## Broken Bonds and Bones

**by Sinclaironfire**

**Summary**

It had been almost a century since Imelda told Hector that she loved him and so much had changed in that time.
Chapter 1

For years, Imelda Rivera swore that she never wanted to remember her husband. She got rid of everything that reminded her of him. She banned his music, his name, anything and everything that had to do with Hector Rivera, she destroyed. She was content to go the rest of her life and death without ever thinking of him again. But now, as Hector died with the rising morning sun, she would have given anything to have him back.

Lost in her grief, Imelda was unaware that her sorrow was being broadcasted in high definition to almost every home in the Land of the Dead. Everyone saw her loss. While the denizens of the Land of the dead lived for centuries, few ever saw the Final Death. That unpleasant aspect of the afterlife was reserved for those without family or who went unloved. For many, seeing Hector die was a grim reminder of how fragile the afterlife was. Despite being loved, The Final Death claimed Hector. It was a sobering experience for all but none quite like for Imelda.

She could only think of the wasted years, the decades spent hating him. She spent fifty years hating everything about him. Her heart once broken by his departed was shattered anew by his second death. Imelda sobbed. Her brothers, Oscar and Felipe, approached her. They knew her the best and had seen her at her worst. They knelt beside her and offered words of comfort to her but nothing could rouse Imelda from her grief.

As the morning sun bathed the Land of the Dead in warm light, Imelda knew that she could never be happy again. Yet, no sooner had the sun risen over the horizon, did something miraculous happen. Glittering lights like golden drops of sunlight swirled about Imelda. Too scared to move, she remained perfectly still. She felt pressure on her lap and before her eyes, the glittering lights formed a human skull. The rest of the body followed. Imelda could hardly believe her eyes.

“H-Hector?” her voice trembled.

He groaned and weakly opened his eyes. “Hola, Imelda.”

She gasped and hugged him. “You came back,” she cried.

“Sorry it took me so long…” he moaned as he hugged her back. “I’m… I’m so sorry…”

His grip on her form weakened and stopped altogether. Imelda’s heart sank. She was losing him again. “Hector!”

But he was still here with her. Hector was merely unconscious. Imelda anxiously laughed. He wasn’t dead – well he was but he was alive. Imelda sighed. “How many scares are you going to put me through, mi amor?”

“Imelda!” Julio shouted. “We’ve got company!”

The backstage of the Sunrise Spectacular show was being overrun by curious staff and nosy reporters. There wasn’t a single soul in the Land of the Dead who didn’t want to know what happened and they were all making a bee-line for Hector. Imelda shielded Hector and although he was comatose, she got him out of there. Armed with her boot, Imelda beat a path for her and her family to escape the roves of unwanted inquirers.
By the time Imelda clear a path and got her family home safely, her shoes were an unrecognizable mess of leather and steel. The loss of her boots was regrettable. They were one of her favorite pairs that she wore for special occasions like anniversaries and holidays but her family was home now and the loss of her boots was worth it. Family came first, second, and last for Imelda. And speaking of her family, she now had to deal with the latest addition to it: her semi-estranged husband Hector.

Hector, who had been through ordeal after ordeal tonight, was currently being carried into the house by Oscar and Felipe. They placed him on the couch as gently as they could. Although Hector survived the Final Death, he was by no means the standard of health. In fact, Hector looked like death warmed over. His eyes didn’t focus at all and his bones were a pallid yellow color. Hector curled up onto the couch like a wounded animal. A moan escaped his lips. Imelda froze where she stood. Any moment now, she feared that he would disappear.

“Imelda!” Rosita called out from the front of the house. “I think you should see this!”

Imelda hesitated. She didn’t want to leave Hector alone in case something happened. Oscar and Felipe jumped to her aid.

“Don’t worry,” Oscar assured her.

“We’ll handle this!” Felipe promised.

As quick as a flash the twins were gone to deal with whatever new crisis had arisen. Imelda thought she could hear the curious cries of a crowd but all at once the noise faded away and it was quiet. It was far too quiet for her. A jarring cough made her jump. Hector groaned and turned over.

“Hector?” she reached out to touch him but fear held her back.

He looked so bad. His bones were covered in scratches and nicks to say nothing of the poor patch job done with – Imelda gasped. Did he use duck-tape? She stared at the face of the man whom she married decades ago. Never in a million years did she think that they would ever be apart or that she would be afraid to touch him. Hector groaned and slowly blinked. He closed his eyes and whimpered. Imelda brushed his hair out of his face. Upon feeling her caress, Hector leaned into her gentle touch. Imelda was as strong and unforgiving as steel but when she wanted to be, she could be as soft as silk. Hector desperately needed a soft place to fall and Imelda provided that for him. He moaned again but this time it was softer, more peaceful. His body relaxed and so did Imelda’s. It seemed, for now, that Hector wouldn’t be going anywhere. He was here to stay.

But for how long, Imelda worried.

Whatever or however Hector had managed to avoid dying a second time tonight, Imelda didn’t know how long it would last. For all she knew, it was a freak accident. How long would he be safe? Coco’s memory kept him alive but she was an elderly woman now. She had dementia. One day her daughter would die and when she did, Hector would die too. Imelda sighed. She could handle death but not her husband or daughter at the same time. That was too much for anyone to handle. Imelda could only hope that Coco had passed Hector’s stories down to Miguel. It wouldn’t allow Hector to cross over the Marigold Bridge next year but as long as it kept him alive, that was all that mattered. Thinking of Hector staying alive brought forward thought on how he had died the first time.

“Murdered…” she whispered quietly.
She never thought….it never crossed her mind that he had been murdered. She assumed that he ran off with some floozy he met in a bar. That he started a new life somewhere else and forgot all about her and Coco. Fresh guilt consumed Imelda whole. She never wanted to be right about why Hector never returned to their family but to be murdered in cold blood was a devastating reveal. Her heart burned with anger over the generations of pain Hector and her family endured. Coco was left without a father, she was left without her partner, and Hector was deprived of being honored after death. As much as she wanted to lay the blame all at Ernesto De La Cruz’s feet, she couldn’t.

*You’re at fault too,* her mind whispered, *You cursed his name. You got rid of his photo. You damned him to the Final Death. His Final Death will be because of you.*

It was all true. She left him to rot. She left him to die. “I’m an idiot,” she sighed. Hector’s body weighted shifted towards her. Completely relaxed, he huddled next to her. Well, if he felt comfortable enough to cuddle her, how much resentment did he have towards her? None, she assumed. She glanced around. No one else was in the room. Imelda placed a small kiss on Hector’s forehead.

The slamming of the front door caused Imelda to jolt in her seat and to disturb what peace Hector had. Her shoulder knocked into his jaw and caused him to yelp.

“No, Hector, it’s alright!” she tried her best to calm her disoriented husband. She pulled him back onto the couch before he could hurt himself. “It’s okay!”

“Imelda?” Even when he was sitting down, Hector wobbled. She placed her hand against his chest and he fell back without much resistance. “Mela?”

She hadn’t heard her nickname in forever but she welcomed it nonetheless. “Si, it’s Mela.”

“…Where…Where am I?” he asked.

“Home,” she answered instantly. “You’re home, Hector.”

Still out of it, Hector smiled softly. “I like home…”

“I do too.” Carefully, she got up the couch and when she was sure that she hadn’t disturbed his peace any further, she ran to the front door. It was there that she saw Victoria, her granddaughter.

“Why are you making so much noise?”

“It’s not my fault,” Victoria defended. “It’s those beasts outside. All that racket and noise! Ay, it’s like a zoo.”

“Are they gone?”

“Si,” Victoria nodded. “Papa and Oscar and Felipe drove everyone off.”

“Good.”

“So, um, how is he?”

Imelda sighed heavily. “I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I…I don’t know…”

Victoria rocked back and forth on her heels. “Uh, Mama Imelda? The crowds, they’ll probably be back tomorrow and no one has seen De La Cruz. What do you want us to do?”

“Oh! Uh, everyone stays in. The store will be closed tomorrow and we’re all staying in.”
“A-Are you sure? We’ve never closed the store.”

Imelda nodded. “I’m sure. Will you tell your father and Oscar and Felipe?”

“Yes, Mama Imelda”

She smiled proudly. “That’s my girl. I’m going to tell Hector of our plans for tomorrow.”

When Imelda returned to the living room, Hector was fast asleep on the couch. He was dead to the world.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I don't know what a skeleton's night-time routine would be. Just go with it.

Imelda never thought she would spend the morning after Day of the Dead carrying her estranged husband up the stairs in her home but here she was doing exactly that. Hector’s feet dragged against the floor. Imelda grunted as she adjusted her grip on his skeletal form. Hector may have weighed practically nothing but he was tall and gangly. His limbs seemed intent on getting in her way. There was a solid POP! Imelda turned her head downstairs and saw that Hector’s leg had come off. She sighed but carried on. She would retrieve it after she got Hector in bed.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Imelda hung a left at the hallway and went straight to the guest bedroom. It wasn’t the nicest place to sleep but it did have a bed with comfy pillows and soft sheets. Imelda, with some difficulty, opened the door and saw the awful state that the guest room had become. Spare leather, shoe designs, extra furniture, and a beaten up old desk made the guest room entirely unusable. The room had become a catch-all for anything that the Rivera family wanted to hold on to but didn’t have a place for.

Imelda groaned. She planned on putting Hector in the guest room but since it was completely unsuitable for company, she would have to find a different spot for him. Quickly, Imelda crossed off every spare sleeping in the house. There was the couch but she would feel better if Hector was in a bed somewhere.

The cot, she thought, no, no that’s not comfortable at all.

There was simply no room. She hadn’t planned on having company this evening – morning – whatever. It had been a long night for everyone. Which made her intent on giving Hector a suitable and comfortable place to sleep. That gave Imelda one option: Her bedroom. She slept on a king-sized mattress. It wasn’t like she didn’t have the room. Besides, he was her husband. It wasn’t weird. It was – Imelda sighed. It was weird. Everything was weird but weirdness wasn’t an excuse to not let Hector sleep off his near death experience.

She turned around and marched to her bedroom. She pushed the door open with her foot. Hector mumbled something but she didn’t catch it. Imelda’s bedroom reflected her personality. It was devoid of clutter but photos of her family were placed on every surface. Little snapshots of her greatest successes were on her vanity. Imelda walked over to her bed and put Hector on the right side. She slept on the left. Hector wobbled slightly. She placed him down gently. He practically melted into the bed.

“…anks Mela…” he mumbled and then quiet snoring filled the room.

“You’re welcome.” She took off his hat and pulled the covers over him. Imelda pulled the black-out shades down. She put his hat on her vanity and escaped to her private bathroom to get ready for bed. As soon as she stepped into her en-suite, was Imelda overcome with pure exhaustion. Every part of her body ached. From her arms which she smacked any busybody who wanted to talk to Hector to
her side which she was sure she bruised when Ernesto threw her to the floor. That was a sore spot
for her to be so easily discarded like so. She was stronger than that. Ernesto had caught her off-guard
but she got him back when she stomped on his foot. His mariachi shoes were all sparkles and
sequins, her shoes had steel in the heel. She recalled the exact moment when she turned his toes to
dust. It was so satisfying after what that man put her family through. Plus, it was nice to get back at
him for the way he twirled her around on stage.

She could still feel where Ernesto had grabbed her by her waist in a clever attempt to steal back
Hector’s photo. Imelda shuddered. She felt gross but being as tired as she was and how late – early –
whatever. She vetoed the shower. Sleep was more important. Imelda washed her face and powered
her markings. She let her hair down and brushed her teeth but when she climbed into bed, she found
sleep impossible. For she was suddenly hyper-aware that she was sharing a bed with Hector, her
husband.

It was strange to have another person in her bed. She never dated or brought anyone after well…after
Hector was murdered. How could she? She had a daughter to raise and a business to run. She didn’t
have time for romance but it didn’t stop suitors from attempting to win her heart. They thought she
would be easily swayed by love songs and promises of grand romance. A few well-aimed rocks
from her stockpile sent any man who tried to seduce her running. Her aim was infamous. She still
kept a few rocks by her nightstand.

Hector shifted under the covers. He sighed happily. Imelda settled into her side of the bed, ever
aware that Hector was lying a few inches away from her. Imelda turned off her lamp and let the
wonderful sensation that was sleep claim her.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I love hearing what you guys think of the story and swear that I will answer reviews when I get a chance.

It had to be a dream.

The bed he was in was far too comfortable to be real and the sheets were as soft as a cloud. Hector couldn’t remember the last time he slept so peacefully. His bones ached for a soft place to crash and now that he had it, Hector could only conclude that he was dreaming. Everything that he felt was part of some dying dream as the Final Death spirited him away to wherever was the last stop for forgotten souls. Hector buried his face deeper into the pillow. He wanted a few more seconds of this wonderful dream before he had to go. Everything was so nice and wonderful. He hadn’t been this happy or relaxed in a long time.

Hector heard a content sigh coming next to him. He recognized it instantly as Imelda. Too scared to open his eyes, Hector reached over and found her hand. He held it. Hector held back his tears. This was the best death dream ever. First, he got to sleep in a real bed and now he got to spend his final moments with Imelda? Hector didn’t know what he did to deserve such a dream like this but he was happy.

“AY!”

Everything happened so fast. Imelda shouted, a vase was thrown, and Hector, frightened, stumbled back. But the sheets were heavily and tangled around his body and without his leg, Hector was unsteady. He fell backwards and onto the floor. Hector pulled the sheets out of the way to see a highly enraged Imelda holding a picture frame. She was ready to kill.

“Don’t touch me you son of a –“ Imelda froze. “Hector!”

Hector didn’t move an inch. He was too scared that Imelda would shatter his skull with the picture frame.

“I’m sorry!” Imelda apologized. “I forgot you were here.”

He gasped. “…T-This isn’t a dream?”

“No, no. This is real.”

Hector tried to stand up but fell right back down. “Where’s my leg? Where am I?” He couldn’t remember a thing. “What happened?” His memories were mixed up. Some things were clearer than others like Imelda singing but everything else was a jumbled mess.

Imelda pulled Hector back onto the bed. “Hold on, I think your leg is still on the staircase. Wait a moment.”

She left the room. Hector kept a tight grip on the bed sheets. His mind was racing. He thought he had died. He was sure that he had died. He remembered the show, Imelda singing, and lots of marigolds
and the feeling of being less. Hector knew that he had died but he wasn’t gone. He was here.

In the Land of the Dead.

In a really nice bedroom.

With Imelda.

Hector gasped and his eyes widened. He was in Imelda’s bedroom. Oh, what the hell had happened last night? He never got as far as a ‘hello’ from her and suddenly, he was in her bedroom? Either something really bad happened or something really good happened and going by how much his body hurt and how he was missing his leg, Hector went with bad. Everything hurt. It took a tremendous effort to sit upright. Hector closed his eyes and tried to remember the rest of last night’s events. There was a kid, a talent contest, Ernesto was there too…Hector’s mind clicked and everything came rushing back. That kid was Miguel, his great-great-grandson, that talent contest was his first performance and Ernesto? Ernesto had murdered him in cold blood. Hector felt lightheaded and fell back into the bed.

“I’ve got your leg,” Imelda said as she entered her bedroom. “I – Hector?”

Fear, panic, and confusion were etched into his face. Imelda approached him. “Hector? Are…are you okay?”

“Did Ernesto murder me?” he asked.

Imelda sighed and sat down on her bed. “Yes,” she answered.

“How?”

“Poison.”

Hector took deep breaths and said with a whimper, “I just wanted to go home…”

“I know, I know…” she drummed her fingers on his detached leg. “Um…would you like me to?”

“Oh! Uh, no, I can manage.” Weakly, Hector sat up and popped his leg back into place.

An unbearably long period of silence drifted between them. Neither knew what to say or do. Eventually, it was Hector who broke the silence.

“I…uh, um….I guess I’ll be going…”

“What?!” Imelda asked, startled.

Hector jumped. “Uh, I-I’m leaving?” he answered nervously.

“You can’t be serious,” she said standing up. “You nearly…you died last night and who knows where Ernesto is and, and….don’t go. Hector, please, don’t go. Stay here, with me.”

“Are you…are you asking me to move in?” He didn’t want to get his hopes up but it sounded like she was asking him to move in.

“Yes,” Imelda said. “Move in with me. There’s a spare bedroom and you can be happy there.”

Oh. Hector had hoped that he could stay with her in her bedroom but it was foolish to think that with all the years between them, Imelda would allow him to jump back into her bed. This was going to
take time but Hector didn’t mind. He spent over eighty years waiting to see his family again. No matter how long it would take, he would work back Imelda’s trust.

“I would love to,” was Hector’s earnest reply. “But there are some things back in my home that I need to get.” He reached over the bed and grabbed his hat. “I’ll be back in a while.”

“No!” she shook her head. “I’m-I’m going with you.”

“But, Imelda, where I live isn’t really,” he struggled to find the right words but failed. He didn’t want Imelda to see the slums where he lived.

“Ernesto is out there, Hector,” she answered, putting an end to the conversation. “We’re going together. Come on, let’s go.”

Hector followed her out of the house. Together, they walked side by side to the slums of the Land of the Dead.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry that I haven't updated or responded to reviews yet. I've just quite literally graduated from college and so I've been out celebrating and catching my breath.

The streets of the Land of the Dead were quiet. After the holiday, everyone was resting. Imelda wasn’t sure if she liked the quiet or not. On one hand, it made it easier to get around the ever-expanding city but the quiet was suppressive. It strangled any chance of making the commute to the slums more bearable. She and Hector didn’t speak. They didn’t know what they would speak of.

Family?

Hector had been disconnected for years. Where to even begin with that topic?

The shoe business?

Hector had nothing to do with it. Would he be interested in the daily grind that came with shoes?

Music?

Imelda winced. It felt good to sing. She missed the feeling of being on stage and hearing Hector play. She glanced over to him and was happy to have him back but something was off about him. He moved up and down at a steady pace. Hector was limping badly. Imelda spotted the reason within seconds. His fibula kept popping out. She frowned.

“How did that happen?” she asked.

“Hm?” Hector looked as his fibula bounced out with every step he took. “Oh, uh, you know those signs on the trolleys that say ‘Not to be used for a tightrope’?”

“Si,” Imelda answered.

“Yeah, that was me.”

“How did you…?”

Hector shook his head. “You don’t want to know.” Out went his fibula again and Hector continued to limp.

“I see…”

Silence fell over the two Riveras again. The next time conversation was attempted, it was by Hector. He cleared his throat and said, in all seriousness, “You really do look well.”

“Thank you.”

“So, um, how have things been for you?”
They’ve been well.” She couldn’t complain. Life was good. She had her family who adored her, her business thrived, and she was a highly respected woman who never needed to depend on anyone for her own happiness. “Oscar and Felipe want to expand the shoe business. They want to open up a second store.”

“Oh?” Hector leaned towards her a little. “And you don’t want to?”

“There’s no need for a second store other than convenience for people who live on the outer edges,” Imelda explained. “When I was alive, I made shoes because Coco needed a future. We needed money. I don’t—” Imelda saw the look on Hector’s face. Dead or alive, Hector was bad at hiding his emotions. She saw how much it pained him to know that his family had struggled to survive while he was gone. “Hector, I didn’t mean—"

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “I never should have left.”

She wanted to disagree with him and comfort him and tell him that his leaving was the result of him doing what he thought was best but she couldn’t. Hector wasn’t there to dry Coco’s tears when her Papa wasn’t there to tuck her in at night. He wasn’t there to worry about bills or putting food on the table or making sure that Coco had everything she needed to have a good life. Hector was off with Ernesto, singing and dancing for a living. She wanted to, more than anything, tell Hector that he wasn’t wrong for leaving but she couldn’t. That year on her own had hardened her heart and Hector never coming home turned it to stone.

Hector and Imelda walked in silence.

When they arrived in the slums, Imelda held back. She wasn’t scared of the shabby skeletons or the hovels in which they lived in. Far from it, she held back because the second, they set foot inside the slums, unkempt and ragged skeletons mobbed Hector.

“Cousin Hector!” They cried. “You’re alive!”

He was showered with affection and warmth that few people ever got. There were questions about his health and his well-being. The other denizens of the soon-to-be-forgotten fusses over Hector. He answered all of their questions calmly and left no detail out. Imelda realized as the other skeletons doted on Hector and the way he returned their affection that they were a family.

It makes sense, she thought, that those without a family would bond together.

Imelda couldn’t help but feel a little jilted. She was his wife. She shared his name and when they were alive, his music and love. They shared a daughter who, thankfully, had their best qualities. Imelda knew that their relationship was complicated and rocky but she would have felt better if she knew where they stood. And then, right on cue, someone pointed at her and asked, “Who is she?”

She was of no consequence to the soon-to-be-forgotten skeletons but she was with Hector. She was the one who cried over his form as he died. She was the woman to whom Hector looked at with nothing but admiration and love for. And since she showed up when he died and came back, it made her a person of interest with Hector’s makeshift family.

“This is my…” Hector stopped and looked at Imelda. Was it too soon to say that she was his wife? “This is Imelda,” he said, not wanting to put her on the spot. “She’s…she’s very dear to me.”

That answer was enough to satisfy the soon-to-be-forgotten skeletons. Any further questions they might have had were disrupted by a wisp of gold floating through the air. A hush fell over the lively
skeletons and a moment of silence was held. Then, after the moment was over, everyone moved on with their lives like nothing had happened.

Hector sighed and said to Imelda, “I’ll go collect my things. I won’t be long.”

She was fine standing where she was. If anyone asked her, she was totally fine. Yep! She wasn’t worried about anything. She certainly wasn’t worried how someone had succumbed to the Final Death just seconds ago like Hector had. It wasn’t like she was reminded how Hector had died in her arms or how his very existence was tethered to Coco’s dying memory. She wasn’t and it was ridiculous to suggest such a thing. Imelda went after Hector to his home because she thought that he might need help packing up his personal belongings.

She pulled back the curtain that acted as Hector’s front door. What she saw broke her heart. Hector lived in a single room, what she dared to call a home. There were holes in the floor. A faded path from pacing about was worn into the aged planks. There were scribbles of plans to get across the Marigold Bridge and supply lists. On the north wall, written in big letters, was the message: NO MUSIC.

“This is your home?”

Hector quickly tried to discreetly pick up his modest home. “It’s not much but it’s, eh, it’s not much…” He kicked the junk away, trying to hide it from Imelda’s keen sight. “

“Can I help you carry anything?” she offered.

“Eh, I kinda got everything right here,” Hector said, showing off a purple bandana.

“That’s it?”

“N-No, I’ve also got my um, uh…”

“Your what?”

“My wedding ring,” Hector said as fast as possible. “It doesn’t fit anymore cause, you know, no flesh but I…,” he sighed. “I couldn’t just…”

“You kept it?” Imelda asked, viewing the gold ring. “After all this time?”

Hector nodded. “I-It kept me going.”

“I see…” Imelda nodded. “We should, we should get going, Hector.”

“Yes, Imelda.”

Hector bid a fond farewell to his makeshift family but swore to visit as soon as things settled down. He and Imelda descended upwards to the vibrant center of the Land of the Dead. They didn’t speak during their walk. Silently, Imelda reached for his hand. Her fingers curled around his and she gave a little squeeze. Hector squeezed back.
The walk home was filled with a different kind of silence. A twinge of tension was still in the air but it was nearly smothered by the genuine affection, small but growing, between them. They knew it would be a while before they were anywhere near the level of intimacy that they had once shared when they were alive. However, the simple act of holding hands was enough for now.

The bond that was broken was slowly being repaired and speaking of repairs, Imelda couldn’t help but notice every bit of damage Hector, ever limping, had acquired. The leg was one of the many bits of fragility that Hector had. His ribs were broken, his bones had nicks and pieces missing, and that was to say nothing of the general state of his bone color. She wanted to fix him up. It was in her nature to do so. If she saw a problem, she would fix it and Hector had through the years had problems on top of problems.

