”

Ariel peered down at the boy, immediately recognizing him from the glimpses they’d caught from the news reports and papers. “The living boy. I remember all the fuss he caused when he showed up… he’s yours, then?”

“My great-great-grandson, yes,” Héctor said, nodding. “He joined us permanently not too long ago. Couldn’t tell you how long, exactly—he’s been unconscious since the night of his first full day here, and I’ve been with him ever since. I may or may not have… lost track of time. Completely.”

They placed a hand on Miguel’s cheek, turning his head this way and that before holding out their hands towards Héctor, silently asking for permission to hold him. He complied, passing his boy with careful delicacy to Ariel, who motioned for him to follow them. The entranceway opened into a disorganized main living space cluttered with scattered papers, haphazard stacks of books, several beakers full of unrecognizable substances, and assorted items of clothing, among other things. Ariel walked through it all without paying any mind to what they were stepping on, a clear disregard for their own property that they continued to display when they unceremoniously pushed a stack of debris off their worn down couch and lowered Miguel onto it, crouching down beside him, eyes narrowed in focus.

“So. Hasn’t woken up, unresponsive to outside stimuli, but seems fine otherwise, right?” Ariel asked, gazing up at Héctor from their spot close to the ground. Héctor nodded and joined them in squatting next to the couch, eyes anxiously focused on Miguel. “This is just conjecture, pure theory
on my part, but… do you think it’s possible that he’s like this because of what he went through when he first came here?”

That was a thought Héctor hadn’t yet considered. “He’d been here once before when he was alive, as you know. He seemed fine when he returned to the Land of the Living, but… maybe it had an effect on him that we couldn’t see until now.”

“It’s just a thought, nothing I can say for certain—but it wouldn’t surprise me if this had something to do with that,” Ariel said, slumping into a sitting position, legs folded in front of them. “It’s unheard of, having a living person end up here. It’d make sense, then, that you’d had no reason to anticipate this—he’s probably the first. If not the first, he’s the only case in recent memory.”

“You’ve always made it look so easy, figuring out things like this,” Héctor rolled his eyes jokingly, settling onto his knees and reaching out for one of Miguel’s hands. “I wouldn’t have thought of that. Just would’ve… kept panicking, I guess. Worrying. Not knowing what to do. Some grandpa I am.”

Ariel patted him on the back gently. “Go easy on yourself, primo. You would’ve sorted it out—I just happen to have the benefit of having an outsider’s perspective on this. Makes things easier.”

He supposed they were right, though he couldn’t help but feel more than a bit dejected that he hadn’t considered it sooner. He lapsed into contemplative silence, the gears in his head turning, slowly beginning to form the semblance of a conclusion. “His body is all healed now, has been since I first brought him home.” He raised his free hand to stroke his chin thoughtfully. “But his soul… it’s the only thing that remains that could’ve possibly been affected by his travels to and from here. Coming here before he was ready, leaving under such emotional circumstances, and then ending up here again in such a violent and sudden way—it’s the only thing that makes sense. He’s here, and yet part of him isn’t, somehow.”

But if that was the case, how was he supposed to help Miguel? The soul wasn’t something he could heal by normal means. He couldn’t mend it or wrap it with bandages—it was intangible, something too pure and delicate to be bound by a physical form.

Miguel was, for all intents and purposes, his soul. Everything he was, everything he had been or ever would be, it was all there. Untouchable, unseeable, but as real and as important as everything about him they were allowed to behold.

But that wasn’t all Miguel was. Miguel was light, sunshine, the smell of the earth after a rainstorm. He was the feeling of coming home, of being with those you loved. He was joy. He was love.

He was music.

Music.

Bolting to his feet, Héctor lifted Miguel off of the couch, eyes sparkling with renewed energy and glee as he pulled his friend to their feet beside him. His face told Ariel everything they needed to know. He’d found a solution, and oh was he grateful—grateful for many things, many of which were going to have to be a subject for another day. Héctor threw an arm around them and sputtered out a jumbled string of words of gratitude before swiveling to face the door and rushing out of it, causing it to bang against the wall. It left a dent, but Ariel found they didn’t mind, letting out another loud, lilting cackle at the sight instead.

They made a mental note to try to figure out where the Riveras were living now once things got settled. It’d been too long since they and Héctor had had a chance to talk heart to heart—and they
found themselves wanting to truly meet the young man who had so greatly impacted their friend’s life.

It’d be worth the wait, for certain.