The strain of guilt filled her. Hector only had problems because she made him so. Imelda groaned. There was no good way to go about this. She had to fix this but how? She eyed the shops that they passed. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that Hector would be overjoyed with new clothes but to spring it on him? Would he take offense? He seemed comfortable in what he was wearing now. She didn’t want him to think that she was embarrassed to be seen in public with him.

She could never be embarrassed by him, she lo….love wasn’t the right word. She cared for him immensely and maybe someday she could, no, she would love him again. But now came the matter of patching things up quite literally in Hector’s case. There had to be a way to gently coax him into fixing his bones. It couldn’t have been easy walking about in his current state.

But who was she to even suggest such a change? She shared his name and had no claim to his heart. Imelda was actually surprised Hector had was holding her hand and then, just as she was reflecting on their relationship, Hector had fallen and Imelda thought she saw a trace of gold.

“Hector!”

Her mind froze with terror. This couldn’t be happening. Hector had been torn from life once already. Miguel had saved him. He brought Hector back from the dead and Coco had sustained her father’s memory. He was remembered. He was safe. He couldn’t die again. She didn’t think she could take it if she saw him die again.

“I’m okay,” he said cheerfully. “I tripped.” He pointed to his leg with was standing alone. Imelda groaned. She couldn’t take this anymore.

“Are you okay?” Hector asked.

Imelda stared at him and shook her head. “No, I’m not.”

Hector winced. “Is it me?”

“No! No, it’s not…it’s…it’s,” she groaned. “It’s everything. Hector, I didn’t think that you would ever be back.”

“Imelda, I’m --“

“Don’t say you’re sorry, please,” she begged of him. “It’s not your fault. Well, not entirely anyway…I’m still hurt that you left, Hector. Coco spent days at the window waiting for your next letter and-and you never came home! She cried and I what was I meant to tell her? That her father
didn’t love us? That he didn’t care about us? Hector, I spent so long hating you and wondering why you didn’t come home. I wrote to Ernesto and he said that you were in a bar with a woman and I—

Hector softly held Imelda by her shoulders. “I would never do that to you.”

“I didn’t know what to think,” she admitted. “I wondered what happened to you. If you were happy wherever you were and now that I know what really happened, I need to know —”

“Yes?” Hector nodded earnestly.

“- if you forgive me.”

“What?”

“I treated you terribly. Worse than terribly – I…I nearly got you killed and I-I need you to know that I never wanted you to be hurt or to die, I just wanted you out of my life.”

“I can leave!” It wasn’t what he wanted but if it made her happy then it was worth it.

“I don’t want you to leave! I never want you to leave again! Hector, do you forgive me?”

“Of course, I do!” He exclaimed. “All I’ve ever wanted was to be with you and Coco. I want us to be a family again.” He hugged her. “I missed you, Imelda.”

“I missed you too. Can we start over?”

“Sure!” he cleared his throat and stuck his hand out. “Hector Rivera, musician.”

“Imelda Rivera, shoemaker.” She shook his hand.

“It’s an honor to meet you. Um, Imelda?”

“Yes?”

“Can you get my leg for me?”

She laughed lightly. “Yes. Hold on.”

As she fetched his leg, Imelda knew that she and Hector were on the right path to their reconciliation.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

I know that skeletons can’t give off body heat but I’m a writer and a romantic one at that. Let me have my fake body heat moment, okay?

The day after Day of the Dead was a lazy day. No one did anything but in the Rivera household, this did not hold true. Everyone was normally in the store or in the back preparing the holiday rush. There was no time to rest when there was a sale to be made or a shoe to be created. However, in the wake of what had to be the most exciting and stressful Day of the Dead in Rivera family history, everyone took a day off. The Riveras stayed home and rested as Imelda requested. With Ernesto who knows where she preferred to keep her family close.

Even as she got ready for bed, Imelda knew where everyone in her family was. Oscar and Felipe were watching soccer, Julio was asleep in his bedroom, Rosita was chatting on the phone, and Victoria was reading in her bedroom. And as for Hector, he was in the recently cleaned guest bedroom. It wasn’t perfect but it was a step-up from where he was previously living. It had everything that he needed. A soft bed, a writing desk, and a small but fully functional bathroom that – Imelda stopped brushing her hair.

She had forgotten to bring him extra towels. Pulling her hair back, Imelda grabbed a few spares from the linen closet and brought them to the guest room. The door was open just a crack and she could see Hector undressing inside. One of his ribs fell off and she was reminded just how badly the years had been for Hector. All those cracks and broken bones…she wondered how he was able to get around.

Imelda stepped back and knocked on the door. She heard Hector gasped and hurry to pick up his rib.

“Come in.”

He’d cover himself with a bathrobe but she still saw the rib not so discreetly hidden under the pillows. “I thought you could use some extra towels.”

“Thank you!” Hector gladly took them. “They’re very soft.”

“Rosita made them. She’s very talented. Her stitch work is one of the best.”

“Ah, Rosita that’s your – mine – um…how is she related to us?”

“She’s Julio’s sister,” Imelda explained.

“And Julio is…?”

“Coco’s husband.”

“H-Husband.” Hector sat down on the bed. “She got married,” he said breathlessly.
Imelda sat down next to him. “Are you okay?”

“I keep seeing her as a little girl and now she’s all grown up and married…” Hector sniffled and blinked back his tears. “It feels like only yesterday I had her on my knee playing songs and-and now she got married…”

“It was a beautiful wedding,” Imelda remembered fondly.

“I bet it was,” he said wistfully. “Um, I think I’m going to go to bed. Thank you for the towels, Imelda. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Hector.”

She left him in his room and retired to her own. Sleep did not come easy for her. Imelda’s dreams were harsh and cruel. She relived the scene backstage. Hector was in her arms and he was dying. His body was destroyed piece by piece and there was nothing she could do. She held onto him as long as she could before he was taken from her. Over and over again, she was forced to watch him die. Imelda woke up in the middle of the night, shaking and gasping for air.

“Hector!”

She bolted from her bed to the guest bedroom. Before she grabbed the doorknob, she pulled herself back.

“Easy, Imelda,” she told herself. “Easy…”

She steadied herself and thought very carefully about what she was about to do. She was not going to wake Hector up to confirm that he was still amongst the dead. She was simply just going to confirm that he was sleeping well. After all, he was her guest. If he asked, she was just making sure that his pillows were soft and that he had enough towels. Yes! That’s it! Towels. That would be her escape if he asked.

Quietly, she opened the guest room door and she peeked inside. Upon the bed, the sheets were disturbed but Hector was gone. Imelda all but collapsed. Her bone marrow ran cold. She went to his empty bed and could still feel his warmth and presence.

“Oh! Oh, Hector…”

She grasped the sheets, trying to hold to whatever essence she could of him but there was nothing left. Imelda sobbed. She recalled how weak he had been when the Final Death had him in its clutches. He couldn’t walk. He couldn’t lift his head up. He’d been so weak. Imelda wondered if he laid dying in the guest bed if he tried to speak or call out for help. She wouldn’t have heard him. They were a few feet away from each other and she left him to die. Imelda shook her head. She couldn’t stand to be in the room or in the house any longer. She needed to escape this horrible room where Hector had perished.

Still in her nightgown, Imelda descended the stairs. She didn’t know where she was going but she was going to get as far away from it all as she could. Imelda went past the kitchen and there she saw Hector sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water in his hand.

“Hector!” she wanted to run to him, to embrace and kiss him, and to give him a good smack with her boot for scaring her.

“I…I couldn’t sleep,” he answered softly.
“Oh…” she put a hand over her chest where her heart would be. “I thought….I thought you were…”

“What?”

“Gone,” Imelda replied. “You weren’t in your bedroom and…”

“I’m not going anywhere, Imelda,” Hector said.

“I didn’t mean that kind of gone, Hector.”

“Oh! Oh…I, um, I’m going to try to not do that too.”

Imelda sat beside him. “How do you know? Can you tell?”

“It’s um, it’s hard to explain.”

“Can you try to explain it?” she asked. She had to know the signs. Even if there was nothing she could do to prevent it, she wanted to have the knowledge to prepare her for the Final Death.

“Please, Imelda,” Hector all but begged. “Don’t make me talk about it. I-I don’t want to talk about it.”

She saw the fear in his eyes. “Why couldn’t you sleep?”

He looked at her and frowned. “I thought it was happening again. I had a dream that I was dying. It felt so real, I thought I was fading away,” he mumbled. “Ay, Imelda, I don’t want to die.” Hector’s voice quivered. “I don’t want to die…”

Imelda didn’t know how long Coco’s memory would preserve him but she decided that the best way to avoid death was to focus on life.

“Come with me,” she said.

“Where are we going?”

“To live.”

She made it a point to have the family photos around. Each Day of the Dead, she was given photos of their family from when she was alive to well after she was dead. She kept them all in multiple scrapbooks. Imelda and Hector sat down on the couch and poured over the numerous family albums. They talked long into the night. In photos and snapshots, Hector was able to live through key family moments that he never got to see.
Rosita was a morning person. She liked to rise with the sun and watch the world come alive. Rosita watched the Land of the Dead slowly move into the bustling world that she knew from her balcony. The mystical spirit animals filled the blue sky. It was a dazzling sight to see the alebrijes fly. However, as much as she adored standing out on her balcony and watching life or rather death as it were happen, Rosita knew that as soon as the sun came up, it was time to get to work.

It came as a shock to everyone in the family when Imelda had decided to not open up shop but given the startling events that came with the latest Day of the Dead, the rest was well deserved. The day after it, everyone was still out of it. Everyone suffered from exhaustion. Getting home safely, pushing the crowds away, and giving Hector the privacy and rest that he desperately needed took a lot out of everyone. But as much as she liked to rest and sleep the day away, it would be nice getting back to work. She had a fantastic idea for new sandals that she wanted to run by Imelda. Leaving her room, Rosita descended downstairs and found the kitchen to be barren.

Imelda wasn’t there which was shocking. Imelda was always the first up. Rosita wasn’t actually sure that Imelda ever slept. No matter what, she was the first one up in the morning and the last one to go to bed.

“Imelda?”

Where was she? Rosita hadn’t heard her in her bedroom when she passed by. If she wasn’t in the kitchen and she wasn’t in the bedroom, then where was the matriarch of the Rivera family? Rosita passed the kitchen and the living room when she stopped and gasped. Imelda and Hector were asleep on the couch. Imelda was leaning against him and cradling the arm that he had wrapped around her waist. He was resting his head against her’s.

Rosita gasped and giggled. She knew that Imelda had intense, mostly negative, feelings for Hector but this, oh, this was wonderful. She didn’t think that after so long she and Hector would be so cozy together. It was rare to see the matriarch of the family so calm and relaxed. It was adorable and precious and Rosita wanted the best for the two. She hadn’t been this emotionally invested in two people being happy together since her brother was hopelessly in love with Coco.

Imelda slowly woke up. Upon realizing that she was using Hector as a pillow, she quietly tried to disentangle herself from him, only to realize that Rosita was also in the living room with the biggest smile on her face.

“Don’t mind me!” Rosita said a bit too fast. “You two go on.”

“Hector?” Imelda said, sighing. “I have to get up. I need to get started on breakfast.”
“Five more minutes,” he mumbled, pulling her back into his arms.

“I’m taking off my boot.”

Hector’s eyes shot open and he let go of her like she was fire. “I’m awake!”

Imelda rolled her eyes and stretched. Her back was killing her. Hector was a marvelous man, father, and musician but not a very good pillow.

“Imelda, I can handle breakfast,” offered Rosita, who hadn’t stopped smiling. “Why don’t you go for a walk? It’s a beautiful morning.”

“Are you sure?”

“More than sure,” she pushed.

“I can help you in the kitchen, Rosita. I’m pretty handy,” Hector said, removing his hand for effect.

“No, why don’t you go with her. Spend some time together. I’ll get breakfast started. Don’t worry about it!”

With Rosita pushing so hard and her back killing her, Imelda decided to go for that walk. She and Hector got dressed and left the house saying goodbye to Rosita.

“We’ll be a few minutes,” Imelda said.

“Just a walk around the block,” added Hector.

“Have fun, you too,” Rosita grinned. “Take your time.”
Hector loved Imelda.

He loved the way she smiled, the way she laughed, and he loved the way that she once she put her mind to something she never gave up. He loved the way she pouted and danced and singed. He loved her ups and downs. He loved her more than he could ever put into words or songs. Hector even loved Imelda when she didn’t love him back but now she did or partly loved him back. He couldn’t get over the fact that she chose someone like him when they were alive and now when she could have any man in the Land of the Dead, she chose him again. Hector was determined not to screw up his second and final chance with Imelda. He didn’t think he could take it if he lost her again. So, he swore up and down that he would never do anything to jeopardize his chance. Whatever he needed to do to win back her trust and love, he would do it – no questions asked. He was NOT going to mess up with Imelda. Which was why he was contemplating whether it was safe or not to hold her hand.

They held hands before but it was Imelda who reached out first. It was okay for physical contact if she reached out but if he did it…oh, that was a grey area. This whole process of being with Imelda but not being with her was a grey area. He never thought that he would be estranged from her but now they were back together again! Sort of, kind of…it would take some time. They would need to take baby steps. Holding hands was a baby step but he was unsure if it was something that she would permit him to do. Hector internally agonized over this dilemma. If he reached out and held her hand and she rejected him, he would destroy what little progress they had made together. He was frozen over his choice. Thankfully, he didn’t have to make that choice.

Wordlessly, Imelda reached over and held his hand.

Hector’s anxiety disappeared in an instant. Holding her hand meant the world to him. He looked over and smiled. She smiled back and everything was wonderful.

“HEY! THERE HE IS!” someone shouted.

And then suddenly everything wasn’t so wonderful.

A mob of busybodies and reporters and new-found fans rushed Hector. They grabbed at him and pulled him away from Imelda. Hector barely registered that he was essentially being kidnapped but Imelda who was hypersensitive to losing him was already running after the mob and Hector. The mob was faster and rougher than the crowds she had tamed before in the past. And she wasn’t wearing her good boots this time either…

Imelda pushed and shoved her way through. The crowd was insistent on keeping her out. They didn’t care about her. All the crowd cared about was Hector. They propped him in front of news backdrop. They blinded him with their lights and cameras. They stuck microphones in his face and
shouted questions at him.

“ARE YOU THE TRUE CREATIVE GENIUS BEHIND ‘REMEMBER ME’?”

“What is your relationship with Ernesto De La Cruz?”

“How do you know the Rivera family?”

“How do you know that child Miguel?”

“Why haven’t you written more songs?”

“Where have you been this entire time?”

“Who did you write ‘Un Poco Loco’ for?”

Through the daze, Hector only heard the question about ‘un poco loco’.


He saw her smile.

“Who is the love of your life?”

“Imelda Rivera,” he answered, never taking his eyes off her. “I love her. She…She’s my wife.”

The crowd went crazy and Imelda disappeared into the sea of lights.

“Where is your wife?”

Hector would have liked to known the same thing. He scanned the crowd for her, for any sign of her but he couldn’t find her.

“I don’t – I don’t know….we were married for-for some time but we, uh, we had a falling out.”

“What happened?”

Hector flinched. “I left-“

The press didn’t care why. An artist with a disruptive home life was fodder for the news. The tide of new fans and adoring public changed on Hector. How could someone who claimed that they had found the love of their love ever leave them?

“You left your wife?”

“Why?”

“Were there martial problems?”

“Where is your wife now?”

“Is she still alive?”

“NO! I’M DEAD!” Imelda shouted. She pushed and shoved her way through the crowd to Hector. She sat down next to him and hugged him. He looked so much worse than before. Those brutes that had dragged him, they didn’t know about his brittle bones. They broke a rib of his. Hector nervously
smiled.

“Brittle bones,” he shrugged. “What can you do?”

All of Imelda’s rage and fury was turned onto the press. “HELLO!” she seethed. “I’m Imelda Rivera. I’m Hector’s wife.”

“WHY DID YOUR HUSBAND LEAVE YOU?!”

She feigned a sugary sweet smile. Under the table, she wrapped her hand around his. “Oh, yes, my husband did leave me. And, of course, by left, I mean he was murdered. He was murdered by Ernesto de la Cruz who also tried to murder Miguel, our great-great-grandson.”

Imelda defended Hector’s character. She was a regular knight in shining armor. Effortlessly, she shot down every question that even dared to suggest that Hector was not a loving husband or father. Imelda would never let anyone ruin his reputation again. Hector had been through enough and she was putting an end to it.
Chapter 10

Imelda ended the impromptu press conference in a flash. The reporters wanted more but Imelda shuffled Hector away. She shielded him from the camera flashes and god-awful fans who grabbed at him wanting more and more. She took off her shoe and smacked their hands away. But Hector’s fans were ravenous for even a glimpse of his brilliance. They pursued Hector and Imelda to the point where they were running away from the mob. They had to hide in alleyways to avoid the press. The reporters ran by them and never saw them. Catching their metaphorical breath, Hector and Imelda rested.

“Are you okay?” Imelda asked.

Hector was a little more broken than before. His rib was barely hanging on. Hector sighed and removed the rib himself. It was better to snap it off now than have it come off later at some misplaced moment. The rib came off with a gentle snap and held it in his hand.

“I’ve been better,” Hector answered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think-”

“But Imelda-”

“No!” She took his rib for him and placed it in her dress pocket. “You did not ask for this! What kind of person asks to be assaulted or hurt? It is not your fault, Hector!” He didn’t believe her. She could see it in his eyes. “Hector, it is not your fault.”

“I don’t think I’m made for the spotlight, Imelda…” he mumbled.

“We’ll find a way to deal with this,” she said, determined to bring some peace and stability to her family’s life. “When we get back to the house, we’ll put your rib back on, alright?”

“Duct-tape doesn’t work very well for ribs,” Hector said as Imelda led the walk back home. “I usually leave them off.”

That stung Imelda but she would find a way to put Hector back together again with or without duct-tape. For now, they were going back home.

“Thank you for saving me back there,” Hector said as he slipped his hand into her’s without fear. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Those vultures have no right to our family’s history.”

Hector smiled brightly.

“What?” Imelda asked. “What is so funny?”

“Our family,” Hector said. “You said ‘our family’.”

“Ay, don’t get any ideas,” she said, good-naturedly. “I’m still angry.”

Hector’s smile disappeared. “At me?” he worriedly asked.

“No, at those vultures! Who does that to anyone?” she raged. “Animals at the zoo are better behaved.”
“I could go stay back at my place. They wouldn’t look twice for me there.”

She knew it was his home for 96 years and that was where most of his family was but if she didn’t want him to go back. Hector had been gone from his family for too long. She wasn’t going to give up on having an afterlife with him because of some idiots with a camera.

“We’ll figure something out. Maybe you could go incognito for a while? Until the fuss dies down?”

“I’m good at disguises! I make one fabulous Frida Kahlo.”

“I know, Hector. Come, let’s get back to our family.”

Hector was grinning like a fool the entire walk home. They had to go the long way to avoid the press and media but neither minded as it gave them more time to figure out how to adjust to Hector’s status as the hottest celebrity in the Land of the Dead.

“I could become a hermit,” Hector suggested.

“No…that means I would never get to see you,” Imelda shot his idea down. “What if we moved?”

“But that’s your home!”

“Home is where my family is and you are my family.”

Her response caught Hector off guard which suited Imelda fine because she liked to have the last word in conversations. Imelda and Hector snuck onto the Rivera property. They walked on the fence and hopped onto the roof. From the roof, they dropped onto Imelda’s balcony and went inside. The other members of the family were in the kitchen watching Hector’s interview.

“Go, Imelda!” Julio cheered.

“Show them who is the boss!” whooped Rosita.

“Ay, look at her go!” laughed Victoria. “She’s not letting them get anywhere.”

Oscar shushed them all down. “Be quiet! We can’t hear!”

“How long have they been showing the interview?” asked Imelda.

Realizing that she was home, the matriarch of the Riveras’ was practically tackled by her family.

“You were amazing!” Oscar and Felipe chorused.

“You were so brave!” Rosita hugged her. “Ay, this calls for a celebration! What do you want to have?”

“Eh, nothing, I-“

“Do you still like arroz Cubana?” Hector asked suddenly.

“Arroz Cubana! I haven’t made that in forever!”

“How long have they been playing the interview?” Imelda asked again, hoping to get an answer this time.

“Not long,” said Oscar.
“It’s on its second rotation,” answered Felipe. “But it’s been very popular. The stations will be showing it often.”

“Yay, I’m popular…” Hector groaned, sitting down at the table with his head resting in his hands. He never aspired to be popular or to achieve fame like Ernesto had. All he ever wanted was the means of supporting his family through the music that he loved. But this madness, the press, the questions, the broken ribs was too much for him to take. Neither Imelda nor the rest of the Riveras deserved to have their afterlives splashed on the front of some tabloid. Living in the slums was looking better by the minute. Imelda was not blind to Hector’s distress.

“Riveras!” she called out. “It is time for a family meeting.”
Family meetings in the Rivera household usually were about business. After all, the family’s general household had stayed the same size since Victoria died but that body count did not include Hector. Nor did it take into account his new-found celebrity status. Their home was fine for shoe-makers but not for famous musicians.

“Riveras,” Imelda announced at the head of the table. “We’re moving!”

“Wait, Imelda,” Hector protested. “We can’t move. T-This is your home, this is everyone’s home. The reporters will go away…eventually. I can go back to my house in the –“

“Slums?” Imelda finished. “Where you barely had a roof over your head? Hector, you’re part of this family. No one is living away.”

“Besides, it’s about time for a move,” supplied Felipe.

“What?” Hector asked.

“It happens every couple of decades,” helped Oscar. “Families get bigger and people need their own rooms and space. Everyone moves up sooner or later.”

“Or down,” pointed out Victoria with just a hint of ice in her voice. “People do get forgotten. Families get smaller.”

Hector nervously laughed. “I could, I mean, are we sure about this?”

“It’s worth the fuss,” said Rosita.

“Hector, you’ve been out-voted. Rosita, can you start looking for places?”

“Si!”

“And now on how to avoid the daily invasions of our personal privacy.”

Victoria raised her hand. “I vote for Pepita.”

“I do as well,” agreed Julio. “One look at her and they’ll never bother us again.”

“That’s great for the private property but I enjoy talking walks with Hector,” voiced Imelda.

He felt a little burst of pride bloom in his chest. She liked being with him. They were making progress.

“You look homeless,” Victoria said. “You could try wearing normal clothes. Then people wouldn’t recognize you.”
Imelda ignored the dig but was silently relieved that someone else had brought up Hector’s state of dress. “She’s right, Hector. We can get you new clothes.”

He frowned. “No,” he showed off his purple vest proudly. “These are the clothes I was buried in. I’ve got a lot of good memories with them.”

“I know but maybe for the time being?” Imelda gently suggested. Her hands were itching to get his clothes off and have him wear something a little nicer. Her concern was coming from a place of love. Hector’s outward appearance reflected the years of neglect he had gone through. It wasn’t wrong to want him to have nice clothes, was it? No, it wasn’t. But there were certain ways to go about bringing change. It wasn’t the way she wanted to get Hector into something nicer and cleaner but what the hell, it would do.

“Okay,” Hector said, giving in.

“Oscar? Felipe? Can you lend him something?”

“Sure,” answered Oscar.

“Follow us,” said Felipe.

Oscar and Felipe’s bedroom was nothing how Hector would thought it would be. He imagined that the twins’ room would be identical in every single way but it was vastly different. One side of the room belonged to Oscar. It was decorated in red and white. There were red and white soccer jerseys and other soccer memorabilia. He proudly rooted for the Diablos. Felipe’s side contrasted the red with its scheme of blue and white. His team was the Angeles.

“Pretty big sports fans, huh?”

Hector never had the chance to get to know Imelda’s side of the family. For the longest time, he thought that she was like him: an orphan but this wasn’t the case. Oscar and Felipe had left Santa Cecilia for university and Imelda whose care was left to the Church like many after the revolution, grew up fine. She bared no resentment for her brothers and was proud that they had gotten an education during a time where many did not have the chance. It didn’t stop her from missing them terribly while they were away though. With school breaks, they would be back and life in the fractured Reyes household would be joyous but all too soon, Oscar and Felipe would leave again and Imelda would be on her own.

“Everyone loves the Diablos,” said Oscar.

“Only an idiot supports the Diablos,” whispered Felipe to Hector. “Everyone who can appreciate the fine art that is soccer knows to root for the Angeles.”

“Everyone who likes losing roots for Angeles,” remarked Oscar.

“You’re just sore because we won the Land of the Dead World Cup this year!”

“You won on a technicality!”

“The best kind of win!”

“Uh, guys?”
“WHAT?” they shouted.

“Clothes?”

They put their rivalry aside and opened their closet door. “Do you have a color preference?” They asked.

“Uh, I like purple but I’m not too picky.” He sat down on Oscar’s bed. Hanging on the wall was a photo of him and Felipe, holding up their diplomas. The photo above it was of them passing their bar exam. “You guys were lawyers?” Hector asked, noting “Back in the day, yes,” state Felipe proudly.

“We were going to open up a law firm. Rivera y Rivera but eh, it didn’t work out.”

“What happened?” Hector asked.

Felipe discreetly elbowed his brother. “Uh, Imelda sent a telegram and asked for some help with the store. Nothing major, mind you. Minding the front of the store once a month – that sort of thing,” he shrugged. “We never left.”

“Let’s face it, shoemaking is better than law.”

“But you became lawyers because you loved the law?” Hector pursued.

Both Oscar and Felipe recoiled at the idea. “NO! Are you kidding us?”

“Do you know how boring it is?” Oscar asked. “To sit behind those dusty books and find loopholes day in and day out? Show-making lets us be creative! We can do whatever we want and don’t have to look for a way to be right.”

“Imelda had and still has a head for business. She gave us some restrictions but we have the freedom to do whatever we want,” said Felipe. “There’s no pressure to always be right.” They searched through the closet for something purple but had no luck. “Would you be okay with blue?”

“Yes. It doesn’t matter too much to me. I can go without.”

“When was the last time you wore a shirt?” Oscar asked.

“The one I was buried in was stolen decades ago. What? I don’t need a shirt. It’s not like I have anything to show off anymore,” Hector said, taking off his vest.

“Put on a shirt,” Felipe said, handing him a blue striped one identical to his and his brother’s.

Hector did put on the shirt. He also was given new pants too. It felt weird to be wearing new clothes after so long but it nice nonetheless.

“How do I look?” Hector asked.

“Like a Rivera shoemaker,” Oscar and Felipe answered.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Julio and Hector have a chat.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finding a new home was more difficult than any of the Riveras ever anticipated. As soon as people found out that it was their home where the famous and tragic songwriter Hector lived, people were fighting to see inside of the house. They had no interest in buying but gawking at where he and the other Riveras lived. Those who were serious buyers weren’t much better. While they did express interest, their terms in buying the house came with odd requests.

“Can we keep the bed where Hector slept?”

“I want to know where Hector Rivera composed his masterpieces! That room has to be mine! Everything else can go.”

One buyer jokingly asked, “Does Hector come with the house?”

Needless to say, the trappings of fame were a special kind of hell for the Riveras. Hector suffered the brunt of it. His disguise as a Rivera shoemaker did help in avoiding the press and his fans but it did nothing to relieve his anxiety in knowing that there were people in the Land of the Dead who were following his every move and wanted a piece of him. He could often be seen at Imelda’s side, expressing his unease at moving and disrupting everyone’s lives.

“It shouldn’t have to be like this,” he said after one disastrous showing. The prospective buyers just wanted to see him, interview him, and unsettlingly enough, know every detail of his death. Imelda had quite literally kicked them out of the house.

“It’s not your fault,” Imelda said automatically. It was practically Imelda’s catchphrase the past few weeks. Whenever someone got a little too personal with Hector or the family, Hector was prone to blaming himself. After spending most of his afterlife blaming himself for never returning home, it was an easy transition to place the blame on himself for the family’s struggle to move. Imelda was intent on changing this. “What do we say?”

“I can control me, I can’t control other people,” Hector recited.

“Exactly. You cannot control the way these people act towards you, or me, or the rest of the family.”

Imelda was right. It was a rare occasion that she wasn’t right but it didn’t stop Hector from feeling guilty about the way potential buyers came into Imelda’s home. The next day, a woman, fabulously wealthy and dressed to the nines descended upon the Rivera household. She flaunted her beauty, her wealth, and her presence as the realtor showed her around.

“Oh! How cozy! How homey!” The woman saw Hector and said with a too wide of a smile and devilish glint in her eyes. “How divine.” Like a predator going in for the kill, she cut across the room, outright ignoring the realtor’s introduction of Imelda and went straight to Hector. “And you must be
That was the final straw for Imelda. She threw the woman and the realtor out of the house and declared, “I WILL DO THIS MYSELF!”

And Imelda did. The next day, she sent everyone out of the house and told them not to come back until six that night. It suited most of the members of the Rivera family. After all, they had a business to run and what was another hour at the store? But for Hector, even an extra hour away was a delicate thing. He was rarely seen away from Imelda and although they could hardly be called intimate together, Imelda had declared herself as his wife and Hector professed that Un Poco Loco was a love song meant for her. But somehow the press found out that they slept in separate beds. This gave rise to a number of questions as to the exact relationship between Hector and Imelda.

Rumors were thrown about that they were together but in the process of divorcing. Or that she wasn’t really his wife but someone he hired so he wouldn’t have to deal with desperate fans pursuing him. Or that she had blackmailed him and was using him to promote the shoe business. None of the Riveras paid much attention to the wildly inaccurate rumors.

“It’s like being in a bad telenovela!” exclaimed Victoria on the way to work.

“Or a good one depending on your tastes,” laughed Victoria.

“I’ll be happy when this is over,” said Oscar.

“Me too but did you see the way Imelda threw that woman out? That was amazing!” grinned Felipe. “It was like she was flying!”

Hector trailed behind Oscar and Felipe. He didn’t speak. He was busy keeping a low profile. Every laugh, exclamation, and flash of light made him jumpy as if any moment reporters would descend upon him and harass him.

“Senor Rivera?” Julio nudged Hector. “Are you alright?”

He nodded and fidgeted. “I just wanna get to the store and off the streets.”

“We’re nearly there. It’s another’s block and then you can stay in Imelda’s office. I’ll see you later around lunchtime.”

“Wait, you’re not going with us?”

“Ay, no,” Julio shook his head. “I’ve got to pick up some leather from a supplier. We used to get delivery but Imelda wants to make sure that the quality is perfect.”

Hector took a deep breath. “Can I tag along with you today?”

“Uh…” The question threw him off. “Sure, but I’ll be taking the trolley. Are you sure that you wanna stay out? The store’s not that far away.”

“No, I’m okay,” replied Hector who was visibly not okay. “I wanna ask you some questions.”

He didn’t know what to expect from Hector. Coco never spoke much about him and all he knew from Imelda was that he never came home. Julio would admit that in the beginning when he fell in love with Coco, he disliked her nameless father who saw fit to abandon her. She was Coco! She had a kind heart, she was witty, she had the most beautiful laughter and a smile that could light up the room. How anyone, how any father could walk away from his only child, was beyond Julio’s
His opinion of Coco’s father grew even blacker with the arrival of their firstborn. The moment Victoria came into the world, Julio was filled with love and joy for his daughter and hate for Hector. How could he have given up his family for music? When he looked into his daughter’s eyes, Julio knew that music, no matter how much he missed it, was not worth anything in the world compared to staying by his family’s side. Hector could go to hell for all he cared and unfortunately, as fate would have it, Hector was in hell.

For years, he spent hopelessly trying to cross over to see his family. The truth was bitter and Julio regretted that he spent much of his life and afterlife hating a man he never met for a harm that he never caused. It was ridiculous and petty but he knew better now. Julio knew that the man who was murdered at age twenty-one was not the faceless shiftless phantom whom he despised for throwing away his family.

“How did you meet Coco?” Hector asked as they boarded the trolley and took the farthest seat in the back, away from prying eyes and unwanted busybodies.

“Uh, she kicked me in the face.”

“She did what?”

“She was dancing at Mariachi Square,” Julio remembered the summer day where he caught sight of the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Coco Rivera was a flash of color as she twirled like a top. Julio was utterly mesmerized by her. Coco danced without a care in the world and without a clue of where she was going. She did one of her famous high kick as she spun and without meaning to kicked Julio to the ground.

That day, Julio saw stars and love.

He and Coco began a secret courtship. They met at Mariachi square and danced the night away. However, in Santa Cecilia, it was hard to keep a secret from Imelda Rivera. She found out about the dancing and the music and forbade Coco from ever seeing him again. But Julio was in love and what was music compared to being with the love of his life?

“And we were together ever since…until I died, I mean.”

“Wow…did Coco did she ever…?”

“Wonder what happened to you?” Julio guessed. “Yes. She guessed that you died and that’s why you never came back. Imelda and I guessed that you found a different family and that’s why you never bothered to…” He sighed. He was happy to know the truth of his father-in-law’s disappearance but Coco would be heartbroken to know that her father was murdered. “She missed you,” Julio finished.

“I miss her too,” Hector said sadly. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen her.”

Julio paused and realized, “This was the first Day of the Dead that I didn’t get to see her.”

“I’m sorry,” Hector apologized. “How-How was she when you saw her last?”

Julio took off his hat and sighed. “She was loved but not well. Her dementia has gotten worse. It was bad when I died but she doesn’t recognize anyone anymore.”

“How old were you when you died?”
“Sixty-eight. I died in my sleep. How old were you?”

“Twenty-one,” Hector replied. “I died in the streets.”

“I’m sorry,” Julio apologized.

“Why are you sorry? It’s not like you were the one who poisoned me,” Hector laughed.

“No, but I hated you for leaving her,” Julio admitted. “Did you ever regret leaving your family?” He had to know.

“I’ve regretted that decision since the moment that I walked out the door.” Hector buried his head in his hands. “I never should have left.”

“You know, late at night, she would sing ‘Remember Me’,,” Julio said, trying to cheer Hector up.

His father-in-law perked up instantly. “Really?”

“Si. She never forgot about you.”

Chapter End Notes

I love Julio. He is one cool great-grandpa and in general seems to be a chill dude but I always thought that Julio would have some negative feelings towards Hector.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Who's up for some Victoria angst? So, I'm going deep into personal headcanon and wild mass guessing territory here. I don't know how anyone died or whatever but this is what I came up with it. I think this is one of the sadder chapters of this story. Enjoy!

Also, I have checked my inbox, I do see everyone's messages and I will answer them all tonight. Sorry for the delay, I have got a wicked cold.

Victoria was a daddy’s girl.

She loved her mother dearly but it was clear from an early age on which child preferred which parent. Elena was attached to their mother and Victoria was attached to their father. Elena preferred to stay at the store sewing shoes with their mother while Victoria preferred to go with Julio for pickups and deliveries. When Victoria was little, she would ride shotgun in the truck with her father and they would spend the long hours of the drive talking about everything and anything. Those moments of driving and laughing with her father were some of the happiest memories she had.

She loved her father and she could see the love that her family shared for each other. They put each other before anything. It was that love that made Victoria wonder about the grandfather that she never had. Her mother spoke fondly of the man who left when Imelda was out of earshot but after hearing how he just left the family, Victoria had to wonder how much her mother was embellishing. Her grandmother never spoke about the mysterious man who was her grandfather unless it was a lecture.

“He chose music over family,” Imelda would start. “He made his choice. That man is not a part of this family.”

That was enough for Victoria. If that man didn’t want to be with her wonderful loving family then that was fine. It wasn’t really fine though. Her mother missed her father so much. There were days where the mail would come and her mother would search for a letter from a man who no one had heard from in years. Other times, there would be a knock at the door and her mother would look up and think that maybe it was him finally coming home.

It never was.

No one knew it at the time but the hopeful moments that Coco experienced was not the longing of wanting her father but the signs of early onset dementia. She was stuck in her early childhood, constantly reliving the days of wondering when her father was coming home. Coco would get worked up and the agony she would have at being told that he wasn’t coming back hurt everyone. The two people who could calm her down was Imelda and Elena. For Julio, it was a blow. There were many things that he father could do and to not be able to help his own wife hurt him deeply. His and Victoria’s chats on the long drives didn’t carry the usual joviality anymore. The somber undertone of Coco’s mental state would come up before long.

“I don’t know what to do,” Julio sighed as they left Santa Cecilia.
“Mama Imelda does,” Victoria said, age twenty at the time. “Mama Imelda can fix anything!”

Victoria might have overestimated her grandmother’s capability to solve problems of the mind but after seeing her handle any problem that threatened the family or business, what else was she meant to think other than her grandmother could? If ever there was a problem or difficulty in their lives, Imelda would step in and like magic, she would solve it all. There wasn’t anything that Imelda couldn’t do…except avoid death.

Imelda went into the store that warm summer’s morning in 1972 and she died of a heart-attack at her workbench. It was Oscar who found her. He joked, unaware that she was dead, that if she worked any harder she would work herself to death. When she didn’t laugh, he went up to her and gave her a little shake. Imelda slumped over and Oscar screamed. Felipe was the one who found his siblings, one dead and the other a complete and utter mess.

Losing Imelda was hard for everyone. She was the family’s rock. She kept everyone together and her presence was missed by all. Her death affected everyone deeply. None more so than Oscar and Felipe. Oscar never really got over his badly timed joke and in 1975 he died at the same workbench that Imelda passed away at. Well, where one twin went, the other was sure to follow. Felipe died three days later.

Victoria missed her grandmother and her great-uncles. The store was quieter without them. The family was broken up and Coco’s mental state deteriorated. There were days that Coco needed to be reminded that Imelda was dead. Elena was now the only person who could calm down her distressed mother. Victoria and Julio were left out in the cold.

“I miss Mama Imelda,” said Victoria, now thirty-eight, after a long and unbearable bout of silence between the two on their weekly drive.

“I know honey,” Julio said. “I miss her too but everyone has to go sometime.”

It was at that moment that Victoria saw her father not as the young man he always seemed to be but as an old one. His hair had gone completely white and his hands shook. He moved slower than how he used to. Victoria wondered when her father had gotten so old. Fear struck her heart.

“You’re not going to go soon, right?”

“What? No, honey,” Julio said, shaking his head. “I’m going to stick around for as long as I can.”

Julio did mean to stick around but he was tired. When they returned to the store, that strange feeling of exhaustion never left him. It never went away. That night, after saying goodnight to the daughters that he loved and the woman to whom he cherished and adored more than anything, Julio went to sleep and he never woke up.

Coco waking up to his corpse the next morning was just another painful shock to her mental state. She had the worst episode that Elena or Victoria ever saw. Elena was strong and like always, she pulled her mother through. She handled everything with the same kind of determination that Imelda had. Where losing their father made Elena more determined for the family to survive, it had the opposite on Victoria. It killed her when he died. It wasn’t poetic prose but Victoria died from grief. She woke up in the colorful Land of the Dead, scared and alone. There was a Recently Deceased officer, one Diana Guzman, who welcomed her to her new state of death.

“Welcome! Are you Victoria Rivera?”

“Am I?” Victoria gasped.
“Si, you are deceased but do not worry, it’s not bad. Your family is here for you.”

“My family?” she sniffled, which was odd because she lacked a nose but still possessed the ability to do so.

“I’ll send them in,” Officer Guzman. She pressed a button and skeletons walked into the waiting room.

“Victoria?” Julio was the first one to step forward. “Oh, honey, what are you doing here?”

“PAPA!” Victoria sobbed as she hugged her father tightly. She knew the pain that her mother suffered for all those years. She knew now what it was like to lose a father but her loss emboldened the hate that she felt for the nameless man who left her mother. Victoria never forgot the feeling of losing her father and she carried it in her heart as a reminder of what that deadbeat did to her mother. But now, after everything that had happened, the hate in her heart didn’t have a place to go. It was so easy to hate someone.

When she saw her father and Hector return from the pickup, it made her ill to see them joking about. She understood that Hector had been murdered but he left. He still made the choice to leave her mother and that kept the hate in her alive.

“Hola, honey,” Julio greeted as he went to the back of the store.

“Hola, papa,” she said warmly.

“Hola Victoria,” Hector said.

She ignored him and pretended to read her book. Hector followed Julio into the back.

“Is she…”

“She takes after Imelda,” Julio explained.

“Oh…”

Imelda had nursed the mother of all grudges for decades. It was obvious that her family would have it too. It wasn’t just Imelda that Hector had to win over but her entire family as well. As Hector helped Julio put the leather away, he wondered how he was ever going to win over his granddaughter if he couldn’t even get her to say hi to him.
Chapter 14

I don’t know how historically correct it is but when my great-grandmother went to Mexico to visit relatives when she was a teenager, she and her cousins would buy Mexican Hats. They would lick them and stick them to their foreheads and dance and see who could keep theirs on the longest. So, I think I’m in the right time period.

Sitting at the dining room table, Imelda was finishing the last bits of paperwork for the house. She had done it. In less than seven hours, Imelda had sold the house and found a new place to live. Imelda did it without a single person harassing her, her family, or Hector. She signed her name on the dotted line and feeling satisfied with how she successfully avoided the insanity that came with Hector’s celebrity, Imelda decided that she earned herself a little reward.

She was going to buy Mexican Hats.

That was the silly name her of favorite gummy candy. When she was alive, she and Coco would buy them every odd weekend or so. It was their thing. They would snack on them in the evening after dinner and before bed. It was a tiny thing in the grand scheme of things. What was candy when music and a father were banished from their lives? But still, Imelda liked to think that it was a pleasant bump in those early years when stability was an uncertain thing and Hector’s disappearance was a fresh wound in their lives.

The walk to the bodega was a pleasant one. All Imelda could think was how her family was finally getting a fresh start from the vultures that haunted Hector. They were moving to a bigger place at the end of the month. They would have a bigger yard for Pepita, a nice kitchen for their growing family, everyone would get their own shower and room – ah, the rooming situation was a tricky one.

She and Hector were not together yet. She was openly affectionate to him, even more in private but there was still fear. Some days, she would wake up and that emptiness next to her would bring her right back to the first night that Hector had left with Ernesto. She relived that night more times than she would care to recall.

That was the past, she would tell herself on those terrible sleepless nights, Hector isn’t going to leave.

He loved his family and his family loved him. That was the thought that Imelda kept in her mind as she entered the store. As soon as she walked in, she saw her granddaughter, Victoria, stalking through the stacks of the magazine and book section. Imelda could sense trouble in the air. Victoria loved books. She also loved giving reviews of them and the only time she ever got a book was when it was really good or really bad. If it was either, the family was going to be served with a dissertation of exactly why the book was a masterpiece or a complete piece of garbage. Imelda hadn’t heard anything about a new book in a couple of days. Victoria didn’t buy books on the fly. She did her research into what she was getting. To see her beloved granddaughter buying a book out of the blue was worrying.

“Hola, Victoria.”

She gasped and greeted her grandmother warmly. “Hola, Mama Imelda.”
“Anything good to read?”

“No…” Victoria sneered at the lackluster selection. “It’s all garbage.”

“Victoria, is everything alright? You seem a little tense.”

Her granddaughter bristled. “Does it bother you?”

“About what?”

“About Hector,” she answered.

Honesty was the best policy and Imelda embraced it. “It is a little strange to have him back,” she admitted. “But it is a welcomed strangeness.”

Victoria frowned. She had hoped for an ally in Imelda.

“How do you feel about Hector?” Imelda asked.

“I don’t like him. He gets on my nerves. I know he’s your husband but he hurt mama! She spent so long wondering if he was ever going to come back and now that he’s here, it’s…it’s weird.”

Imelda hugged Victoria. “Ay, I know. It is weird.” It was still strange to have Hector referred to her as her husband. She was married to him but it had been so long since either of them were intimate with each other. “And it’ll be weird for a while. I can’t promise that it will be easy but maybe one day it will be. All that I ask is that you give him a chance. You don’t have to call him Papa or hug him or do anything that you don’t feel comfortable doing but you do have to give him a chance, okay?”

She sighed and nodded. “Si, Mama Imelda. I will try.”

“That’s my girl.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Victoria took after Imelda in more ways than one.

Victoria loved her family and now, whether, she liked it or not, Hector was a part of that family. In the weeks following the move into their new home, Victoria saw more and more of her grandfather. Hector insisted on helping, on doing anything he could to be of use. For Victoria, his buzzing around got old quickly. As a result, Victoria spent most of her time at the store. She wasn’t doing it out of spite or rage but because it was what she was comfortable with.

The shoe store was safe and familiar whereas Hector was new and goofy. Victoria wasn’t sure how to handle new and goofy but Imelda did. The stern but loving grandmother was a different person when Hector was around her. She would laugh at old private jokes that hadn’t been uttered in nearly a century. She would almost dance around him when he would speak softly and sweetly to her. It came as a shock to Victoria but she realized that her grandparents were flirting with each other. How badly she wanted to roll her eyes at Hector’s cheesy and clichéd romantic actions but she couldn’t. Hector made Imelda happy and when Imelda was happy, it made Victoria happy. So, for Imelda’s sake, Victoria put up with him.

Once they were settled into the new house, she saw less of Hector. He was still trying to find where he fit in their already secure family system and while he did spend some time at the store, Hector was aware of how Victoria felt about him and thus decided to spend most of his days back at the slums. When Victoria first heard that Hector had gone back to the slums, she thought that he and Imelda had hit a rough patch. This was not the case.

“He misses his family,” Imelda explained one afternoon in the store. “They are dear to him.”

Hector was still very attached to his makeshift family in parts of the Land of the Undead where those who had no family were doomed to be forgotten. He ditched his new clothes and returned to the rags that he was accustomed to wearing. Hector would take different paths to get to the slums and stay for most of the day. He would return to his biological family at the store near closing time when the crowds weren’t as big.

Some days, Hector would come into the store and laugh about a new joke he had heard from one of his cousins or aunts and uncles. Other days, Hector would walk a little more slowly. The bounce in his step was gone and a somber distant look would be in his eyes. Hector never said it but Victoria knew that when he looked like that it was because someone he knew was forgotten.

She wondered how he put up with it. Being forgotten was terrifying. How he could force himself to go back to the slums and watch people that he knew disappear into oblivion was beyond her. But it was one day that as Hector limped into the store that she realized it was because he loved them. Those souls with no one had each other and Hector who through some bizarre miracle survived the Final Death could provide some comfort in a person’s last moments. She knew nothing about being forgotten but she saw the pain that it caused. Victoria remembered the way her grandmother cried when Hector was forgotten. She saw the pain that Hector had when he lost a family member.

Today, that pain was clear and present on Hector as he once more limped into the store. He smiled
sadly at Victoria who was working the floor. She acknowledged him with a polite nod. Hector retreated to what was his corner of the store. Next, to the sandals, he would sit and would play his guitar. He never sang but would strum the strings and provide music for the store’s patrons.

Victoria had to admit it was nice to have music in the store. And while she wholeheartedly appreciated the atmosphere that Hector provided, she wished, just a little, that Imelda would take him clothes shopping. Hector looked like a mess in his rag like clothes. She understood that he carried memories in the clothes that he was buried in but still, he had a home, he was back with the family, he could get new clothes. And shoes too! Victoria inwardly scowled to herself. Hector was married to the Land of the Dead’s finest shoemaker and he went without any kind of footwear! What did that say about their family?