None of the Riveras had been able to stop Héctor long enough to get more than a word or two out of him at a time as he rushed back into their courtyard with Dante on his heels, looking happier than they’d seen him in days. From the few words they’d all managed to get out of him collectively, they were able to piece together that he seemed to have come up with a way to help Miguel—something that he seemed confident would work. Figuring it was for the best, they all left him to it, all fully confident that he knew what he was doing.

Taking Miguel back into his and Imelda’s room, he placed him back on the bed, folding his hands over his chest, before sitting down in the same chair he’d occupied since the morning Miguel hadn’t woken up. This time, though, his guitar was in his arms, fingertips hovering over the strings, voice waiting to be released into the still, silent air of the bedroom.

He began to play.

And he didn’t stop until finally, finally Miguel began to stir.

He awoke to the gentle, welcoming sound of Papá Héctor’s music, full of peace unlike any he’d felt in a long, long time.

Chapter End Notes

Side note: for anyone curious to see what kind of nonsense I get up to when I'm not working on this fic, feel free to follow me on Twitter under the name @endlessapis! I post doodles and pictures of my axolotls more than anything else, so be prepared for a whoooole lot of that. ^^
Rise and Shine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first thing Miguel was aware of was music all around him, weaving through his ribs and the gaps in his bones. It came from somewhere just out of reach, beyond the dark that surrounded him. Practiced chords played by skilled fingers, a voice that sounds like home and safety, beckoning him forward out of the darkness. He stirred, shifting, fighting for his eyes to open, forcing both his mind and body towards consciousness.

And just like that, he was awake.

Everything’s fuzzy for a moment, his eyes straining to adjust to being used again, his surroundings slowly coming into focus. Warm morning sunlight filtering through cracked blinds. The silkiness of sheets both above and below him. The outline of a familiar form close by, silhouetted against the sunlight. And music—music everywhere. He stirred further, lifting his hands from beneath the covers to rub the sleep from his eyes.

A sharp, piercing grito to his left jolted him the rest of the way out of his grogginess. Miguel let out a yelp and bolted upright, chest heaving, casting his gaze about frantically until his eyes alighted upon Héctor—his grin wider than Miguel had ever seen before, and what looked like tears welling up in his eye sockets. He haphazardly set his guitar onto the foot of the bed and threw his arms around Miguel, his grip tight as his body shook with relief.

Miguel was extremely confused, to say the least.

“Papá Héctor?” he asked tentatively, bringing his arms up to return the hug. He ran his hands over Héctor’s back, counting vertebrae and ribs silently to himself as he went. “Is everything okay?”

Héctor let out a choked laugh and held Miguel back by his shoulders so he could look him over, relief evident across his face. “It is now, mijo.” He freed one of his hands to rub roughly at his eyes before placing it back on Miguel’s shoulder. “It is now.”

The sound of a multitude of hurried footsteps filled the corridor outside of Héctor and Imelda’s room, followed by the loud crack of the wooden door against the wall as it was flung open. The rest of their family, having heard Héctor’s shouts moments before, were eager to see their boy and jostled against each other as they tried to press into the room all at once, their struggle a cacophony of clattering bones, flailing limbs, and terse, argumentative chatter.

Dante, brilliantly vibrant and as wiggly as always, managed to push through the mass of Riveras and leapt up into Miguel’s arms, pushing the boy backwards onto the bed and nuzzling his face under Miguel’s chin. Letting out a cry, Miguel hugged his alebrije tightly and held him close, mumbling a string of praises and words of love against the soft, fuzzy skin of his muzzle.

Still baffled despite his joy at being reunited with Dante, Miguel managed to sit up—still cradling his canine companion, who was now busy kissing his face—and averted his gaze from the event going on in the doorway, eyes falling back on Héctor, who seemed to have regained his composure. “I… I don’t understand,” Miguel said as he began to absently examine his hands, turning them over in his lap. “Why is everyone so worked up?”

Héctor’s expression faltered as his eyes scanned Miguel’s face, taking in the concerned eyes, the
set to his grandson’s mouth, the drawing in of his brow bones. The Riveras who had been fighting to get into the room suddenly fell quiet and managed to shuffle in without any further fanfare, taking their places at the fringes of the room, just outside Miguel’s field of vision.

“Miguel…” Héctor sighed, pushing a hand through his hair. “You’ve been asleep for over a week. You went to sleep the night we sang on the roof together and you wouldn’t wake up no matter what we tried.”

Miguel blinked slowly, confusion and alarm mixing on his face. “I wouldn’t wake up? What happened?”

Knowing how inadequate his response would be, Héctor shrugged a shoulder and shook his head. “No clue, chamaco. I have my theories, but… nothing concrete. It could be that your body just needed time to rest, or it may have had something to do with you adjusting to coming back to the Land of the Dead for a second time. We just don’t know.”

“Well…” Miguel let out a hum and rested his hand against his chin. He paused, thinking for a moment as he turned to gaze at his family. A smile bloomed across his face as he took in the sight of them, warmth growing behind his sternum as he saw the love and relief in their eyes. “I’m just sorry I made you guys worry! I’m feeling a bit better now though, so that’s good, right?”

Héctor couldn’t help but smile in the face of his boy’s optimism. “Aye, it is, it is. But don’t feel like you have to be back at 100% right away, alright? Healing takes time, and… well, you have a lot of it left to do. And that’s okay!”

“This isn’t something to be rushed, Miguel,” Imelda added as she stepped forward and cradled his face in her hands, placing a kiss to his temple. “We’re all here for you, and we’ll support you every step of the way.”

Miguel wrapped his arms around Imelda, resting his face in the crook of her neck as she pulled him close, Dante now squished between them. “Gracias, Mamá Imelda.”

Without warning, the rest of the Riveras bustled over to the bed and surrounded the three of them, everyone’s voices rising and falling in waves as they sought to tell Miguel how grateful they were, how happy they were he’d woken up, how they couldn’t wait to properly welcome him, help him settle and adjust. All Miguel could do was laugh and return their embraces, soaking in the warmth and hope that their love for him instilled.

“This is mine? Really?”

Miguel peered around the edge of the door, brown eyes wide and sparkling as he took in the sight of the room just beyond it. It was fairly large for a single bedroom, a big, soft-looking bed in one corner beneath a window that looked out to their courtyard. Bright cotton curtains fluttered in the gust of morning air, almost as if they were beckoning Miguel forward. With a gentle hip check from Héctor, Miguel laughed and stumbled into the room, promptly throwing himself onto the bed.

“It’s so comfy!” he exclaimed from where he’d sunken into the plushness of the mattress and its comforter. With a snicker, Héctor ran over to the side of the bed and fell backwards across it, pinning his grandson in place and earning a grunt from the boy in response. “That wasn’t an invitation! How are you so heavy, Papá Héctor?”

“What was that? I thought I heard something…” Héctor gazed around the room, purposefully avoiding looking down at Miguel as a mischievous grin formed on his face. He shrugged and
shifted, stretching his legs as they dangled over the edge of the mattress. “Oh well! Must’ve been the wind!”

Miguel giggled and tried to squirm his way out from underneath him, managing to get free only to be pulled back down again, this time in a careful-yet-restrictive hold.

“Oh, would you look at that! There was somebody there!” Héctor exclaimed in mock surprise, ruffling Miguel’s hair before pressing his mouth to the back of Miguel’s skull and letting him loose. “What do you think, Miguel? Do you like it?”

“I love it! It’s so big, and so nice—look at this bookshelf! And the floors! The closet!” Miguel spun in a circle, arms spread wide as he gestured to all of the amenities his family had provided for him. “Thank you so much Papá Héctor!”

Shaking his head and chuckling, Héctor replied, “I’m afraid I can’t take all the credit. I did a lot of it, but once you had your little… episode,” here Héctor flinched and looked away sheepishly, “I wasn’t exactly good for much. Coco, Oscar, and Felipe were the ones who finished it up for you—and a wonderful job they did!” Héctor called out as the twins walked by, both calling out “Gracias!” as they went.

“It’s perfect,” Miguel said, turning to face him, eyes alight with excitement stirring a feeling of warmth behind Héctor’s sternum.

It was so good to see his boy smiling again.

“Not too shabby for a bunch of boneheads, eh?” he replied, rising to his feet and dusting his hands off on his pant legs. “Still got a lot left to do before we can say you’re settled in, though. Rosita and Victoria are hoping they can persuade you to go to the market with them later—something about wanting to help pick out some new clothes for you?” He mock-scoffed, doing his best to look offended and failing as he fought back a laugh. “It’s like they don’t trust my sense of style or something.”

“That’s because we don’t,” Victoria deadpanned from her spot in the doorway. “Your ‘style’ has pretty much disappeared since you died, viejo.”

Letting out an indignant gasp, he set his hands on his hips and tossed his head back before looking to Miguel. “Can you believe it? The audacity of your Tía Victoria, claiming that the most fashionable Rivera has no fashion sense at all!”