It wasn’t like they didn’t have a few dozen pairs lying about in the house. But where Hector’s overall look was concerned, her normally forward grandmother took a backseat.

“He’s comfortable in what he’s wearing and people do not recognize him,” Imelda would say, “Who am I to force him to change?”

You’re his wife! Victoria wanted to shout. If anyone had the right to say anything to Hector about his clothes then it would be her! But Imelda remained passive. Hector was free to wear what he wanted, when he wanted, and there was nothing she could do about it. Victoria was forced into inaction and it was steadily driving her crazy. She held her tongue from any comments she wanted to say about Hector’s state of dress but the customers that frequented the store did not.

“You shouldn’t let people like that into the store,” said Senor Sanchez as he looked for new boots.

“What?” Victoria asked, looking up from the store’s catalog.

“That man,” he pointed to Hector in his corner, unaware of the small talk surrounding him. “Look at him. You let those kinds of people in and it will bring down your store’s credibility. This is a high-class place. People like him don’t belong here.” He scoffed. “He can’t afford anything, not even an aglet from here.”

“Some people have a rougher afterlife than others,” Victoria gently reminded Senor Sanchez. “They can’t help it.”

He huffed. “He could clean himself up. Don’t they have running water in the bajos?”

“Shh,” Senora Sanchez whispered, “He’ll hear you!”

“So what if he does?” Senor Sanchez asked. “Look at him! Don’t you see how yellow and chipped his bones are? He’s more duct-tape than bone. Don’t you agree, Senorita Rivera?”

“I’m not allowed to insult customers,” Victoria replied, barely holding back the venom in her voice.

“That’s a pity,” said a clueless Senor Sanchez. He looked at Hector and then said, “The sooner he’s forgotten the better. People like him should fade away.”

Faster than anyone in Rivera history, Victoria had her boot off and she struck Senor Sanchez.
I severely underestimated how much people would like Victoria smacking Sanchez. I will answer reviews tomorrow, okay guys? Cool. Have some Imelda being a good grandmother and Victoria still being commander of the Hector protection squad.

The Rivera shoe store was the kind of place where a specific type of clientele would come to. While the Riveras catered to any soul who wanted fashionable and durable footwear, there were few who could appreciate the shine of the leather they used and the way the stitches were oh so lovingly put into every shoe. The patrons that they attracted had manners and money. Or in the case of Senor Sanchez, just money.

The noise that Victoria made when she struck Senor Sanchez was loud enough to be heard throughout the store. Imelda, upon hearing such a noise, ran downstairs from her office. In the storefront, she saw her Hector holding onto his guitar as if his life depended on it as Senor Sanchez ran out of the store with his head in his hands. Victoria who was still cursing after Sanchez with a boot that now had a broken heel in her hands, screeched, “AND DON’T COME BACK!” She slammed the door behind Senor Sanchez and his wife.


Victoria scoffed and fixed her hair as she went upstairs for her lecture. Imelda looked to Hector for some sign as to what caused the scene. Hector held up his hands and shaking his head said, “I don’t know. They were talking and she exploded on him.”

Imelda shook her head and went upstairs to her office where Victoria was muttering angrily under her breath.

“Do you want to tell me why Sensor Sanchez left the store without his head attached or do I have the honor of guessing?” Imelda asked, her tone soft and even.

“He deserved it,” Victoria spat.

“Uh-huh, and what did he do exactly?”

Victoria glanced at her grandmother and back at the floor. “He said some things about Hector.”

“Good things?” Imelda asked, frowning. She knew that her granddaughter wasn’t Hector’s biggest fan but -

“He said that people like Hector should fade away. To be forgotten about,” seethed Victoria.

Imelda was stunned into silence. All at once, she could see Hector, in her arms, fading away into nothing. It was too real for her.

“He comes into the store from the slums, Mama Imelda! You should have seen Hector’s face when he came in! He lost someone today! Someone he knew is gone! Forgotten about forever! And then Sanchez started talking about how Hector looked and that didn’t belong here! HERE! THIS IS THE
RIVERA SHOE STORE! HE’S A RIVERA! HE’S GOT MORE RIGHT THAN SANCHEZ DOES OF BEING HERE!” Victoria raged. “Don’t ask me to apologize to that man because I won’t. You said I could do what I felt comfortable doing around Hector and smacking Sanchez made me comfortable. No one deserves to be forgotten, especially not my grandfather.”

Imelda was lost in her visions of Hector dying. When she came out of it, she rose from her chair, clasped both hands on Victoria’s shoulders and said, “That’s my girl. Take Sanchez off the accounts. Bring up his charges and send him the bill. Tell Oscar and Felipe, Rosita, your father…if they see that man in the family store to kick him out. He’s not welcomed here.”

“Good,” Victoria went to exit the office. She opened the door and walking up to it was Hector. He smiled nervously at his granddaughter.

“Hola, Victoria,” he greeted.

“Hola, Papa Hector,” she answered briskly as she went off to find the rest of the Rivera family. The sooner they got Senor Sanchez out of the accounts, the better.

Hector stepped inside Imelda’s office. He was smiling and said with disbelief, “D-Did you hear that? She called me Papa! She called me Papa Hector!”

“Yes…she did, didn’t she?” Imelda answered softly.


“Hmm? No, no…Hector? Why don’t we go out to lunch? Just you and me.”

“Like a date?” he hopefully asked.

“No as a date,” Imelda smiled. “Let’s go.”
Chapter 17

Going out anywhere with Hector was an interesting experience. People either A: Knew who he was and wanted to ask him a million questions and do a thousand interviews or B: Saw Hector as a broken deteriorating skeleton who looked as though he was on the brink of experiencing the Final Death.

The denizens of the Land of the Dead either held Hector with the utmost admiration or they looked at him with pity or disdain. Imelda wasn’t blind to the looks that he husband garnered. She expected the infatuation and admiration from his throngs of fans. After all, Hector wrote some of the most popular songs in the Land of the Dead. He was a true musician and he played from his heart. The sincerity and love that he put into every song that he wrote could be heard and seen by anyone who ever had the chance to see Hector play. However, it was he pity and the disdain that Imelda saw more of as she and Hector left the shoe store to go to lunch. As they walked the crowded streets, some people would give Hector little looks. She knew what they thought of him and his broken appearance. Imelda could practically hear their thoughts.

Poor man, he’s nearly forgotten.

Another soul on his way to the slums.

Dead man walking.

Imelda scowled. How dare they hold such thoughts about her husband? And yet, Hector’s outward state could not be avoided. His bones were yellow and chipped. He had more broken bones than anyone Imelda knew. In an afterlife that ran on memories, Hector was on the lowest tier of existence. Every impaire step that Hector took was a constant reminder that he was on the Final Death’s doorstep. Imelda gripped his arm a little tighter. She wouldn’t lose him. She just couldn’t, not again.

“Que pasa?” Hector asked, noting her quiet demeanor.

“Nothing,” she answered leaning into him. She had forgotten how nice it was to hold onto someone during a walk. “Do you remember how we walked the streets of Santa Cecilia in the summertime? And we would stop in the cantina and drink until evening?”

“I do. I remember waking up next to you in the mornings and feeling…,” Hector closed his eyes. He could recall those wonderful mornings where it was just him and Imelda and it felt like nothing else in the world matter, “…happy.”

“Are you happy now?”

“I am with you and our family,” he said honestly. “But…”

“What is it?”
“Ah, it doesn’t feel real, you know? Like,” Hector shook his head. “Never mind. It’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. I want to know how you feel, amor.”

It was with amor that Hector was emboldened to confess how he felt. “It feels like a dream when I’m with you,” Hector said wistfully. “But like any moment, I’m going to wake up and you’re going to be gone.”

Imelda carefully thought about his words. She was in no such danger of the Final Death. “I could never leave you.”

“You have, Imelda,” Hector said sadly. “In my dreams. Do you know how many times, I’ve dreamt of being with you, doing what we’ve always done, and then when I wake up, you’re not there? If this is a dream then I don’t want to wake up.”

They arrived at a quaint café on a charming street corner. To make sure that their meal went undisturbed, they ate inside. After they were seated, Imelda reached across the table and held Hector’s hand.

“What can I do to make you feel better?” she asked.

“Can you tell me good morning? And good night?” Hector asked.

“But I already do that,” Imelda said. She had made it a point to say good morning and good night to him for more of her own concerns. After that last scare of finding his bed empty, she didn’t want her last words to him to be something mundane.

“No, like…” Hector took a deep breath. “Like how when we were alive?” He winced and waited for the fallout. But Imelda, careful and calculating Imelda, reviewed the request. How did she say good morning and good night to him? Ah, it clicked in her mind, it was with a kiss. Each morning, just as the sun rose, she would kiss him and as the sun would set, she would place her lips upon his before they would fall asleep.

“I’m sorry,” Hector apologized. “This was stupid. I shouldn’t have said anything. I——”

Imelda reached over the table and softly she kissed him. The kiss was brief, only a flicker of the flame that their romance was had but it was enough to ignite the fiery passion that they felt. The kiss dispelled any fears Hector had that his afterlife with Imelda was but a dream. When the kiss broke, Hector was left breathless and speechless. Imelda kissing him was like having summer after a perpetual and bitter winter. It was warm, inviting, and left you wanting to spend the rest of the day with its loving embrace. It was everything Hector remembered it to be and more.

“Do you feel better?” Imelda asked, barely able to contain her coy smile. It felt good to know that after so many years, she still possessed the ability to make Hector come completely undone.

Hector slowly nodded as he came back to his senses. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“You’re welcome, mi amor,” Imelda said as she looked over the menu. “Do you know what you want?”

“Oh, um…the soup, I guess?” Hector was still trying to recover from her kiss. All he could think about was how she called him ‘love’ and kissed him. He longed to hear those words from her and to know her touch once more that to finally experience it left him out of sorts. “Or I’ll have whatever you’re having. You’ve always had good taste.”
Imelda looked Hector up and down. “Yes, I do.” Even broken and battered, Hector was still the most beautiful man she ever laid eyes on.

The waiter came to collect their orders. Hector differed to Imelda’s better judgment and as the waiter jotted down their order, the unmistakable look of scorn could be seen on the waiter’s face whenever Hector spoke. It was subtle but Imelda saw it nonetheless. The way the waiter’s jaw tightened and his eyes flicked away from Hector’s gaze practically screamed how uneasy the man was serving Hector. It was no great secret why. Hector represented what almost every soul had to face: the cessation of existence. Why would anyone ever want to see the physical representation of the Final Death staring back at as they performed their jobs? But the waiter, though he was practically screaming for Hector to leave via his body language, kept his mouth shut and ran to the kitchen.

Imelda wondered if Hector knew about the glances and looks that he got. Hector was a sweet man, not an idiot. He had to know what everyone else thought of him. Did it bother him? Imelda thought the talks that Victoria had with her regarding Hector’s appearance. Was he scruffy looking? Yes. Was he the epitome of needing some TLC? Yes. Was it her place to bring it up? Eh…that one was muddled still. On one hand, she was his wife but on the other hand, his state was her fault. She left him to rot in the afterlife for years out of spite and hurt. It was her fault.

His fragile bones, his limp, his broken ribs, and amounts of duct-tape used to hold himself together – all of it was on her. She brought him to the brink of death. Oh, yes, Ernesto had murdered him but she was the one who nearly condemned him to a more permanent death. There was nothing she could do for Hector’s delicate bones but for his clothes, she could do something. It wasn’t wrong to want someone that she loved to have nice clothes, was it?

“Imelda?” Hector asked, breaking her line of thought. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

Their food arrived and as they dined in a contented silence, Imelda asked, “Hector? How would you feel if we went clothes shopping after this?”

“Sure, yeah. What did you have in mind?”

“New trousers for you, a few dress shirts, nothing too outrageous but something –“

“Wait, clothes for me?” Hector asked.

“Yes, querido. Who else?” stated Imelda like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

New clothes were a must. Hector deserved nice things and she would be damned if he wasn’t getting a decent wardrobe. Yes, they would go clothes shopping after lunch and make a day of it. She would get him new shirts, new pants, and – Hector didn’t wear shoes. Well, she wasn’t going to let him go barefoot any longer. Where others she was content to buy shirts and pants for her husband, when it came to his footwear, she would take care of that herself.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

You know what my favorite thing is in stories? Where a character who has been through a lot finally gets to sleep. I love that so much.

There were few moments in the hustle and bustle of running the premier shoe shop in the Land of the Dead where the store was peacefully quiet. It was during closing that quiet reigned and peace was in command. Personally, it was Oscar and Felipe’s favorite time. The winding down allowed the twin brothers to breathe and reflect on the day and to relax.

With Hector now a part of the family, he often provided music as the floor was swept and the shoes were returned to their proper place but today, Hector did not play. The resident musician was asleep on the stairwell. He was curled up, arms crossed, body leaning up against the wall as though he was trying to stay out of everyone way. At his feet were scores of bags each containing new clothes for him to wear. Imelda insisted to Hector that they would buy only a few things; the bare essentials as she put it. Those bare essentials turned into a new wardrobe for her semi-estranged husband.

Shopping was easy for Imelda. She had an eye for quality, fabrics, and style but for Hector who spent a majority of his afterlife wearing rags had a different opinion on clothes.

“Am I covered?” Was his qualifier. “Then it’s good enough for me.”

Shopping for clothes didn’t appeal to him but it did for Imelda. She dragged Hector up and down the clothing district and the entire experience left him exhausted. The poor man was tired and neither Oscar for Felipe could deny him the chance to sleep. They put a blanket over him and slipped a pillow between Hector’s head and the unforgiving wall. Perhaps it was under the light of the setting sun but Hector seemed to look worse than ever before. Oscar and Felipe shared a pity look for their brother-in-law.

The man, who through his mastery of music and song, won Imelda over, had seen far better days. It was their observance of Hector, that something had to be said to Imelda. Oscar and Felipe, more than anything in the world, wanted their sister’s happiness. Hector made her happy but as his existence was tethered to Coco’s dying mind. There was no telling how long Coco could keep her dear papa alive. They would have to say something to her. It was a conversation that neither wanted to have but there was no denying the fact that Hector’s afterlife was hanging on by a thread. If the worst should happen and Coco’s dying mind ceased Hector’s existence, they wanted Imelda to be prepared.

“Do you want to start it?” asked Oscar, “Or should I?”

“I’ll start,” said Felipe with a heavy sigh, “I’m the oldest, after all.”

And so it was done. Oscar and Felipe went upstairs to Imelda’s office. The door was open and at her desk was Imelda. She was furiously sketching away on a new design. Imelda gasped as Oscar and Felipe entered.

“I didn’t hear you,” she said. “Come over here, I want to show you something.”
Her brothers leaned over her chair to view Imelda’s hard work. Her sketch was rough but beautiful.

“What do you think?” she asked. “It’s for Hector.”

“We do have shoes that he can have,” said Oscar. “Just a few dozen or so.”

“Ay, I know but I want him to have something from me. I want something special to give him. There’s no sense in him walking around barefoot.”

She was making shoes. Imelda was serious in keeping Hector around for the long term. Oscar nudged his brother to say something. Felipe nodded and started in what was the most difficult talk he would ever have to give in his afterlife.

“Imelda, dear,” he started, “Have you seen Hector lately?”

“Yes…what?” She stood up immediately. “Is he okay? What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing!” Oscar said, “Nothing’s wrong, well – okay, nothing’s right either but Imelda, what I mean to say –“

“What we’re both trying to say,” said Felipe supporting his brother, “Is that Hector’s future is still… unsure.”

“We don’t want you to prepare for a future that might not get to happen, dear.”

“We don’t know how long he’s going to be around. Coco is the only person keeping him –“

“Stop,” Imelda asked softly. “Please, I don’t, I can’t hear this. Not now.”

“If not now, then when?” Felipe asked. “We’re not saying this to hurt you but –“

“To prepare you,” finished Oscar. “We’re not telling you to stop loving Hector or to throw him out on the streets but to be aware.”

“Coco is the only person keeping him alive. There’s no telling what may happen when she passes away.”

“All we’re saying is to prepare for the worst but hope for the best,” they said in unison.

Imelda grimaced at the prospect of an afterlife without Hector but she could not deny what her brothers’ said. Buying Hector new clothes barely qualified as a band-aid solution. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, keeping Hector in the alive in the Land of the Dead was beyond her control. It was up to Coco to carry on the burden but for how much longer could her daughter do it? Already, her memory had faded to the point to where Hector had died at the hands of the Final Death. Imelda could only hope that Coco had passed down the memories that she had of Hector. Even if there wasn’t a photo of him anymore, Imelda would settle for having her husband in the afterlife. They had spent too much time apart. She didn’t want to lose him again.
As Imelda prepared to go to bed that night, her mind was filled with the worrisome thoughts of the possibility of losing Hector again. Everything Felipe and Oscar said to her was true. Securing Hector a longer and healthier afterlife rested on two key principles. The first was that Coco had to pass down stories and her memories of Hector to their living family members. The second was that Hector’s photo was put onto the ofrenda.

It all seemed so simple but nothing was for certain. When Hector failed to return and Ernesto implied that he had run off with some bar floozy, she out of sorrow and rage destroyed his things. Over the course of a few days, Imelda had sterilized the home of Hector’s presence. It was like he never existed at all. And it wasn’t like they took a lot of photos back in the day either. Over the course of their marriage, Imelda and Hector took three photos. The first was of their wedding day. The second was a family photo with Coco sitting on Imelda’s lap and Hector in his mariachi suit. The third was a headshot of Hector’s. That one was taken at Ernesto’s insistence before he and Hector set off on what would be their first and final tour.

It was regrettable but Imelda had burned her wedding photo. Hector’s headshot…who knew where that was in the Land of the Living? And as for their first family photo, Imelda had torn Hector out of it. She had done it with the mindset of finally getting Hector out of her and Coco’s lives. If he didn’t want to be a part of the family then she didn’t want to see him.

She knew better now but it couldn’t change what had been done. Ah, but what were photos when Coco held her father’s memory. It was all thanks to Coco that Hector survived this long but between Coco’s dementia and advanced age, it was anyone’s guess as to what would fail her first: her mind or her body. And when she did die or forget, then what would happen to Hector?

The answer was clear, he would die again.

The Final Death would steal him away from the family that he loved and deserved to be loved by. There was the chance that Coco would tell Miguel or the family stories about Hector and preserve his memory but Imelda knew her granddaughter Elena well. She held the same anger that she had, that Victoria had towards Hector for leaving their family. As Elena was now the family matriarch, it left very little doubt in Imelda’s mind that Elena carried on the music ban and Hector’s unjust banishment from the family ofrenda.

Imelda shook her head. She thought of the worst case scenario in order to prepare herself. If Coco forgot about him or died then Hector would die and there was nothing she could do about it. The best case scenario was if Coco, through some miracle, managed to pass on even the tiniest bits of Hector’s memory onto Miguel then Hector would live on but he would be unable to cross the bridge. Imelda would happily live with that. She would explain to Coco everything about her papa and why
he never came home. When the rest of the Riveras would arrive in the Land of the Dead, she would explain things to them too. The second she could talk to them, she would tell them what a wonderful husband and father Hector was and how he wanted to come home. She would get rid of any doubt that they had about Hector was anything but a dutiful father and the love of her life.

“Imelda?” called Hector from outside her bedroom door. “Are you still up?”

Imelda took a deep breath before she said, “Yes. Come in.”

Hector stepped into her bedroom. He was wearing his brand new pajamas. They were purple with white stripes.

“Do you like them?” she asked.

“Yes,” Hector said with a smile. “They’re perfect. Thank you so much for them. They’re really soft.”

“I’m glad. Are you going to bed?”

“Yeah, I –“

Hector was interrupted with a kiss from Imelda. She ran her hands through his hair and held him close as she kissed. Imelda needed this as badly as Hector did. Their kiss confirmed one thing: That they were both still here and that they were together. When the kiss was done, Imelda hugged Hector and swore that she could hear his heartbeat.

“Are you okay?” Hector asked, lightheaded from her caress.

Imelda nodded, unable to speak. If she did, her voice would break, she would cry and tears were the last thing she needed now. What Imelda needed was to know that Hector was here with her and their family and that he wasn’t going to disappear again. Hector wrapped his arms around her returning the hug.

“If there’s anything that I’ve done,” he started to say.

Imelda shook her head and knew that she would have to speak. “I’m just happy you’re home.”

“I’m happy to be home too,” he laughed lightly.

Imelda reached up on her toes and kissed Hector again. He was surprised by her affection but would always welcome any love and any touch he could get from her. Hector loved Imelda more than he could ever put into words or song.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a sample of my next Coco story: Miguel never saw the gun until it was too late.
Chapter 20

The Riveras were sure that with the move to a new home, things would have changed for them in terms of privacy. In some way, it did. People didn’t clamber up to their home to take photos of Hector or followed anyone anywhere. The crowds went away but it was hard to keep everything a secret. Their new address got out and like wildfire, letters of admiration filled their mailbox. It was one fateful afternoon as Rosita returned from the store and collected the mail that one fan letter stood out. At that time, Rosita was unaware that the letter was indeed fan mail for Hector.

The letter looked innocent enough at first glance. It came in a plain white envelope. Its stamp was an adorable Chihuahua dog. However, there wasn’t a return address and it was addressed, strangely enough to ‘Earth’. Puzzled, Rosita opened the letter and read it.

My dearest Earth,

How is the good life? Do you enjoy the love, the attention, and fame that you now possess? I know I have. I do not know why you try to hide from the love that the world is so ready to give to you. It is a futile matter. Your fans will love you from here to eternity and yet you rebuff them. Why? Isn’t this what you always wanted? To be loved? I confess I do not understand why you now run from the love that you so desperately wanted. I can help you, my dearest Earth. I and I alone, can show you how to receive the love that is so willfully given to you. My dear, sweet, naïve Earth, it would be a mistake to refuse my offer. Who else would be there for you? Who else knows you as well as I do? Haven’t I always been there for you? Let me into your life and I can show you the way to navigate this strange new world that you are living in.

Yours truly,

Heaven

“What are you reading?” asked Victoria coming into the kitchen.

Rosita gasped. “Oh, you scared me! And what I was reading…I’m not very sure.” She handed over the letter, glad to be rid of it.

Victoria scanned the contents of the letter and gagged. “This is hideous. This is terrible. This is –”

“A love letter?” Rosita asked, shrugging. “I think it’s for Hector.”

“He could do better than this garbage.” Victoria sneered. “Is he here?”

Rosita nodded. “Yes. He’s in his room but he asked not to be disturbed.”

“He’ll make an exception for this,” said Victoria waving the ghastly letter in her hand. “Better that he sees this instead of Mama Imelda.”

Going up the stairs, Victoria heard the soft strumming of a guitar. It was coming from Hector’s room. She leaned against the door and knocked. “Hector? It’s me, Victoria. Can I come in?”

“Yes, yes, come in, neita!”
Victoria opened the door and saw scores of sheet music littered the floor. Hector nervously grinned at her. “Sorry about the mess, I thought you were Imelda for a minute and…heh, cleaning when anxious never goes well.”

“You’re writing music?”

“Yes!” Hector answered brightly. “It’s a present for Imelda.”

“You’re writing her a song?” asked Victoria, touched at the idea.

Hector nodded. “I’m trying to anyways. It’s…,” he sighed. “It’s been a while. I’m rusty but I’m trying. Imelda…she’s been so kind to me. I never thought I would ever have a chance to be with her again. Creating a song for her is the least I could do. When I see Imelda it’s like…like you know that feeling like there’s a song in the air and it’s playing just for you? That’s how I feel when I see Imelda like…”

“A feeling so close, you could reach out and touch it?”

Hector paused and stared at his granddaughter. “Yes! Yes, exactly like that! How did you…?”