Rolling her eyes, Victoria couldn’t help but smile as she watched Miguel double over in laughter, shaking her head and stepping forward into the room with a hand on her hip as she did. “Fine, fine, your clothes aren’t all completely terrible, but we’re not letting you pick his clothes regardless. We don’t want Miguelito running around the Land of the Dead without a shirt on like a certain someone.”

A beat of silence, then Héctor shrugged, grinning down at Miguel. “Can’t argue with that. He’s all yours, then. You keep your tías out of trouble, okay Miguel?”

Miguel gave him a thumbs up as Victoria led him out of the room, Rosita rounding the corner and joining them, waving to Héctor as she passed with Dante on her heels. Letting out a low, contented sigh, he turned back to survey Miguel’s room, taking in the sight of it all and making mental notes at what could be added to improve it. His boy deserved nothing but the best, after all… maybe a rug here, a string of lights there—
“You look distracted,” remarked a familiar voice from behind him. Expression softening, he turned to face Imelda and chuckled.

“Oh you know, just thinking.” He sat down on the bed, patting the space beside him. With a flourish of skirts, she joined him, taking hold of his hand. “Lots to think about. Haven’t really had time to just… sit, let it all soak in, you know?”

Imelda hummed in agreement, rubbing her thumb idly over his knuckles. “Would talking about it help? You hardly stopped long enough to fully explain what you thought was going on before you rushed into our room and started trying to wake him up again.”

“Like I said to Miguel, and to you in significantly fewer words earlier, I’m not completely sure. But,” his gaze flickered over to hers for a moment, then settled on the floorboards beneath their feet, “I think it has something to do with the fact that Miguel’s been here before. He came here, he went back, and now he’s here again. I just don’t think our souls are meant to experience something like that, especially in such a relatively short amount of time.”

“I think that’s a reasonable guess, given what we know. It would make sense that his body would need time to readjust to such a sudden, drastic change, especially if he was still recovering from being here last time.” Imelda squeezed his hand and drew it into her lap, cradling it between both of her palms as she watched his expression morph into one of grief.

“If he’d come here when he was older… when he was meant to…” His voice was low, quiet, and he shook his head slowly. “I don’t think this would’ve been a problem. There would be a lot of things that wouldn’t be problems. He’d still be alive, watching his little sister grow up, getting a career in music, living and experiencing new things and—” Another sigh. He fell silent, voice caught in his throat.

She pulled him closer, bringing his head down to rest against her shoulder. They sat like that for some time, resting, taking in the quiet comfort of each other, Imelda’s thumb still brushing his knuckles, the arch of his cheekbone pressing against her humerus.

“There is nothing worse than watching someone you love suffer, especially when the circumstances are as unfair as Miguel’s,” Imelda murmured into the stillness, her grip tightening in reassurance. “It’s exquisitely, indescribably painful. But he doesn’t have to go through this alone. He has us. We all have each other.”

“You’re right,” came his reply, the hint of a smile in his tone. “We’ll all make it through this somehow. It won’t be easy, but we’ll do it.” He hesitates, and Imelda feels a tremor run through him. “I just hope it’s enough.”

“It will be. He couldn’t be in better hands, or in the arms of people who love him more than we do.” Imelda rose to her feet, pulling him after her and into her arms once more. “Now, I know someone who’s hardly gotten any sleep in over a week—let’s go get you tucked in for a while.”

Héctor nodded, gratefulness and love clear in his eyes as he followed after her. Miguel needed the best he had to offer, and if Héctor was to be able to give that to him, he needed to rest first. There would be plenty of time for worrying about the days, weeks, months, years ahead of them later—for now, all he could do was take it one moment at a time.

With a glimmer of hope growing behind his ribs, Héctor dozed off, dreaming of a time where Miguel no longer hurt or worried, where all of them could be truly, completely happy together.
It's been a very, very long time since we've spoken, hasn't it? So much has happened—many difficult things, but a number of wonderful things as well. I'm sorry for keeping you all waiting for so long, but just know there's hardly been a day where you haven't been on my mind.

I'll spare you all the fuss of spilling the deets here, but for those who are interested... I have a tumblr! You can harass me all you'd like there—my inbox is open and I'd love to hear from you. You can find me at endless-existential-crisis, and I track the #oqnv tag if there's ever anything fic-related you'd like me to see. Thank you for your patience, and for sticking around! It feels great to be back <3

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