“It’s from a De La Cruz movie. I was seventeen. I had a rebellious streak and I wanted to see music on the big screen.”

“And?”

“And I found Ernesto de la Cruz, to be the biggest bore I ever saw. He did what he always did in his movies: he sings, he dances, his shirt mysteriously comes off, he punches the villain, and rides off into the sunset. He was boring. He was uncreative. He wasn’t an artist like you.”

“Thank you,” Hector said quietly.

“How’s the song coming along?” Victoria asked.

“Uh, well I’ve got major C and that is it.”

“Just C?”

“I was thinking of putting a D chord in there somewhere…it’s been slow and a long since the last time I’ve made an original song was ah…decades ago.”

“Would you like help?” Victoria asked as she sat down on the bed with him. “I don’t know anything about music but if I could help –“

Hector cleared off a seat for Victoria on the bed. “I would love your help, sweetie.”

Victoria bent down and picked up the sheet music. The letter was forgotten as granddaughter and grandfather sat down to compose a love song for Imelda.
Chapter 21

It was strange to sleep in a bed. It was strange to receive a kiss from his semi-estranged wife every morning and evening. It was even stranger to be writing music again but Hector found himself liking and even enjoying the strangeness that his afterlife now had. As Hector woke early that morning, he pulled the covers and blankets over his body and sighed happily.

He knew where he was, whose home he was in, and the family that he now had the joy of sharing but it didn’t feel real. It was all a wonderful dream that he got to have all to himself. Hector flipped onto his side and buried himself deeper in the pillows and sheets. It was heaven. It was beyond heaven and there wasn’t a thing in the world that could ever make him want to leave it all. But a knock at his door prompted him to answer.

“Come in,” he said, not wanting to leave the warmth of his bed.

The door opened. Hector peeked out from his covers and saw Imelda. He sat up. She smiled at him as she closed the door behind her. Hector loved the way that she smiled but there was something about how she smiled today, at that exact moment that made him pause and take notice. Imelda was beautiful but this morning, she looked radiant. The way the sunlight bathed her bones and caressed her body struck Hector with inspiration. His fingers itched for his pen and his notebook. He wanted to write this moment down and preserve it forever but alas, with his muse in his bedroom, it made reaching for his notebook a dangerous task. Imelda was intelligent. She would see his notebook and asked questions. What was the point of writing a song that was meant to be a surprise if the love of his life saw it in it’s current state? Completely utterly incomplete.

Victoria had been a great help in talking the songwriting process out but as for actual progress? Not so much. But Hector was glad to have spent those precious hours with the granddaughter he never knew in life. Showing Victoria everything that went into making a song, was a refresher that he needed.

“Good morning, Hector,” Imelda said with that peculiar grin on her face.

How he longed for his notebook! Imelda seemingly glided across his bedroom with the kind of grace he only ever read about in books but that was Imelda. She was beauty. She was grace. She’d smack a boot in any man’s face. It was as she sat down on his bed with her arms holding something behind her that Hector was stunned. Here, sitting on his bed, was the most captivating woman in the world. She was strong hearted. She was kind. She was fiery and cool. She intelligent and brilliant and never to be mistaken for a fool. Imelda was the love of his life.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

He nodded, shaking himself out of his lovesick daze. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ve got a present for you,” Imelda said placing a plain brown box on his lap.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You have to open it to find out.”

“Will it break if I shake it?”
“If it does, then I’ve failed in my afterlife.”

Hector decided against shaking the box and opened it as Imelda instructed. Inside, were a pair of highly polished brown shoes that shined under the morning sun. Hector gasped softly. “Oh… wow…”

“If you don’t like them,” Imelda said, “I’ve also made a pair in black and in gray. I wanted you to have options in case you wanted to switch things up a bit.”

“You made these?”

“No, Hector I bought them,” Imelda scowled. “Yes, of course, I made them! Do you lik-“

“I love them.” Hector said breathlessly. “Thank you!”

Imelda smiled. “What kind of wife would I be if I let my husband go around barefoot?”

“Wife…” Hector gasped. “We’re married.”

“Yes, mi amor,” nodded Imelda.

“You’re actually married to me…”

“I know,” Imelda as she kissed him. “Mr. Hector Rivera and,” she kissed him again. “Mrs. Imelda Rivera.” She kissed him over and over. Each little touch left him aching for more. “And as your wife, I want to know how you got this way.”

“Wha…?” He was under her spell. He didn’t know what she was asking from him. ‘What do you mean?’

“You bones, amor.” She traced his cracks and breaks in his arms, his chest, and his face. She sent him shivering. “How did they get this way?”

“You don’t want to know, Imelda.”

“We’ve been apart for years, Hector. I want to know everything. I want to know every crack, every break, and every scratch that you’ve got.”

“Did you clear out your day?” Hector asked.

“I’m all yours, amor.” Imelda said.
Imelda was not prepared for everything that Hector would tell her. Every crazy scheme, every plot, and every desperate attempt that he made to cross over the Marigold Bridge was filled with unbearable sadness. Imelda laid next to Hector. She held his hand as he recounted his disastrous attempts to cross the Marigold Bridge.

“Year fifty-four was the time where I tried to disguise myself as one of the alebrijes. It, uh, didn’t work. The paint wasn’t dry and I left tracks everywhere. It nearly got me through. The police didn’t have a clue until I was over the barricades. They got me…I was arrested. Spent the rest of the night in jail. They let me out early morning. It was year fifty-five that really got me into trouble,” Hector said with the shake of his head. “Remember how I was telling you about the trolley wire from before?”

“Yes?”

“I thought that if someone held the other end that I could get across. But a policewoman on the other side spotted me. She grabbed the wire and shook it. The wire whipped upwards and smacked me in the chest. That’s how I got that crack. I fell onto the bridge and sunk. She came and arrested me. I spent three weeks in the crypt. My chest hurt really bad after that one!”

Imelda turned over to Hector. She now knew two things about him. The first was that Hector never gave up. Even when he was on the Final Death’s doorstep, he never stopped trying to see their daughter. With that determination, Imelda knew the second thing about Hector and that was how much he loved Coco. He never stopped trying to see her. Imelda leaned her head down and kissed Hector softly.

“I love you.”

Hector’s mind was reeling from those three little words that he never thought he would ever hear from Imelda again. She curled up next to him on the bed, her legs entwining with his. She placed her hand on his chest and with her other hand holding her head up, Imelda repeated those three little words over and over again.

“I love you,” she said with a kiss. “I love you.”

The years of resentment she carried in her heart evaporated. Imelda could only think of the love she had for her husband.

“I love you too, Imelda,” Hector said eagerly. “But, ah, just so we’re clear you love me, right?”

Imelda kissed away his fear and anxiety. “I love you, Hector Rivera. I love you more than I thought I was capable of loving someone.”

“What do you love about me?” he couldn’t help but ask. “Is it my rugged good looks? My
physique?” Hector held up his right arm and, Imelda assumed, flexed his nonexistent muscles. “My
debonair wit?”

She chuckled dryly. “Eres caliente but no, it wasn’t your rugged good looks or physique that
attracted me to you.” Imelda ran her finger over his ribcage making him shudder.

“What was it?”

“Present tense, amor. I’m still in love you,” Imelda reminded him. “It’s your compassion, your
sweetness…”

“My sweetness?”

“Yes. The way you care for others. The way you put others before yourself. I love how much you
love our daughter. I love the way you never gave up…I love you. I love everything about you,
Hector. I love you for loving me when I wasn’t very lovable.”

“The way you kept me guessing, I’ll take it as a blessing that I’m only un poco loco,” Hector softly
sang. “Imelda?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?” Hector asked, getting onto his side to face her.

“What do you want to know?”

“Will you go out with me? For our anniversary dinner? It’s coming in two months and –“

Imelda grinned and showered Hector with affection that he desperately needed. “I thought you
would never ask,” she said between delicate kisses and soft caresses of his bones. “Tonight, which
side do you want to sleep on?”

“Where?”

“In my bedroom,” Imelda answered. “I miss having you next to me.”

“As long as I can wake up next to you, it doesn’t matter to me, amor.”
HI! Okay, so I do see all your reviews but editing took up a majority of my day so I can't answer them all right now. Tomorrow, I will answer them and your questions about writing and my first novel and all that jazz. Are we cool, dudes? Also, if you don't me spamming up your inbox with my replies, just let me know. I hate to think that I'm coming off as annoying.

It had been far too long since Hector composed music and even longer since he shared a bed with his dearest Imelda. However, that night as he got into bed with the love of his life, Hector put aside the song he was trying to write for her. Instead of working, he curled up next to her and rested.

“Did you ever think we would be like this again?” he asked her as he settled into bed.

“No,” Imelda answered honestly, putting down her book. “But I’ve never been so happy to be wrong.”

“I love you,” Hector said with utter devotion.

Hector and Imelda stayed together, huddled together in bed. Imelda was the first to fall asleep. Seeing her at peace and being next to her, spurred Hector to action. He realized that if he was going to be serious about writing a new song for Imelda, he would have to get a studio. Working at home was great but there was no telling if Imelda might hear him. He needed a private place to work and as luck would have it Frida Kahlo had the perfect space.

“You can have the loft above mine,” she offered. “It’s already soundproof and all that equipment from …you know who…is still there. Take the studio! Use it to write a love song for Imelda!”

With an offer like that, how could Hector refuse? At once, he moved his musical things to the loft above Frida’s. It was a wonderful arrangement. Frida was courteous to his needs as a fellow artist and as a beloved celebrity, Frida had excellent security. She allowed Hector to sneak into his loft without much harassment. Getting to work, Hector set up his studio. Yes, the equipment was good but it was missing a personal touch. Hector adorned his studio with photos of his family. At the desk where he worked, there was a single photo of Imelda in a sterling silver frame.

He had his inspiration: Imelda. Glorious, gorgeous, divine Imelda was his muse. Hector sat down to write what would undoubtedly be his magnum opus and the second he put his pencil to paper…nothing happened. He stared at his paper, he willed his hand to write but he couldn’t think of a single thing.

“WHY IS THIS SO HARD?” Hector declared in anguish.

Time and time again he was able to create music. Give him the tiniest bit of tune and he would make it into something irresistibly catchy. But now, with the love of his life, the woman whom he idolized above all else Hector had nothing. His thoughts grinded to a halt. His mind was utterly blank. Hector banged his head against his desk. Two months! That was all the time he had to create THE love song for the woman who meant the world to him.
Hector groaned and shook his head. “What am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

Hector did the only thing that he could do; he stayed at his new studio for hours. He worked late into the night on a project that never saw much in the way of progress. When he did come home, Hector wouldn’t eat. He would go straight to bed where Imelda was waiting up for him. He would crawl into bed next to her and sigh heavily over his lack of progress. Seeing her lovely face was a reminder how he was failing as a romantic partner. Imelda had done so much for him and asked nothing in return. A song was the least he could do for the woman whom he loved.

“How is the new album going?” Imelda would ask as Hector would cuddle next to her.

Under normal circumstances, Hector would never lie to Imelda but this song that meant for her and only her needed secrecy. Losing ‘Remember Me’ to Ernesto for decades had made Hector paranoid. This song, this singular song, needed to be protected from those who would turn into some cheesy over the top piece of showmanship.

“It’s going great, amor.” Hector would dutifully reply.

He hated lying to her but this song was meant to be a surprise for her. He had the moment planned out to the last second. He would write the greatest love song ever just for Imelda. He would set up his studio with candles and flowers and make it look romantic instead of the sad workspace of an artist who hadn’t written anything in years. After the set up was done, he would meet Imelda at her favorite restaurant. He would be witty and charming. Everything would be romantic and Imelda would fall in love with him all over again. After dinner, he would show her his studio and perform the song for her and only her. It would be the finest performance of his life and then everything would be perfect. Imelda would love him just as much as he loved her. He wanted her to feel the love that he carried in his heart for her for years when he would play that song for her. Now if only his brain would work with him and compose something that was good!

“How? Are you sure that everything is okay?”

He glanced up at her and nodded. “Yes, mi amor. Why do you ask?”

Oh dear god, she must have found out about the song. That was his ace in the hole! He had nothing else to give to her other than music! Hector inwardly screamed.

“You’ve been out late every night these past two weeks,” Imelda said with a frown. “You haven’t been at dinner. Are you sure that everything’s okay?”

Hector nodded, relieved that she hadn’t found out about the song. “Hmm-mm, work just keeps me busy. I’ll try not to make a habit of it,” Hector said with a kiss. “Goodnight, Imelda.” Hector fell into a blissful sleep a love song worthy of his muse. Imelda, however, did not sleep easy. A tiny seed of doubt was planted in the back of her mind and it was only a matter of time before it grew into something worse.

“Goodnight, Hector.”
Chapter 24

There were few things that could strike fear into Imelda’s heart. Until recently, Hector hadn’t been a part of those insidious fears that could keep her up at night but now, with his behavior, he was. Imelda liked to think that she knew Hector well even with the near century of estrangement between them. However, now, after everything she was unsure. It was unlike Hector to not want to spend time with his family. Of course, with his new celebrity status, people would want to hear his latest tune. Hector’s fan mail reflected it. Love letters flooded their mailbox. Men and women wrote to Hector daily. Sometimes, the letters spoke of a simple love that they had for Hector but most of the time, the letters were explicit.

…hold me…
…touch me…
…kiss me…
…feel me…
…pinch me…
…bound me…
…bite me…
…scratch me…
…suck me…
…fuck me…

A litany of the kinkiest of kinks, all written in devastatingly descriptive detail over what his fans wanted Hector to do them and in reverse what they wanted to do to Hector. The last letter that came to the house was of a specific erotic fantasy in which Hector was bound and gagged and was spreading his legs while the letter writer straddled him until they both came to a climax. Imelda was disturbed by the letter and as much as she wanted to burn it, she couldn’t. She needed the letter as proof that he needed to stay home. It wasn’t like she thought that Hector was out with other people….being with other women…having an affair. No, she was just concerned and the letters that she had would serve as a back-up.

That night, after Hector missed yet another family dinner, Imelda decided that she would talk to him. She had the whole conversation planned out in her mind. Hector would come into their bedroom and she would pull out the letters from her nightstand and she would be Imelda Rivera! The woman who built a shoe business out of nothing! Imelda Rivera, who needed no one’s help! Imelda Rivera, who carried on when Hector never returned home and raised their daughter by herself.

As Hector stumbled into their bedroom that night and got ready for bed, Imelda’s nerves were as tight as a guitar string. Hector, getting undressed, took one look at her and stopped dead in his tracks. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

Imelda faltered. Her confidence was shot. All that unrest she had was gone and she found herself wanting on the back foot.
“Imelda?” Hector sat down on the bed. “Honey? Is…is everything okay?”

“We need to talk.”

Hector had fear in his eyes. “Okay…A-About what?”

Imelda knew that she was in the right. She knew it but confronting Hector meant that she ran the risk of him having an affair a reality. Denial was a wonderful thing but she couldn’t live in it. She had to know. “About you staying out at all hours. Amor, I know that work is important to you but when you leave and you don’t get home until late…it worries me. No, it scares me. When you walk out that door, I…” Imelda sighed. “It’s like you’re leaving me all over again.”

Hector hugged her. “I’m so sorry, Mela. I didn’t mean to…It was not my intention to scare you or to make you worry. It’s work and songwriting isn’t as easy as it used to be for me.”

“Then what was your intention?” she asked. “How did you think I would feel if I rarely see you?”

Hector nervously grinned. “It’s a surprise. I mean, no…it’s I’m working on something – something for you and only you,” he held her hands. “I want you to know what it’s like to love you when I get to see you.”

Imelda wanted to believe him but she had to know for sure. “Hector, please be honest, are you not happy with me?”

“No! I mean, yes! I’m happy with you and no! Like…I could never want to be away from you. I love you, Imelda. You make me happy and I didn’t think I would ever get to be happy again. I love you! What makes you think that I’m not…?”

Imelda got out the letters. Wordlessly, she placed them on Hector’s lap. Hector read them. Slowly, he grew bright red.

“…wow…” He put the letters aside. “That is…” he sighed deeply.

“Graphic?” Imelda offered.

“Yeah, graphic…and scary,” he said. “Imelda, those people are not who I love. I love you. What can I do to prove my love? I’ll do anything!”

She had no doubt that he would do anything but Imelda’s request was a simple one. “Be home before the sun sets.”

“What?”

“Be home before the sun sets,” she repeated. “When you left, the first time with Ernesto, the sun was setting and you never came back. I just need to know that when I come home, you’ll be there. It’s… your bones are still in bad shape and we don’t know how long Coco will be able to remember you.” She wasn’t going to cry. She hadn’t cried in years, she wouldn’t do it now. ”Please, Hector, I can’t lose you again. I’m not strong enough to go through that again.”

“I’ll be home before the sun sets,” Hector confirmed with a nod and a kiss. “And I’ll put a cap on the crazy fan stuff. I’m sorry for bringing that into your home.”

“Our home,” Imelda corrected. “This is our home.”

That night, in Hector’s arms, Imelda finally slept peacefully for the first time in two weeks.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Here's a fun fact: Chapters are written the same as they are published.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hector was true to his word when it came to Imelda’s request. He was home every night before dark. Before dusk could set, he was inside the safety of the Rivera household and by Imelda’s side. Hector mourned the loss of the time could have used to compose Imelda’s love song but seeing Imelda at ease, Hector knew that every second he lost was worth her peace of mind. While the family sat down for dinner and chatted about the day’s events, Hector wrote scores of songs and lyrics in his mind. Each song and melody was lovelier than the last. But all it took was one heartfelt gaze from Imelda to send Hector into a downward spiral. The ballads and tunes that he created couldn’t hold a candle to everything that Imelda was. It depressed Hector horribly.

After he washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen with Imelda, they retired to bed. As Hector climbed into bed, he took a glance that the love of his life and was reminded how he was failing to prove his love to her. He didn’t know how to make shoes, he had a criminal record longer than the Marigold Bridge, his bones were weak and ugly compared to her bones brilliance. Music was his thing. It was what he was good at. If he couldn’t write a single song for Imelda then what could he possibly offer her? Nevertheless, despite his lack of progress and his bones dull and unattractive state, Imelda cuddle up to him just the same. She kissed him senseless and told him that she loved him.

It should have been enough for Hector. The way Imelda held and embraced him, it should have been a clear sign that she loved him but in the back of his mind, Hector feared that he would never live up to that love that she had for him. Ironically, his only solace was being with Imelda. She could make him forget his songwriting troubles until they fell asleep. However, when Hector would wake up, the first thing he would see in the morning was Imelda and he was reminded yet again, how he did not have a song for her and that his time was running out. Huddled next to the love of his life, Hector stroked Imelda’s hair and kissed her softly on her forehead. She woke up and gently kissed him back.

“Good morning, amor,” she whispered.

“Good morning, Imelda.”

She stretched as she left the bed. “What are you going to be up to today?”

“Going to the studio,” he answered as he helped her make the bed. “The album needs work. What about you? What’s going on at the store?”

“Clearance sale,” she shrugged. “It’ll take us a while.”

“What time will you be home?” Hector asked as he got dressed.

“Seven, hopefully. What time will you be home?”
“Before the sun sets,” Hector answered her with a kiss. “I love you, Imelda.”

“I love you too.”

Hector set off for the studio after breakfast with his family. He walked along the side streets of the Land of the Dead. It was safer to get around by taking the longer routes. There was less of a chance that people would spot him. Usually, Hector was okay getting to the studio. It was when he arrived that he was faced with the multitude of fans who wanted a piece of him. No matter how he snuck by, someone always spotted him. Today, just as Hector thought he was safe, someone saw him. His fans grabbed his arms and pulled him back. Some grabbed his legs and held him tight.

“HECTOR!” They screamed. “WE LOVE YOU! WE LOVE YOU!”

“Let me go! Help!” Hector yelled. “Please! Help me!”

The more he struggled, the tighter his fans held him. Hector was nearly pulled into the raging sea of fans until the security guards rushed out to save him. Two sets of strong hands grabbed Hector and forcefully dragged him inside the building.

“How is it out there?” asked Frida at her canvas as the security detail went back out into the fray.

Hector wobbly stood and cracked his back and neck. “It’s a little rough.”

“They always get rowdy before the weekends,” Frida said, putting down her brush. “How’s the song coming along?”

“BADLY!” Hector threw his hands up in despair. “I’ve got nothing! Zip! Zilch! Nada! Zero!”

“It’s can’t be that bad. I’m sure Imelda would love whatever you write for her.”

“Frida, this is Imelda we’re talking about here!” He stressed. “She’s not just gorgeous, she’s, okay, yeah…I mean, she’s gorgeous. She’s stunning. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on but she’s more than that! She’s smart and funny! She’s got a great sense of humor and her wit is sharp as a knife! She’s hardworking and she runs her own business! For nearly a century and she makes it look so easy too. Oh…Imelda’s got a great heart. The way she cares about our family…I wasn’t around for any of that and she handles any trouble. She’s complex and so easy to understand. I look at her and I am overcome with love. Do you wanna know why?”

Frida coyly smiled. “Because you love her?”

“YES but because she loves me! Imelda is…is she’s, she’s just wow,” Hector said with a breathless gasp. “You know? She-She’s just WOW! And look at me! I was a bum! What am I going to do?”

Frida laughed. “Here’s what you do: When the time comes, bring her back here and play ‘Un Poco Loco’. She’ll love it!”

“She’s heard ‘Un Poco Loco’,” Hector lamented. “She’s heard it a million times before.”

“But she hasn’t heard it a million times from you. Imagine how she will feel when you perform it.”

“It’s not enough,” he sighed. “I…I need to really wow her. I want her to know how I feel when I see her. I love her, Frida. Imelda means the world to me.”
Also, some of you eagle-eyed readers may have noticed that I updated the tags and bumped up the rating. I like to think that I've been very upfront with you guys in the tags and in the comments section that what's coming, Ernesto, will be brutal for Hector. I don't want anyone to go into this blind when chapter 29 comes up and shocker! Bad things happen to Hector. So, if you don't want to see Hector get injured, kidnapped, etc., by Ernesto, stop reading after chapter 28 and promptly resume the story again after chapter 37. You'll have skipped all the Ernesto stuff and you will get to read all that sweet fluff. It'll be great!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Two more chapters before Ernesto shows up!

Hector spent hours at his workspace developing Imelda’s song. He worked through dozens of notebooks and any bits of paper he could get his hands on. No progress was made. It left him agitated and furious. The best part about working in his soundproof studio was that it was okay to scream and scream he did. Hector shouted and cursed and howled until he was exhausted. He rested his head on his desk and groaned. He held Imelda picture on his desk and sighed.

He never had this kind of trouble before. When it came to writing ‘Remember Me’ and ‘Un Poco Loco’, it had been a breeze. He wrote from his heart and he wrote what the world called masterpieces. This time, as he wrote from his heart, he should have been able to come up with something. Out of all the times, he was able to make up something on the fly, why now did his brain decide to betray him? Why was this so difficult? It was Imelda. He loved her with all his heart.

“You’re driving me un poco loco, mi amor,” he said to her photo.

Maybe Frida was right. Maybe singing ‘Un Poco Loco’ would be enough and Imelda would love it and him just the same. But, surely, she would want something new? Something better? Hector knew that she did deserve better. Imelda deserved the world and then some. The key issue was delivering the whole world and then some for her. Imelda deserved a love song and he would be damned if he couldn’t write one for her.

He was starting to feel damned. He had less than forty-eight hours to create her love song. Nothing was good enough. Nothing felt right or worthy to carry the name ‘A Song for Imelda’. Who was he kidding, the song didn’t even have a proper title! It shouldn’t have been this hard to create a song for Imelda. She was the love of his life. He wanted to be back in her life for so long and now he was failing her.

“I need some fresh air.”

Hector left his studio and went to the roof. He couldn’t go outside like a normal person anymore. Waiting on the streets of the studio were his fans. They were screaming and calling out his name. Hector stayed out of their line of sight. He stared out onto the Land of the Dead and shook his head. How did his afterlife turn out like this? A couple of months ago, he was a bum and no one knew his name unless they were on the verge of being forgotten or they were arresting him. And now? Now, he was the biggest name in music since Ernesto. Hector scowled at the thought of his former friend and partner. Everything that man touched, he ruined. He turned ‘Remember Me’ into a bloated and overused love song. It was meant to be sung tenderly, sweetly and Ernesto sang it as loud as he possibly could. Ernesto took everything from him and twisted it until it was unrecognizable. ‘Un Poco Loco’ and ‘Remember Me’ were tainted by Ernesto’s touch. He sold the love that Hector had for his family for fame and fortune.

Hector shook his head. He had to create a brand new original song for Imelda. He just had to. Anyone could sing ‘Un Poco Loco’. He had to create something new, something that Ernesto hadn’t ruined. But with less than two days, Hector was feeling the strain.
“Am I losing my touch?” he worried.

It felt like he was. His creative spark was just as dead as he was. Suddenly, Hector felt like screaming again. He had to get his frustration out. If he didn’t, he would be driven to madness. Hector returned to his studio. When he flipped the lights on, they stayed dead. Hector fussed with the switch for a minute before giving up.

“Great,” he grumbled. “What’s going on now?”

Hector went to his work desk and saw a note from Frida on top.

Blew out the lights again! Sorry!

-Frida K.

P.S. I’m having new dancers come in tomorrow. Spur of the moment, you understand, don’t you? Don’t freak if you see new faces.

Hector sighed and gave up. His mood was sour and his mind was dead. Under normal circumstances, he could work in the dark but today? Not even remotely possible. What was the point in agonizing over the song when he could be at home with Imelda? Hector packed up his things and left the studio. In the dark and under the mess of used notebooks and score sheets, Hector never saw the second note at his desk.

Why aren’t you answering my letters?

-Heaven
Here's Rosita the matchmaker!

Imelda had her day planned out. She was going to spend her day in her office, going over the clearance sale. It was dull work but it was important work that needed to be done. However, Rosita had other plans.

“We should go shopping,” she said as they boarded the trolley.

Imelda looked up from her magazine. “What?”

“We should go shopping,” Rosita insisted. “You anniversary date with Hector is tomorrow, right? Let’s go shopping and get you a new dress, some jewelry, have a girl’s day out.”

Imelda shook her head. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“It is your anniversary, Mama Imelda,” spoke Victoria. “Why not get a new dress?”

“When was the last time you went shopping?” asked Oscar.

“You’re going to want to look pretty for your date with Hector,” supplied Felipe.

“Are you saying that I don’t look pretty now?” asked Imelda, her eyes narrowing at her brother.

“Did I say that?” Felipe asked, laughing nervously, “No, I didn’t say that, right Julio?”

“Don’t bring me into this,” replied Julio. “But if I was going to give my opinion, and it was me going on the first date with my spouse in a few decades, I would say to buy something flashy. Show him how great you look.”

“How long have you all planned this ambush?” she asked as she crossed her arms.

“Since this morning,” admitted Rosita. “But come on, it’s your anniversary. If you don’t dress up for your anniversary then when?”

“I don’t know, the store –“

“We’ll take care of the store,” said Felipe.

“Go have fun!” pushed Oscar.

“Alright, we’ll have a girl’s day out. Victoria, are you coming?”

“The only shopping I do is for books. I’ll pass.”

With the store in capable hands, Rosita and Imelda left the trolley on the third stop. They headed into the shopping district for their impromptu spree. Rosita knew just which shops to hit. The first store had gorgeous gowns. Rosita picked out several lovely pink ones, a black one, and a red one as well.
Rosita sent Imelda into the dressing room.

“How are you doing in there?” Rosita asked. “Do you need help?”

Imelda tugged at the slinky black gown. “I hate shopping.”

“How can you say that? You took Hector shopping an entire day for clothes!”

“That was different,” defended Imelda. “That was for Hector!”

“And?”

“Hector looks great in everything. It was hard to narrow down the choices. Besides, I wanted him to have nice things. It was worth the effort.”

“So get nice things for yourself. Make his jaw drop when he sees you.”

Make his jaw drop, Imelda thought as she stared at her reflection. The black dress made her look… not like herself. It draped everywhere and not in a flattering way. It was too modern for her tastes. She threw the black gown off and slipped into the red one, ignoring the nearly identical pink dresses Rosita had chosen.

“Are you nervous about tomorrow?”

Imelda fussed with the dress. “A little,” she admitted. “It’s…strange.”

“Being with Hector?”

“No, loving Hector. It is still strange to say ‘I love you’ to him.”

“Good strange?” asked Rosita hopefully.

“Good strange,” confirmed Imelda. “It…it silly but I when him that I love, it feels like the night he left us again. I almost half expect him to walk out the door and to…” she sighed heavily. “I know, deep down, he would not leave and yet…the fear is there.”

“It’ll go away,” comforted Rosita.

“When?”

“With time. It’s been how many years since you and Hector were together? It’ll feel strange but once you two get back into the feel of things, it’ll feel like old times again.”

“He says that he’s been busy with his new album,” Imelda said suddenly. “That’s why he was staying out so late.”

“So I’ve heard. The poor dear, he always looks so exhausted when he comes home. It must be so hard creating new songs.”

“Hmm-mm songs.”

“Are you okay?”

Imelda sighed. “It—it’s everything. I love Hector, I truly do but I do not like the fame. Everyone is in
love with him and it scares me. Those fans of his? The letters?”


“What?”

“The Heaven letter,” repeated Rosita. “It was a love letter for Hector. It was…how did Victoria put it? Garbage.”

If Victoria said that the letter was garbage that could mean only one thing: it was dripping with romantic prose straight out of a Hallmark movie. The tiny seed of doubt and fear grew. Imelda wasn’t a stupid woman. She left Hector out in the cold for almost a hundred years. The idea that he kept loving her all that time was a sweet thought but it was unlikely given her attitude towards him during their estrangement. There had to have been other women.

“What did the letter say?”

“Oh, what they always say,” Rosita said with a roll of her eyes, “‘Dearest’, ‘Sweet’, ‘I’ve been there for you’, it’s the same with all the other letters.”

“D-Do you think that Hector…ah, do you think that Hector is happy here? With us?”

“You mean with you. And, yes, he’s happy to be with his family but most of us came after he died. We didn’t know him in life like you did. You don’t see the way he looks at you.”

“How does he look at me?”

“Like you’re the only woman who exists. He’s hopelessly in love with you, you know. The letters, the fans, they don’t mean anything to him. These people like him because of his music and that’s where it ends.”

“They don’t just like him, Rosita,” said Imelda with a sad look, recalling all of the practicality pornographic letters that arrived for Hector. “They love him.”

“But what do they know about him? Do they know that he has you? Coco? A family?” Rosita shook her head. “They think he’s like De La Cruz; a famous musician who wants the spotlight.”

“That’s not what Hector wants at all.”

“Exactly! He doesn’t want the spotlight! He doesn’t want the fans or fame. He wants you, Coco, and us: his family. You’re worrying too much, Imelda.”

“You think I am?”

“The next time Hector is giving you that look, I’m taking a photo so you can see it,” said Rosita with a smile. “Come on out, Imelda. I want to see how you look.”

Imelda stepped out of the changing room and Rosita gasped. “Wait till Hector sees you!”
Chapter 28

Upon arriving home, Hector wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed with Imelda. However, she was still at work. He would have to wait a few hours more before she was home. The house was lonely without her and their family. It was strange to be the first one home. It was even stranger to be alone.

Hector was hardly ever alone. Even before his fame had launched into the spotlight, back when he was living in the slums, Hector was surrounded by people. His makeshift family was always around. People rarely left the slums. They had no one else but each other. There was someone around but as for his biological family, they had their own lives. Now with his fame, it was a rare moment where someone wasn’t shouting his name or grabbing at him.

The silence was deafening.

Hector pulled out his guitar and started to play. He didn’t like the quiet and wished his family was home. He was lonely without him. The thought crossed his mind to visit them at the shoe store or to visit his family in the slums but it would be getting dark soon. As much as he wanted company from people that he knew and loved, it wasn’t worth scaring Imelda or making her worry. After all, he put her through, being home before the sun went down was the least he could do.

Well, that and write her song.

Imelda and their family had done so much to accommodate him. They moved from their home, they took the long way to work so he could avoid his fans, they gave him their clothes, spent time with him. Imelda bought him nice clothes, she kissed him, openly gave him affection. She made him shoes! She let him into her bed! She said ‘I love you’ on a daily basis!

If he couldn’t write a song for her then what could he do for her?

Hector fell into despair. He had until tomorrow night to create a love song for her. How was he ever going to pull it off? How did one go about pouring their heart and soul into a song for the love of their life? For nearly two months, Hector worked on Imelda’s song and nothing was good enough. This song had to be the best. It was what Imelda deserved. Hector, stressed and worried, got up and walked around the house. He hated being alone. He wished Imelda was there with him.

The sound of papers hitting the floor alerted Hector to the mail being delivered. Hector go up to talk to someone for a few minutes but by the time he reached the door, the mailman was already down the block. Hector closed the door and picked the mail off the floor. There was the usual junk mail, some bills, and to Hector’s horror: a fresh bundle of fan mail.

Hector didn’t need to look at a single one of them. He knew what was in store. More pornographic letters like the kind Imelda had read. It hurt him deeply to know that she had read the degrading letters. Hector wondered if Ernesto had gotten the same kind of fan mail. And then, just as his
thoughts turned to Ernesto, another letter slipped through the mail slot. Unlike the other letters, the new one was small and was written on a postcard that had a photo of a Chihuahua on it. All that was written was:

I NEED YOU
- Heaven

Hector shook his head. Just another crazy fan. All his fans said that they needed him. That they wanted him. Hector shuffled the postcard with the rest of the fan mail and put it away. Maybe there would be a day where he would answer his fans and all their questions but until the insanity calmed down, it would be radio silence.

Around six, the Rivera family filed into their home. Hector raced to the door to see them and Imelda too. However, she wasn’t among the group.

“Where’s Imelda?” Hector asked.

“Shopping spree with Rosita,” yawned Victoria. “She’ll be home in an hour.”

“Oh…okay.”

“Relax, it’s a shopping trip, she’s not gone for forever,” said Felipe.

“I know, it’s…it’s been a rough day,” Hector sighed.

“How’s the song coming along?” Victoria asked.

“Aww, you’re writing Imelda a song?” gushed Julio.

“I’m trying to. I wanted to surprise her with a song meant just for her on our anniversary date tomorrow but I’ve hit a wall. I can’t think. She’s going to hate me.”

“You know that you don’t have to write her a song, right?” asked Oscar.

“I have to write this song for her,” insisted Hector.

“Papa Hector,” said Victoria, “Mama Imelda loves you for you. You don’t have to write her a song.”

“No, I have to. Music is how we met, its how I won her over. Did you know, before we met, Imelda kept rocks by her bedside and would hit suitors who tried to woo her? I was the first person she didn’t strike. Music is what made her notice me. It’s the foundation of our relationship. It’s how we supported ourselves and if I can’t write her one song…what does that say about the love that I have for her?”

“What is says is that you have written anything in decades,” said Julio.

“That you’re rusty,” said Victoria.

“That you love Imelda to the point where it’s stressed you out,” said Felipe.

“That you’re overthinking this,” said Oscar.
“If you don’t write her this song,” said Julio. “What is the worst that can happen?”

“Imelda won’t love me anymore and she’ll leave me,” answered Hector in a heartbeat.

“And the best thing that can happen?”

“She still loves me?”

“YES!” exclaimed the Riveras.

“She loves you. Wait until tomorrow comes, then you’ll see it,” said Victoria confidently.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Here it is folks! The moment you’ve all been waiting for! Back by popular demand*, the man who murdered Hector, the man who made Coco grow up without a father, and caused a rift in the Rivera family, I present to you: ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ! Hector Protection Squad, you’re going to be needed.

Well, you’ve been warned. This is going to be brutal. Have fun, guys!

*Ernesto’s popularity varies from people who want to see bad things happen to Hector but also want Hector protected.

Today was it.

Today, was Hector and Imelda’s anniversary. In their shared bedroom, huddle together like they did so many times when they were alive, Imelda slept peacefully with Hector. But for Hector, sleep was impossible. At six tonight, he would join Imelda at her favorite restaurant and would have nothing to prove to her that he loved her. The song that he had worked so hard on for the past two months was incomplete. Everything he worked, every lyric and melody, on paled in comparison to the woman next to him. Hector tossed and turned.

His mind was filled with fear and worry as he laid in bed. He had but a few hours to create and perfect her song. How could he a song for her that would not only prove his song for her but would show Imelda just how much she meant to him? It was an impossible – an utterly impossible task but it was one that he had to undertake. He just had to write her the perfect song. Hector looked over at the clock on Imelda’s bedside. It was three in the morning. He had fifteen hours to compose, practice, and perfect Imelda’s love song.

Quietly, Hector got out of bed. As much as he wanted to stay by Imelda’s side, he needed the extra time to work on her song. He got dressed and grabbed his guitar. Before he left the bedroom, Hector jotted down a note for Imelda and kissed her softly. He grabbed his hat and guitar and left the Rivera home.

His walk to the studio was quiet and peaceful. There was hardly a soul out. Hector, although he disliked the quiet, was thankful that none of his fans were out stalking him. Softly, he played his guitar on the empty streets. It was like how everything was before he became a “somebody”. He almost wished that he was still that faceless soul whom nobody looked twice at. He didn’t like being under a microscope or how his family had to change their lives because they were now associated with him. It wasn’t fair that they had to move or got harassing mail. His family was the greatest in the world. They put up with so much for him. Hector walked a little faster to the studio at the thought of the abuse that his family was put through.

He would finish the song before tonight.

The studio that Hector shared with Frida was deserted. There were no fans and security didn’t show
up until seven. Frida and her new dancers weren’t set to arrive until eight. It was just Hector by himself. He went up to the second story and flipped on the light switch. The lights were still dead.

“Oh…Frida….”

Nevertheless, Hector decided that he had no right to object to the lack of light. There were candles he could use and with the deadline to present his song to Imelda, he could and would work under any conditions. He got to work lighting the candles everywhere, unaware of the looming danger behind him.

“Hello, Hector.”

The lone musician turned around and saw, stepping out of the darkness like a malevolent spirit, was Ernesto De La Cruz. His former friend still looked amazing as always. His hair was perfect, his suit was clean, and his bones were a dazzling, blinding white. His eyes were cold and had a strange look in them. Hector knew the look well. He saw it in his more intense fans’ eyes when he would pass the barricade. It was the look of obsession. Ernesto closed the door behind him and locked it. He twirled the key in his hands for a moment before tucking it away in his back pocket. Fear spiked in Hector’s heart. He was in a locked room with his murderer.

“Ernesto…” Hector cautiously stepped back. “Wh-What are you doing here?”

“See you, amigo,” said Ernesto took a step forward. “Why else would I be slumming it here? Tell me, Hector do you love it?”

He kept his distance as Ernesto advanced towards him. “Love what?”

“The fame! What else? Don’t you love the adoration?”

“N-No.” Hector kept his eye on the door. If he got a running start, limp or no limp, he could break it down and run away. He couldn’t depend on security or Frida and her dancers to show up. It was up to him to escape. He just wished that the only way in and out of the studio wasn’t blocked by Ernesto.

“Then let me help you,” said Ernesto who continued his steady advance. “I know fame better than anyone. You’re lost. I can help you.”

“I don’t want any help from you.”

Ernesto’s congenial smile faded a bit. He shook his head and sighing said, “Hector, Hector, Hector…you’re in no position to turn me away. My reputation may have suffered, ah, a bump but look at me. I’m strong and healthy. My memory in the Land of the Living will live on forever but yours? Ay, Hector…have you seen yourself lately? You’ve got more broken bones than the last time we saw each other.”

“The last time we saw each other you tried to murder my great-great-grandson!” Hector spat. “Miguel didn’t do anything to you, you son of a bitch!”

“I’m giving you a chance, Hector,” persisted Ernesto. “Make this easy on yourself and come with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Since you insist.” Ernesto lunged at Hector who promptly dove out of the way. Hector ran for the door but Ernesto was relentless in his pursuit. He roughly tackled Hector to the floor. There was a
loud SNAP! And Hector felt the all too familiar pain of a broken bone. He didn’t know exactly what was broken this time but judging how he could no longer feel anything midway to his thigh, he was willing to bet that Ernesto had broken his femur in two. But a broken bone had never stopped Hector before and it wasn’t going to stop him from getting away from Ernesto now. Hector clawed at Ernesto’s face to force his would-be kidnapper to release him.

“HELP!” Hector cried out. “SOMEBODY, PLEASE! HELP ME!”

No one heard him. The studio was soundproof. Hector’s desperate cries went unheard and unaided. In a desperate attempt, Hector left his lower half in Ernesto’s grasp. He would crawl away from Ernesto if it meant safety. He didn’t know what he would do. All Hector knew was one thing: get away from Ernesto. Reason didn’t have a home in his mind anymore. The single most important thing was to get away.

“GET BACK HERE, RIVERA!” he roared.

Ernesto grabbed Imelda’s photo in the heavy frame from the desk. With all the strength he possessed, Ernesto grabbed Hector and struck him in the back of his head. Hector’s body was taut with pain as his skull shattered. Bits of his skull went everywhere. Hector couldn’t think, he couldn’t scream, or struggle. All he could feel was hot, burning agony consume every inch of his skull and radiate throughout his body. Hector collapsed to the floor. Small, shuddering gasps escaped him. Weakly, with the last bit of strength he had, Hector glanced at Ernesto. There wasn’t a trace of pity or remorse on his features. To the contrary, Ernesto looked proud. He had gotten what he wanted.

“Don't look at me like that, Hector. It didn’t have to be like this,” said Ernesto to his half-conscious prey. “You forced my hand.”

Ernesto fixed his hair and straightened his suit. His assault on Hector wasn’t done yet. The final indignity came in the form of transportation. Ernesto could hardly be expected to carry a star like Hector around. So, he grabbed Hector’s guitar case, got the guitar out, and shoved Hector inside. It wasn’t easy, of course, but Ernesto made due. Hector already a few broken bones, what were a couple more? Ernesto broke Hector like a twig. Unlike the last time Ernesto had injured him, Hector was not blessed with the sweet relief of unconsciousness. Trapped inside his own case, paralyzed by pain, Hector was vaguely aware of what was happening to him. He felt the pain as his ribs were broken and his legs were snapped in pieces. Hector's last salvageable thoughts as Ernesto carried him out of the studio was that he wouldn’t get to see Imelda.
So I'm guessing that everyone loved chapter twenty-nine, right? Anyway, have some Imelda angst.

Waking up without Hector beside her caused Imelda to panic in the worst of ways. She feared the worst – that Coco’s memory had finally failed her and Hector had faded away in the middle of the night. On the verge of tears, Imelda spotted the note from Hector on her nightstand.

Mi amor,

I can’t wait to spend tonight with you! I’ll meet you at La Luna at six.

I love you, Imelda

- Hector

Imelda breathed a sigh of relief. Once her fear had ebbed, she made a mental note to remind Hector that she didn’t appreciate these scares. He knew how she felt about him staying out at all hours. Imelda thought that Hector would have known how she might feel if she woke up without him. Nevertheless, she knew that his work was important to him. After decades of not writing a single thing, Hector’s album was his first major work in years. Still, she wished that he hadn’t gone in today. It was their anniversary and she would have liked to have spent a majority of the day with him. Ah, but he was an artist and she could not deny him the chance to get some work done before their dinner date.

On the subject of work, Imelda had the shoe store to attend to. She got ready and started her day. However, work was that last thing on Imelda’s mind as she started her day. From the moment the store opened, her mind wandered near and far. A dreamy look of which none the likes the patrons of the store had ever seen was on her face as she worked.

“She’s not thinking of shoes,” Felipe informed as he rang up a customer

“She’s thinking of a musician,” teased Oscar as he swept the floor.

“Go home and get ready for your date,” her brothers said as they shooed her out of the store.

Imelda did go home and she did get ready. She took an hour-long bath, touched up her markings and did her hair. She put on her new gown. She looked stunning, she looked gorgeous, and she was more nervous than she had ever been in her life. Imelda hadn’t gone on a date in decades. She swore off dating and marriage after Hector…Imelda tried not to think of him leaving and dying. This was different. Tonight was different. It would be about them celebrating their love for one another, their family’s growth, and to having music back in their lives.

They would be back to normal after this.
Imelda left the Rivera home and arrived at the La Luna restaurant ten till six. She stepped inside and saw dozens of happy couples laughing and talking. Imelda smiled to herself. That would be her and Hector. They would be chatting and laughing and having fun.

“Welcome to La Luna,” greeted the hostess. “Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, Rivera.”

“Ahh, yes, Mr. and Mrs. Rivera, ah…” The hostess looked behind her for Mr. Rivera.

“He’ll be here momentarily,” Imelda explained.

“Right this way, mam.”

She was shown to a private booth away from peering eyes. It was the perfect spot for Hector and her. They could have the privacy that Hector wanted and it would allow them to be more comfortable with each other, to speak freely with one another, without everyone looking at them. Imelda took her seat. A waiter arrived shortly after.

“Hello mam!” he handed her a menu. “May I recommend tonight’s special?”

“Oh, no thank you. I’m waiting for my husband.”

The waiter nodded and left to attend to his other tables while Imelda waited for Hector to arrive. The minutes ticked by and when it was six, Hector was not at their booth, laughing and chatting with Imelda like she hoped he would be. Imelda craned her neck to see if he was at the front and talking to the hostess but he wasn’t there. Another ten minutes passed and Hector had yet to arrive.

“That clock is a little fast,” said the waiter helpfully. “I’m sure your husband is on his way.”

But after an hour without any sign of Hector made Imelda worry.

“There’s been a couple of disasters in the Land of the Living. We’ve got a lot of new arrivals,” the waiter said in an attempt to rid Imelda of any fear, “The trolley traffic is pretty bad right now. No one is getting anywhere.”

“Thank you…”

Another hour passed and Hector was not at the restaurant. The waiter passed by and flashed a sad smile. Imelda continued to wait for Hector. On the third hour, the waiter nervously offered, “Mam? Can I get you anything while you wait?”

“No. Thank you. I’m waiting for my husband.”

The customers came and went and Imelda stayed waiting for Hector. He just had to show up sooner or later. He was the one who asked her out for their anniversary! He wanted to be with her, didn’t he? Imelda waited and she waited and waited. She waited until the hostess calmly walked over to her and said, “Mam? I’m sorry but it’s midnight. We have to close up. I’m –”

“I understand,” Imelda answered as she stood. “Thank you. I hope you have a nice evening.”

As she began the long walk home, Imelda vowed that she would never forgive herself for letting her heart and mind run away.

“What did you think was going to happen?” she bitterly asked herself. “He becomes famous and he still wants to settle down and be a big happy family again? Idiot! It was an act! It was all an act!”
Imelda’s heart hardened. “To hell with Hector!” she cried.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Ernesto has Hector and Hector suffers from not having all his pieces together.

Chapter Notes

I've noticed that everyone seems to be on edge for when bad things happen to nice people like Hector and Imelda. So, I've decided to list samples on what happens in the next chapters.

Chapter 31: Bad things in general
Chapter 32: Rosita is a badass
Chapter 33: Bad things happen to Hector
Chapter 34: Sad things happen to Imelda
Chapter 35: Bad things happen to Hector
Chapter 36: Bad things happen to Hector AND Ernesto
Chapter 37: Sad things happen to Imelda
Chapter 38: Sad things happen to Imelda AND Hector
Chapter 39: Sad things happen and fluff things happen

I hope this relieves everyone's stress even if it's just a little bit! Also, I will answer reviews tonight/tomorrow.

There was hardly a soul in the Land of the Dead who did not know the name, Ernesto De La Cruz. He was the land’s premier musician. Ernesto was a charming man, beloved by all until it was televised his attempted murder of Miguel and condemning Hector to the Final Death. In an instant, Ernesto’s name was blackened and he was ostracized by the Land of the Dead. If that wasn’t enough, and it wasn’t, Ernesto spent his first few months in his fall from grace, underneath, fittingly enough, a bell

For the man who had everything, who was loved by everyone, the sudden seclusion had a distinct negative impact on Ernesto. The isolation left him unhinged. Trapped underneath the bell, Ernesto was consumed by thoughts of the fame he once held. As he began his escape, digging and clawing, his thoughts turned to those responsible for his fall from grace. Miguel Rivera, the precious great-great-grandson of Hector, was far from his grasp. He wouldn’t be able to harm the little brat while he was safe in the Land of the Living. For now, Miguel was of no concern to him but his great-great-grandfather was.

Hector Rivera was the answer.

It was so obvious! How did he not see it before? His banishment from the bright lights of fame and fortune came because of Hector. People found out that it was Hector’s song that he sang, that’s why people loved Hector. As Ernesto finally broke free of his prison, he was struck with inspiration. If he had Hector, if he restarted their partnership, then he would be back on top. He needed Hector.
Ernesto was far too accustomed to his previous lifestyle to start slumming it like everyone else. However, getting close to Hector proved to be difficult. The fame that had once been Ernesto was transferred to Hector and had increased ten-fold. The mystery of how Hector came back from the Final Death, the shock at discovering the true genius behind the most popular songs, the loving family that he had made Hector the object of everyone’s desire and attention. Ernesto would have loved it but Hector despised it. He wasn’t cut out for the interviews or fans or anything that had to do with celebrity. But it was in celebrity and fame that Ernesto knew well.

He lent out his support to Hector. Who else knew how to navigate the strange but thrilling world of being a ‘somebody’? In the Land of the Dead, where one’s longevity was dependent on being remembered, Ernesto was practically immortal but Hector? His partner hadn’t improved much since he last saw him. Ernesto made his offer to Hector but for some strange reason, Hector refused and Ernesto was forced to take extreme measures. He had hoped to bring Hector with him in one piece but you couldn’t always get want you wanted. Ernesto shifted the guitar case and, trapped inside, Hector whimpered.

“Shush, mi amigo. We’re nearly there.”

There wasn’t a lot of places where someone now as infamous as Ernesto could now go. He knew how to travel unseen in the Land of the Dead and had his places where he could go to be alone. The storage facility of his Sunrise Spectacular was his favorite place. The facility was a sprawling shrine to himself. It was here that Ernesto now lived. He opened the door to his home and strode through the door.

“Hector, we’re home.” He heard his precious songwriter moan. “You’ll love it here!” Ernesto spoke to the guitar case. “Just imagine the songs you’ll write.”

He brought the guitar case to the stage and dumped its contents out. Bits and pieces of Hector came pouring out. Systematically, Ernesto bound Hector’s limbs and parts. He kept every part separated until all that was left was Hector’s skull. Half-lidded and barely conscious Hector moaned and whimpered through the entire process. His body ached to get back together.

“…please, I ca-can’t stay here…it’s dark outside….imelda…worry…”

Lacking half of one’s skull made many things difficult like thinking, speaking, and awareness of one’s environment. Hector struggled to string his words together but had to plead his case. Though his thoughts were scattered, Hector knew deep down that not returning home by sunset was something to be avoided at all costs. Someone named Imelda, whom Hector felt nothing but love for, was waiting for him. She would worry about him and although Hector couldn’t remember what or who Imelda was, he knew enough that he didn’t want to make her worry.

“Imelda isn’t important. You’re mine now. You belong to me. Imelda isn't important.”

“Sh-She…isn’t?” Hector sluggishly replied. His head was killing him. The pain was dull and constant. Hector tried to think of this Imelda person and a sharp pain went coursing through his skull. He recalled a flash of purple and a gentle, clever smile but as quickly as he was able to form that memory, it slipped through his weak mind.
Hector forgot about Imelda.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not updating yesterday. I was out visiting family. I'll answer reviews tomorrow. Please enjoy Rosita being a badass.

There were few things in Rosita’s humble opinion that could compare to a fresh bouquet of flowers. The pink, purple, and lovely red hues all bundle up with brown wrapping paper and string with a heavenly intoxicating aroma were practically magic. Adding flowers to any room gave it a bump. Flowers were more than a pretty decoration. They were a statement waiting to be made. And tonight, with Hector and Imelda on their first date in decades, Rosita was intent on making sure that they came home to a warm and charming home.

Rosita decorated the Rivera household with the best flowers she could find. It took her hours to find the perfect flowers and to arrange them in just the right way. It was almost one in the morning when the flowers were placed and the arrangements were done and when Rosita heard the front door open. Rosita did not race to the door. Hector and Imelda would want their time alone together. She suppressed her giggles. Oh, love! What a wonderful thing!

She heard Imelda’s door slam shut and the sounds of crying. Rosita rose from the couch and when she reached Imelda’s door, Victoria, Oscar, and Felipe were already there, trying to coax information out of the heartbroken matriarch.

“Imelda?” Oscar knocked on the door. “Please open up.”

“Please,” Imelda said through her sobs. “Please leave me alone.”

“You’ll feel better if you talk about it,” pleaded Felipe.

Both brothers were leaning against the door, waiting for some sign that Imelda would open up. Rosita went to Victoria who was on the floor trying to peek inside through the peephole.

“What happened?” Rosita whispered.


“Where’s your father?” Rosita asked. “He’s good at this sort of thing.”

“Papa went out,” she answered and went back to trying to see her grandmother. “She’s locked the door. We can’t get inside.”


“Please go away,” Imelda begged. “I don’t want to talk. I’ve been put through enough embarrassment for one night.”

“It’s okay to cry,” Rosita said. “Tears are natural.”
“It’s not natural for your husband to stand you up!”

“The trolley ways are backed up tonight,” Rosita excused. “No one can get anywhere.”

“Maybe he’s stuck in traffic?” offered Oscar.

“Maybe he fell into the sewers?” asked Felipe.

“Maybe a long-lost friend of his came in from somewhere out of town!” added Oscar.

“Maybe he’s saving people from a burning building!” said Felipe hopefully.

“Maybe he doesn’t care,” growled Victoria bitterly.

“MAYBE,” Imelda shouted. “He’s with some floozy fan of his!”

Rosita had enough. This wasn’t the Imelda that she knew and Hector’s behavior was out of the ordinary. “Imelda? Sweetie? Are you behind the door?”

Imelda sniffled. “No…”

“Oh, good!” Rosita, with one swift motion, kicked down the door. Oscar and Felipe screamed but Rosita didn’t care. She stepped through and put the door back up. “Hi, sweetie!”

Imelda quickly wiped away her tears. “I said that I didn’t want to talk to anyone!”

“You don’t have to talk, just listen. Hector loves you. You know this and I know this and they know this, right guys?” Oscar, Felipe, and Victoria nodded in agreement. “Do you really think that he would leave you for a fan?”

She crossed her arms and sighed. “I don’t know…everything’s different now. He’s famous. He’s got millions of fans and — her mind wandered to the awful pornographic letters. “- and people who’ve wanted him more than I did these past decades.”

“Who are you?” Rosita asked.

“What?”


Imelda looked to her brothers and granddaughter for help but they were as clueless as she was. “I- Imelda Rivera?”

“Who are you?” Rosita asked again.

“Imelda Rivera,” she answered a little louder.

“WHO ARE YOU?”

“IMELDA RIVERA! WHY ARE YOU SHOUTING AT ME?”

“Because you’ve forgotten who you are! You are Imelda Rivera! You are the leader of this family! You built a footwear empire! You created a business that’s going on for over a hundred years! You are not some weak wallflower, you are Imelda Rivera. When has she ever cried over a man?”

“She doesn’t, I mean, I don’t, I –“
“Then go find Hector! Remind him who you are! You are Imelda Rivera! You are his wife! If he wants to skip out on his anniversary with you then there are consequences to his actions!”

“I will!”

She straightened out her dress, she fixed her hair, and holding her head up high, Imelda Rivera marched out of the house to go find her husband.
Chapter 33

Every artist has their own creative style and work process. Some spend countless hours planning key plot points, others review their own work to see their largest themes, and then there are the lucky few for whom creating masterpieces of their trade comes easily. Hector Rivera was one of those lucky few people who had that magic touch. Whatever he worked on, whatever song he produced was golden. Even the songs he discarded were gems. Hector was just that good but he was only that good when he wrote from his heart.

He couldn’t snap his fingers and create a masterpiece. It didn’t work like that. What Hector needed in order to be great was his family. He needed to be where he was with the people he loved and where he was loved in return. It also wouldn’t hurt the creative process if he was in one piece. But Ernesto who had Hector disoriented, in constant pain, and separated from his body couldn’t see that.

“WRITE RIVERA!” Ernesto roared. “You’ve done this before! Write something!”

Hector winced. Fresh pain overtook him. There was no relief. From his broken bones to his shattered skull, Hector could barely create a sentence. Creating a song was out of the question.

“…i can’t…” he gently protested, wishing more than anything for peace, quiet, and to have his body together again. “…please, please, let me go…”

Everything hurt. Hector was in constant pain. He didn’t know where he was or why this man was shouting at him to write but Hector did know one thing: it was that he wasn’t supposed to be here and that he was meant to be somewhere else. His memories were hazy. He recalled a loving home with people who cared about him. He didn’t know where that was but he liked the thought of it. He liked the idea of home and people who loved him. Hector wasn’t sure if it was his mind toying with him or trying to think of anything but the hell that he was in but he sincerely hoped that it was true.

Ernesto slammed his hands down on the table. “You’re mine, Rivera! You’re not going anywhere now write!”

“Please,” Hector begged. “I can’t.”

There was too much pain, too much hurt for him to function. Ernesto was seething with rage. He would have his song one way or the other. He went to Hector’s separated and tied up body parts. Ernesto ran his finger up and down Hector’s spine. Hector yelped.

“Still sensitive, I see, mi amigo,” Ernesto said, smirking. “I’ll make you a deal. Every time you write a song, I’ll give you back a piece of your body.”

Hector’s bones shuddered with Ernesto’s touch. It was maddening to feel but not to have control of his body. Ernesto’s hands were everywhere, touching him everywhere. Nothing was sacred.

“But if you don’t write music, do you know what will happen?”

Hector couldn’t think let alone speak. The sensation of Ernesto’s hands on him paralyzed him.

“If you don’t write, I will sell you piece by piece. There’s a black market for this sort of thing. People go crazy for celebrities. They’ll wait for hours to see a person, find out where they live, watch their house for a sign of their favorite star and even dig through their trash just to have something that was used by them. Imagine how badly people will want a piece of you, Hector. I will you to the highest bidder but you know what I won’t sell? Your head. I will keep your skull with me at all times. We
will never be apart.”

Ernesto leaned down and kissed Hector. The tortured musician was helpless against the assault. Kissing Ernesto was like kissing a brick wall. It was cold, hard, and unforgiving. “I think it’s in your best interest to write, Hector.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Who wants some Frida Kahlo?

The waiter at La Luna hadn’t exaggerated how bad the trolley traffic was. The trolleys were backed up for miles. People were stuck waiting until the traffic let up. Those souls who didn’t have the patience to wait were climbing out onto the lines and jumping onto people’s roofs to get down. But Imelda had neither the patience nor the need for the trolley system. Her choice of transportation that night was her alebrije, Pepita. A mystical multi-colored creature that was part jaguar, part ram, part eagle, and part domesticated house cat. Fiercely loyal to Imelda and the Rivera family, Pepita flew her mistress to the studio which Hector shared with Frida Kahlo.

An adoring crowd of critics and fans surrounded the studio, showering their praise onto the famed artist. Imelda, was not here to give admiration. She was here to get Hector and remind him that while death may have separated them in life, they were still husband and wife. She cared for him and she loved him and she expected that in return he would have the decency to show up to their first date! Pepita elegantly landed on the street and Imelda descended perfectly. Blinded by her rage, she stormed through the crowd, pushing anyone who dared to get in her way, aside. Imelda was stopped only by security.

“Whoa, hold it, mam,” said the burly security guard. “No fans past this point.”

“I’m not a fan,” Imelda spoke through gritted teeth. “I am Imelda Rivera. I am Hector Rivera’s wife. I’m here to see my louse of a husband!”

The security guard scoffed and laughed, “So are they.” He gestured to a crowd of women who were dressed in purple gowns, had their hair tied back like she normally wore, and had almost identical markings to her’s. It was at that moment, which Imelda’s fear of infidelity grew. Those shameless women were practically throwing themselves to get into the studio. Imelda could not deny their beauty or the grace that they possessed. If even one of them had crossed the threshold into Hector’s studio and cornered him, who was to say that Hector would resist? They were beguiling, they waited for him in all kinds of weather, and each cry of Hector’s name that escaped their lips was said like a reverent prayer.

Imelda was just as awed by their devotion to a man whom they never met as she was disgusted. Hector never said anything to her about the women that flocked to his studio. He passed the line of yearning fans each and every day for the past two months. Did he ever think about letting any of them into his private studio? Imelda’s mind was filled with horrible visions of Hector with different women. Fresh tears threatened to fall but Imelda hardened her heart. Rosita was right. She was Imelda Rivera. She never cried over men and she wasn’t about to start now. If Hector wanted to sleep around with some floozy…Imelda shook her head. She would confront Hector, she would stay strong, and she would remind him who she was.

But how to get into the studio? Imelda watched as the members of undead society presented their invitations and went inside to celebrate the genius that was Frida Kahlo. Up on the roof of the studio, the party was raging. Someone started to throw marigolds petals below. It was Frida. She was cheering and laughing. Her party was thriving and she was having the time of her life.
"KAHLO!" Imelda shouted. "FRIDA!" she waved.

The master of surrealism waved to her crowd and when she saw Imelda she disappeared from sight. Moments later, Frida appeared. She laughed as she came down.

"IMELDA!" she shouted to be heard above the roaring crowd. "DARLING! HOW ARE YOU?"

One look at Imelda’s distraught features ceased Frida’s joy. She put an arm around Imelda and pulled her inside. Frida brought Imelda to a quiet part of the studio, far away from the noisy party on the roof.

"What’s wrong?" she asked.

"I need to see Hector," Imelda said.

"He’s not in. His studio is locked. What’s…" Frida knew the look that Imelda had all too well.

"Hector’s not having an affair."

Imelda looked away. She was unable to say anything.

"Hector’s not having an affair," Frida insisted. "Look at me, I know married men who have affairs. I’ve had affairs. My marriage to Diego was…" Frida shook her head. "Complicated. But Hector? The man worships the ground you walk on. He’d never have an affair."

"There have been letters…," Imelda said. "Pornographic letters. They did not shy away from the details of what they wanted and…" she turned her head to the noise those enticing women were making. "He says that he’s working on an album but… I-I need to know."

Frida nodded. Together, they went to the second floor where Hector worked. Frida pounded on the door.

"Hector!" she shouted. "OPEN UP!" Frida continued her barrage. "HECTOR! I respect you as an artist but as a concerned friend, I’m coming in. You better be decent!"

Using her spare key, Frida opened the door and threw it open with a bang. Imelda held her breath for the scene her mind tortured her with: Hector loving and caressing another woman. She could see it so clearly that it pained her but her pain was never to materialize. Inside the darkened studio, Hector was nowhere to be seen. Frida hit the lights and they saw the unsightly state in which Hector kept his workspace. Papers were littered everywhere. It was impossible to take a step without stepping on something.

"He’s not here," Imelda said, unsure of whether she should be relieved or worried. She was caught in a state of constant anxiety.

"No, but his work is." Frida picked up a multitude of papers that covered the floor. "Ay, that Hector…always a mess." A small smile slowly spread across Frida’s features. "Imelda? I don’t think you have to worry about Hector seeing anyone else."

In her hands, Frida held ten completed love songs for Imelda. She grabbed more papers and found more gorgeous love songs, each waxing poetic about Imelda. There were enough songs for forty albums. Frida shook her head. "He’s lovesick. Oh…how sweet. Imelda, have you read these? Imelda?"

The shoemaker kneeling down, holding a shattered photo frame. It was then, under Hector’s desk that she saw the tiniest bit of white. Imelda reached out for it and gasped. She knew what bone felt
like. The piece she reached for was a large chunk of bone. It was a part of someone’s skull.

“Hector?” Imelda called out, hoping that he was hiding somewhere inside the studio. “Hector! Amor? Mi amor!”

Imelda’s heart was gripped with fear.
There were no words to describe the fear that Imelda felt for Hector as she held a piece of his skull in her hands. She stepped back, horrified by what she held. A soft crunch was heard underfoot. Trembling, Imelda looked down. A sliver of skull was on the ground. Pieces of Hector’s skull were strewn about the studio. Imelda was utterly broken by this realization.

“Hector!” she cried out. “Oh…mi amor.”

As skeletons, there were few things that could truly harm them. Thankfully, murder wasn’t one of them but health and vitality in the Land of the Dead were dictated by memories. The more loved and remembered a person was, the stronger they were to injury. For someone like Hector who barely recovered from the Final Death, any egregious injury was a threat to his afterlife. That was to say nothing of how Hector’s ties to the physical world rested on their daughter’s dying mind. In an instant, Imelda saw the worst thing happening: Hector, hurt and alone, succumbing to the Final Death.

Would he be aware of what was happening without his skull together? She didn’t think he would. So, there Hector would be; suffering the worst fate imaginable, unable to comprehend why his body was failing him as the Final Death ravaged his bones. Imelda was overcome by her thoughts of losing Hector again. She could not hold back her tears. She cried for the man that she loved and over the guilt she had for thinking he would ever betray her.

“Imelda?” Frida spoke softly and gently. “I-I’m sure Hector is…” He wouldn’t be fine. No one was ever fine after having their skull bashed in but Frida knew Hector. He was resilient. He somehow managed to bounce back from everything. “I’m sure that Hector is-“

“He’s hurt!” Imelda sobbed. “I was so mad at him! I said that I didn’t care about him…I thought he was having an affair!” The guilt Imelda suffered from was heavy. It fractured her.

“So you were wrong! Big deal!” Frida said. “Move on! Hector needs you. Tears will not help. Pull yourself together and find him! Cry when you have him again.”

Without saying a word, Imelda ran from the studio with Hector’s skull piece in her hands. She pushed the crowds away.

“PEPITA!” she shouted.
Her loyal alebrije came to her call in a heartbeat. Imelda shoved the skull piece in her face. “Find Hector!”

Pepita bowed and Imelda climbed on. In a flash of color, Imelda was soaring on the back of Pepita and searching for her husband. Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts as she urged Pepita to fly faster. She was filled with rue for thinking even for a moment that Hector did not love her. It was the fame and fans. The letters that they sent, the things that they wanted from Hector…they didn’t love him. They adored his music and the mystery that he represented by being the long under-appreciated songwriter to the hottest songs that the Land of the Dead ever heard. Those fans knew nothing of the sweet man who hopped over her courtyard wall to sing to her. They didn’t know about the way he cried so many happy tears when she revealed he would be a father. Those who invaded their privacy were clueless to the dedicated and loving father who never once stopped trying to see his daughter long after he was banished from the family’s ofrenda.

Everyone loved Hector’s music but Imelda loved Hector. She didn’t give a damn about his fame or new found fortune. It was him that she wanted above all else. To have Hector whole and at home would give her no greater joy. The skull piece felt so tiny in her hands. It made her sick with grief to know that someone had struck her husband. She didn’t want to think of someone attacking her husband. Hector was the sweetest person that she knew. Rarely, if ever, was he drawn to anger. He wasn’t a combative person. In general, Hector was fairly easy-going and if his fame was anything to go by, he was now universally adored by all.

It was at that thought that Imelda couldn’t help but shudder. Hector was loved by all. His name was known by everyone. His fans were obsessive and the letters made it clear that they wanted more from Hector than he would ever give them. Imelda was sure that some fanatical admirer of Hector’s had injured and taken him. New fear washed over her. That fan, whomever they were, knew where Hector lived. Had they watched the house? Did they know everyone’s schedules? Just how long did they stalk Hector?

Imelda was lost in the paranoia that she barely noticed Pepita flying downwards. She held tight to her spirit guide as she was brought to a large storage facility on the outskirts of the Land of the Dead. The warehouse loomed over the other storages surrounding it.

“Pepita? Are you sure..?” It was then that Imelda heard someone shout at the top of their lungs, “UN POCO LOCO!”

The singing was slurred but she knew Hector’s voice when she heard it. The main entrance to the warehouse was locked. Imelda climbed the outside stairs instead. Carefully and quietly, Imelda crept inside the warehouse through a broken window. Successfully inside, she followed Hector’s voice on the upper walkways. She was relieved to hear his voice.

“Un Poco….un poco loco!”

His singing was growing faint. Imelda feared the worse and when she finally saw Hector down below, her fears were realized. Laying on the floor with only his head and torso attached was Hector. His head rolled to the sides as he tried to sing ‘Un Poco Loco’. The rest of his body was tied up by black electrical tape and separated.

“I’m nodding and yessing…blessing….UN POCO LOCO!”

“SHUT UP!”

From the corner, she saw Ernesto De La Cruz lunge at Hector. Ernesto grabbed him and shook him furiously.
“Stop singing that song!”

Disoriented, Hector replied, “…you’s wan…wanted a…pret-pretty song. I-It’s….retty.”

“A new song you idiot!” In his rage, Ernesto threw Hector down on the cold floor and stomped on his rib cage. Hector’s screams, echoing in the warehouse, would haunt Imelda for a very long time. Imelda did the only thing she could think of to ease her own suffering. She tore off a piece of the railing from the walkway and descended the stairs below to see if it was possible to kill someone who was already dead.

Ernesto would pay for his crimes against her family.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Imelda to the rescue.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, Sinclair here. I wanted to ask you all a few questions regarding the story. So, obviously, Hector's been through a lot with Ernesto torturing him, having his skull bashed in, etc., and a few of you have brought up that Hector will inevitably suffer some form of PTSD which has prompted me to do some thinking. We're on the final stretch of this story and I've got it planned where there is, as promised, a happy ending for Hector. However, I've planned the ending where it isn't 100% happy. It's like 90% happy and for me, that's pretty good.

Now, I do have two stories planned for this fandom. One is Coco based and the other stars Miguel. Here's where it gets tricky. I did promise to write Miguel's story first but would everyone be cool if I put it on the back burner and focus on Coco first? I can't give away too many details at this time but with Coco's story would get to see more of a continuation of Hector's story whereas Miguel's doesn't take place until nine years later. How does everyone feel about that? Let me know in the comments section below.

As Hector lay on the ground, bones broken, pain surging through him, he wished more than anything that he could fall into the sweet embrace of unconsciousness. Ernesto brought his heel down into Hector's side.

“How does it feel, Rivera!”

Hector screamed. Ernesto was a sadist. He kept Hector in misery and anguish but never pushed him to the brink of unconsciousness. He didn’t let him sleep either. Every second since Ernesto brought him to this hellish place, he kept pushing for songs that Hector could not write. Another kick to his torso left Hector a sobbing mess.

“Are you going to write now? Or should I start placing calls? You don’t want some deviant handling your bones, do you Hector?”

“Lo siento,” Hector whimpered between gasps. “I’m sorry…sorry…I’m so sorry.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” smirked Ernesto. He hoisted Hector’s broken form up. “You’re mine, Rivera. Don’t forget it.”

That’s what Ernesto said – that he belonged to him but that couldn’t always be true. He had to have had a life before Ernesto and this fresh hell that he was living, right? There had to be a time before his bones were broken and he was bombarded with threats of being sold to the highest bidder. He thought he recalled a home where it was warm and he was loved. However, as the hours dragged on
and Ernesto’s pushing for more music continued, Hector wasn’t sure of that home. It seemed too
good to be true. If he did have a home, with a family who loved him, then where were they?

Despair consumed him. Hector settled that his mind had created this wondrous home life and family
as a way to cope. A person wasn’t meant to live like this. It wasn’t right nor was it healthy in any
aspect. Still, Hector had to admit that he did like his home and family life even if it was fake.

A flash of red caught his attention and that’s when Hector saw her. She was a captivating woman.
Stunning didn’t come close to describe the woman in the red gown. She descended the stairs like a
1940s movie star. Maybe she was an actress, Hector’s damaged mind thought. She was certainly
gorgeous enough to be one. Everything from her daring heels to her gown even the way her black
hair cascaded down in curls screamed that she was a woman who enjoyed the finer things in life and
to whom money was of no concern.

Fear struck Hector hard. The woman had money or had enough of it to spend it on anything she
liked. Was she a buyer? Hector recoiled at the thought. He’d been good! He hadn’t done anything
wrong! He didn’t want to be sold. Hector squirmed in Ernesto’s grasp. Would pleading work? It
seemed unlikely. If the woman freely bought celebrities parts she was as cold as – Hector paused.
Did the woman just wink at him? He saw her hold the metal railing. She tapped it on Ernesto’s
shoulder. He turned around.

Imelda swung hard and fast. Ernesto barely saw the pipe before it connected to his jaw. The sound
the pipe made against bone was sickening and the blow was terrible. A crack, large, ugly, and jagged
went from Ernesto’s jaw all the way to his eye socket. The former star howled in pain but he kept a
tight grip on his songwriter.

“Hello Ernesto,” Imelda spoke calmly as she readied up for another swing.

Partially blinded by the pain, Ernesto barely saw Imelda but he knew her voice and that was enough
to have him backing away from her.

“Imelda! How….nice to see you.” He held Hector in front of his as a shield. Surely, Imelda wouldn’t
take a swing with Hector in front? It seemed to work or at least she didn’t try to hit him again.
Nevertheless, she kept her guard up and didn’t lower her weapon.

“I’m going to break every single one of your two hundred and six bones,” she said, her voice filled
with hatred, “And I’m going to make sure that no one will be able to piece you back together again.”

“Imelda,” Ernesto backed away. “Be reasonable.”

“I am. I’m thinking how reasonable it would be to use your head as a vase. The flowers might die
but it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Imelda…”

“Don’t you ‘Imelda’ me,” she threatened. She advanced upon Hector and Ernesto. She didn’t take
steps. She stalked forward after her prey. “You kidnapped Hector, you maimed him, and you were
going to sell him? You murderous son of a bitch. Be happy that you’re already dead.”

“Imelda,” Ernesto persisted, keeping his good eye on her weapon. “Is it really worth it? All this
effort? Ask yourself this: is Hector that good of a husband? Didn’t he leave you? And Coco? To
fend for yourselves?” He shook his head. “You and I both know that he isn’t. And even if he was,
look at him now!” He held up Hector who whimpered at being used. The woman was as beautiful as
she was terrifying. He didn’t want to be alone with her. “What kind of husband would he make in
his current state?” Ernesto pressed down on Hector’s collarbone and snapped it. Hector winced and moaned.

Seeing Hector in pain stopped Imelda cold. Ernesto smirked. “Ah, see? He’s falling to pieces.”

“No thanks to you!”

Ernesto shrugged. “Why don’t we make a deal?”

“A deal?”

“Hector is famous, yes? And I’m sure that a woman such as yourself would prefer to have a husband who was whole instead of…” he gave Hector a once over and scoffed. “Hector’s no good to you but I still have some of my connections. I know men who would if they were alive, die to be in your presence. Here’s what you and I will do. You leave my humble abode and I keep Hector’s skull. We sell off the rest of him piece by piece and split the money 50/50.”

“You would keep his skull?”

“Of course!” said Ernesto jovially. “You could take whatever you wanted from him. He won’t complain. We sell whatever’s left of Hector, split the money and go our separate ways. What do you say to that?”

“Hello.”

“Hello?” Ernesto parroted.

“Hello?” Ernesto parroted.

“To Pepita.”

Imelda’s alebrije tore down the warehouse doors and roared. She turned her sights to Ernesto and hissed. Ernesto, concerned more with self-preservation than fame, discarded Hector so he could run away but Ernesto could not outrun Imelda’s alebrije. Pepita pounced on him and shook him like a maraca. She threw him into the air and caught him. Her razor sharp teeth broke Ernesto’s rib cage.

“Take him away,” Imelda commanded. “I don’t want him near Hector.”

Pepita was more than happy to take Ernesto away. After all, she rarely got new toys to play with. Ernesto’s screams faded into the night and Imelda breathed a sigh of relief knowing that he was far away from Hector now. She turned her attention to Hector who was writhing in pain. Carefully, she approached him.

“Hector? Are you okay?”

“Please,” he begged, trying to get away from her. It was a difficult task due to him be only a head and torso. “Please…don’t hurt me.”

“I could never…” but she had hurt him. She cursed his name, she left him that monster for hours… “Do you want to leave this place?”

He did but – pain washed over Hector anew. It was getting harder to remember things and in his current state, he was in no condition to turn down help of any kind. Hector nodded. Imelda smiled but now came to the difficult part of bringing Hector home. He was in pieces both literally and figuratively. It wasn’t right to put Hector back together in the place where he had withstood so much. She would bring him home and repair him there. Imelda tore her dress up to her knees. She created a makeshift pack and grabbed all of Hector’s limbs. She reached down to pick Hector up. He avoided
her touch.

“I know you’re scared but it’s okay. You’re going to be fine.”

Hector allowed himself to be picked up by Imelda. He was amazed by how gentle she was. At any moment, he expected her to inflict the same pain that Ernesto had done for hours.

“Do you want me to carry your head?”

The pack was getting full. She couldn’t imagine that Hector would feel safe if he couldn’t see where he was going. Hector, mind addled with pain, wearily sighed.

“Oh-huh.”

Gently, Imelda removed his head from his torso. She placed Hector’s damaged torso inside the pack.

“I’m going to pick up your head now, okay?”

“…okay…” he whimpered.

She carried Hector’s head in her arms and together, they left the warehouse.

Imelda walked in silence as she and Hector made their way back to civilization. Hector was slowly drifting to sleep in her arms. There were a million things Imelda wanted to say to him but would he remember? And if he did, would he ever forgive her? Imelda absentmindedly started to run her hand through Hector’s hair. It didn’t go unnoticed by Hector. It was soothing. Imelda’s nimble fingers were a relief to his pounding headache. He moaned a little. Imelda stopped to his dismay.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked.

“No…i liked it….”

She resumed running her hand through his hair. Hector happily moaned. It was rare for him to not feel pain. He liked any relief he could have. He liked her touch. It was soft and kind. It was the opposite of Ernesto in every single way. He wondered if she was different from Ernesto too or if it was just her touch that was different.

“I’m sorry,” Imelda spoke.

Tiny spikes of fear made Hector worry. She was like Ernesto but apologetic. She was going to sell him too or beat him. Hector suppressed a small whine. Why was everyone out to hurt him? What did he do to become the world’s punching bag?

“…please, don’t…”

“No, I’m sorry. I never should have doubted you. I’m sorry, Hector.”

Was she apologizing to him? Hector didn’t know what to do. People who sold or beat other people didn’t usually apologize so sincerely. Maybe she was an actress and she was just acting.

“…it’s okay,” Hector said warily. He couldn’t get a read on her at all. “What’s your name?”

Imelda was frozen with fear. She held Hector’s skull up to her own and asked, “You don’t remember me?”
“Should I?” he asked, equal parts scared and worried.

“No, it’s okay. It’s okay. Shh….relax,” she urged. “My name is Imelda.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” he smiled. “You’re very beautiful, Imelda.”

She smiled sadly. “Thank you, Hector.”

“….do you have a family?” he asked, trying to get as much information on her as he possibly could.

Imelda wanted to scream. Hector had forgotten everything. She lost him again. Ernesto had taken everything from their family once more. It wasn’t enough for Ernesto to steal Hector’s life, his music but he had erased his mind. Ernesto ruined everything he touched.

“Yes. I have a family; a large one actually.” She held him back in her arms and brushed her fingers through his hair. “There’s me, my brothers, my son-in-law and his sister and there’s my granddaughter. And you live with us too.”

Hector’s mind struggled to comprehend what Imelda told him. “What?”

“I’m your wife, mi amor.”

Pain rippled through Hector thoughts. It was hard to stay awake. He wanted nothing more than to rest. “We’re married?”

“Yes,” she nodded although he couldn’t see it. “We’re married. I’m your wife.”

“You’re really married to me?” Hector started to doze off. “Huh….”

“I am.” She stroked his hair. Her thumb brushed across the gaping entrance of Hector’s shattered skull. “Hector, would you mind if I tried something?”

He moaned a little – too tired to put up a protest. Imelda reached into the pack for his skull piece. It was large and would cover up most of the wound. Cautiously, Imelda placed the piece into the back of Hector’s skull. It fit perfectly. Imelda felt his bones seize up.

“Hector?” Imelda panicked.

He didn’t respond back. Hector, after hours of torture, finally fell asleep. Imelda held him close to her.

“I’m so sorry, mi amor.”

She walked continued her walk back to civilization in complete and utter silence.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Who's up for some angsty cuddles?

Chapter Notes

Alright, I've gone over the reviews and Coco's story is going to be my next project. Don't worry, Miguel fans your story is currently in production. It'll be great! There's angst, Hector fussing over Miguel, Miguel fussing over Hector, Mama Imelda being generally upset at events, and did I forget to mention murder most foul? You'll love it.

It wasn’t an easy task to travel the Land of the Dead unseen but Imelda managed to pull it off. As dawn rose over the world, Imelda arrived at the Rivera family home. She opened the back door to the kitchen and stepped inside. She should have felt relief that Hector and she were home but she didn’t. Getting home was only the first part of what was to be a long and difficult task of getting Hector back to normal. Imelda knew that Hector took priority but the family had to know first. She would inform them of what transpired and she would take Hector back to their bedroom and then…

Imelda sighed. She didn’t know what to do next. Hector was in pieces. There weren’t any doctors in the Land of the Dead. Well, there were doctors but flesh and blood doctors! To fix broken bones in the afterlife relied on being remembered. Hector’s memory being sustained relied on Coco and – Imelda choked back a sob. She was overwhelmed by it all. Coco’s mind was dying. She couldn’t keep Hector alive forever and in his current state, it felt it was only a matter of time before the Final Death claimed him again. She couldn’t lose him again.

“Imelda?” she heard Rosita say.

“She’s home!” And now came her brothers.

Imelda wiped away her tears and put on a brave face. She would need it if she was going to tell her family what happened. All at once the Riveras charged into the kitchen. They were ready to lecture Hector on standing Imelda up but the second that they saw Imelda, dress ripped and looking like hell, their anger dissipated.

“What happened?” asked Felipe.

“Who hurt you?” asked Oscar.

Imelda took a deep breath. “I’m fine. No really, I am.”

Victoria noticed the pack on Imelda’s back. “Where’s Hector?”

Imelda shook her head. This was harder than she thought it was going to be. “Everyone, family meeting. Take a seat.”
The Riveras did take a seat at the kitchen table. Imelda put the pack down and everyone heard the sound of bones clattering inside the pack. Fear and horror took hold of the shoemaker family.

“Oh my god,” Rosita gasped.

“Is that…?” Victoria asked breathlessly.

From the pack, Imelda removed Hector’s sleeping skull and held it in her arms.

“Is he dead?” Oscar asked. Felipe elbowed his brother in the ribs and shot him a dirty look. “No, what I mean is, is this, you know, Final Death related?”

“Imelda?” Felipe asked. “What happened?”

She had the whole speech written up in her mind. She knew exactly what she was going to say and how she was going to say it but the words got lost and Imelda could only say, “Ernesto happened.”

Imelda swore she was going to stay strong but she couldn’t. Everyone needed to be soft and Imelda desperately needed to be soft right now. She sobbed. Felipe and Oscar were the first to move to her. They hugged their sister as she cried.

“It’ll be okay,” Felipe whispered.

“We’ll get through this, Mela,” Oscar said. “Don’t worry about it. We will get through, okay?”

Imelda nodded but she couldn’t speak. Oscar and Felipe hugged her tighter. Both of their hearts broke. Words were fairly useless in a situation like this but it was what they knew. How they were going to get through this, they weren’t sure but they were a strong family and they had each other.

There was a knock at the back door. Everyone, sans Hector and Imelda, glared at the intrusion on their family. Victoria had her boot off, ready to strike at the unwelcomed visitor onto their home. Rosita was right behind her with her sandal off. They nodded to each other. Rosita would open the door and Victoria would hit whoever it was that decided now of all times to intrude. Rosita opened the door and Victoria stopped an inch from hitting Frida Kahlo.

The artist grinned nervously at the scene she encroached upon. “Hola,” she waved anxiously.

“Hola,” chorused the Riveras.

“Frida?” Imelda sniffled. “W-What are you doing here?”

“You, um, you left the studio so suddenly. I was worried and –“ Frida gasped when she saw Hector’s skull on the table and his bones in Imelda’s makeshift pack. “Oh dear god…uh, you left the, uh, studio and…” From her purse, Frida got out a small baggie of white shards. “I got them all.”

Imelda grabbed the bag of Hector’s skull. “Thank you!” she hugged Frida. “Thank you so much!”

“Think nothing of it.” Frida returned the hug. “I can’t stay long. The press was hard to dodge and –“

As if on cue, the sounds of reporters and fans were close to mobbing and breaking down the front of the Rivera family home. Frida winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to –“

“It’s not your fault,” Oscar defended.

She smiled gratefully. “I’ll distract them. See if I can pull them away.”
“We’ll handle the front door, right Victoria?” said Rosita.

“Right!”

Frida left through the back door and disappeared into the night. She was successful in being distracting but now that the reporters knew where Hector Rivera lived, they were insistent on seeing the mysterious songwriter. Imelda heard their ravenous cries to catch just a glance at Hector. Oscar and Felipe did not want to leave Imelda alone but the sooner that they got the media away, the better everyone would be.

“Don’t worry,” Oscar assured her.

“We’ll handle this!” Felipe promised

The twins ran after Rosita and Victoria to handle the mob of reporters and fans. Imelda was left alone with Hector in the kitchen. She sat down and didn’t know what to do with herself. Well, she knew what she would like to do. Imelda wanted to take a shower and to rest but more than anything she wanted to curl up in bed with Hector and be able to sleep knowing that he was safe and in one piece. She stole a glance at Hector who was still sleeping peacefully on the kitchen table.

Imelda loved Hector. She loved him more than she thought it was capable to love anyone.

It was that love that made Imelda pick up Hector’s head and limbs. He deserved to sleep in a real bed and not on the kitchen table. Imelda brought Hector into their bedroom. The door was back on its hinges with an apology note from Rosita. Imelda added her own addition to the note which clearly stated:

I need some time alone with Hector.

Imelda locked her door. She brought Hector’s skull to his side of the bed and placed him on his pillow. He moaned a little but the pillow was soft and warm and a relief from the hours of torture he’d suffered at Ernesto’s hands. Imelda stepped back and watched him carefully. She didn’t get a good look at him before. The warehouse was dark but now, under the bedroom lights, she saw how grave the damage was. The scars were awful. Tiny cracks emerged from the back of his skull. One reached his eye and whenever he moved, his eye socket would open a little more. Instinctively, Imelda brushed his hair out of his face. She’d done it a million times when they were alive. It felt normal to do so now. Hector sighed.

“Oh, mi amor…” Imelda leaned down and kissed him softly on his forehead.

She knew what she had to do. Imelda grabbed the pack and the baggie of skull shards. She began the long task of putting Hector pack together. She started with his skull. Imelda rested on the floor and put Hector’s head sideways on the pillow. She worked her way up. The skull fragments were incredibly tiny and fragile. Nevertheless, Imelda carefully continued the arduous task. It was a labor of love. She would do anything to restore Hector. Time and time again, the pieces slipped through her fingers but Imelda pressed on. Using tweezers, she put the shards back into their rightful place. The slivers of bone made a bizarre sound, like glasses clinking together, as they reconnected.

When Imelda was finished, she stood back to look at her work. She waited for Hector’s eyes to open and to hear his voice but it didn’t happen. Hector stayed as unresponsive as the moment she put in the first piece. Disappointed but not discouraged, Imelda went on with restoring him. From her pack, Imelda reached for Hector’s bones and freed them from the black electrical tape that bound them together. Once freed, Hector’s bones were eager to rejoin their mangled body. The smaller bones such as Hector’s fingers and toes needed assistance in finding their spot but Imelda set them straight.
The same clinking noise was heard as his bones reconnected. Imelda placed Hector’s head on his body and put him back together. Having his body in one piece should have made him look better but it didn’t. It showed the extent of what he had gone through. Cracks and fractures scarred Hector’s body from head to toe.

Suddenly, Hector gasped in pain and his bones rattled in a discordant way. After a minute the awful noise stopped. Hector’s chest rose up and down and any indication of pain that Hector was in was gone. Imelda allowed her guard to go down and cautiously, she approached her husband.

“Hector? Mi Corazon?”

She was almost too afraid to touch him but she needed to confirm that he was here, in their bedroom, and in one piece. Imelda pulled the covers over Hector and joined him in bed. She rested beside him, trying her best to embrace him without causing him any pain or bones to break. It was like hugging glass. She propped her head up with her right hand as her left rested on his chest. She resisted the urge to take him and hold him tight. Outside, she could hear the mob of reporters and fans.

Imelda scowled at their frantic and eager cries. Those people were animals. They didn’t just want Hector, they craved him. He was like a drug for them. She hated them. Why couldn’t everyone just leave them alone? Her family was not a sideshow attraction for the world and Hector was nothing like Ernesto. Hector whimpered in pain as the noise outside grew. Imelda nearly left the bed to scream at the crowds to leave them alone but she couldn’t leave Hector alone. It didn’t matter if it was out the bedroom and to the front door, she was too scared to leave him by himself.

What if he woke up? What if he didn’t know where he was? What if he didn’t know who he was?

She couldn’t compound the hurt he’d already gone through by leaving him in a place where he wasn’t going to be familiar with. So, she stayed by his side and listened to his breathing and the crowds slowly fading away. Gradually, Imelda started to relax. She placed her head next to Hector’s and sighed.

“I love you, Hector.”

Getting back to normal wasn’t going to be easy but with love, family, and music, Imelda knew that it was possible. It was just going to take time and for Imelda, when it came to Hector, she had all the time in the world.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Hector wakes up.

Chapter Notes

Here we go! Some angsty cuddles. I'll answer reviews tomorrow!

Imelda didn’t mean to fall asleep. The matriarch of the Rivera family intended to stay awake until Hector woke up so that he would see a familiar face and not panic at his new surroundings after everything he had gone through with Ernesto. However, Imelda was exhausted and unfortunately, she fell asleep. She didn’t hear Hector’s bones slowly rattle or the way his breath quickened as he fell into the grasps of what was going to be the start of a series of long and reoccurring nightmares. Hector whimpered and his eyes were shut tight.

There were hands touching him everywhere. His face, his ribs, his arms, and legs – there were hands all over him, touching him. Hector stopped being a person and became an object. He didn’t have feelings, he was to be used and abused as whoever was touching him saw fit.

SNAP!

There went another bone. Rough hands pressed down onto his collarbone and it broke into pieces. More fondling ensued. It was maddening. Hector opened his mouth the scream, to protest, to beg for help and mercy but nothing came out. There was only silence – horrible, terrible, and all-consuming silence.

Hector woke with a startled gasp. He instinctively reached out to swat away at the hands that were going to grope him but found that moving his arms was impossible. His entire body felt as though it was made out of lead. A strangled whimper escaped his lips. He couldn’t move and he couldn’t speak. Hector was utterly helpless.

A hand, cold and unfamiliar, rubbed up and down his ribs and chest. Hector choked back a sob. Ernesto had really done it, he sold him to the highest bidder. Hector wanted to scream for help but nothing came out. Tears started to form. Hector didn’t know where he was but he wanted to go home. But home…where was home? Where was he? The person’s hand went lower down his body until it reached his pelvis. It wrapped around his lower half and pulled him closer. Hector shuddered. Panic raced through his mind. He was someone’s plaything now! He was a -

Hector heard a sigh. Straining his eyes in the dark, he struggled to see the person cuddling against him.

“…imelda?” he dared to whisper. “Mela?”

She stirred. Her eyes fluttered open and she whispered, half-asleep, “Yes, mi amor?”
That was all it took to break Hector. He now knew that he wasn’t with Ernesto or trapped with some celebrity crazed pervert. He was home with Imelda, the love of his life. He was finally safe. With the little strength he had left, he turned over to face her and sobbed into her warm and loving embrace. No words needed to be said; they knew what had happened and that recovery would be long. Imelda was fine with it. She loved Hector and would be there for him until the very end but for Hector? He was emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted. He didn’t have the wherewithal to even begin to process what happened to him. Hector cried until exhaustion took him and he fell back asleep.

Imelda held him a little closer when he slept. It seemed to bring him comfort and security. After everything that he went through, Imelda could no deny Hector anything. She cuddled closer to him and rested her head atop his. Faintly, she could hear some commotion downstairs but she couldn’t tell if it was Hector’s fans or their family deciding how to approach the topic of ‘Why Did Hector Come Home In Pieces?’

The more Imelda thought of how she was going to answer that question, the more exhausted she felt. Ernesto De La Cruz happened, what else was there to say? But it wouldn’t be enough. Her family would want details and specifics. They would want to know everything that had happened. Imelda wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. Speaking about it would mean reliving it all over again. She could still see Hector, on the floor, as Ernesto threatened and beat him. Imelda gritted her teeth in anger.

How dare that man invade her family again?

She swore she would never let anyone harm her family. She would keep everyone safe. They would move again, they would get a P.O. Box for their mail, she would file restraining orders and hire bodyguards and body doubles. Whatever it took, no matter the cost or how extreme, she would have her family safe and sound. She had to, no one else would. As far as Imelda could tell, the Land of the Dead saw her family, specifically Hector as an object for their amusement.

Hector was not an object, Imelda scowled.

She curled up closer to her peacefully sleeping husband. He sighed contently knowing that he was in her arms and not some stranger’s. Imelda couldn’t help but kiss him. She loved him. Imelda softly kissed him on the lips.

“I’ll protect you, mi amor.”

She would never let anyone or thing hurt her family ever again.
Chapter Summary

The promised happy ending.

Chapter Notes

Well, here we are, at the end. Thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, liking, bookmarking, etc. this story. It truly means the world to me to know that people genuinely like what I write. I hope everyone enjoys the final chapter of Broken Bonds and Bones.

Imelda wasn’t sure how long she laid next to Hector and frankly, she didn’t care. She could have stayed next to Hector until the end of everything. Brushing her fingers through his hair, Imelda contemplated their life now. She doubted the fans would ever really go away. Everything about Hector from his tousled black hair to his music attracted fans like moths to a flame. If Hector was truly the flame then he would be burnt out. Imelda wondered if he would ever play music again after all the trouble it brought him.

She hoped that it wouldn’t deter him. Music made him happy and when he was happy, she was happy. It was his happiness, well-being, and safety that she put above all else. Ernesto was…Ernesto was a monster. Imelda didn’t know what was worse: That someone like Ernesto had gotten to Hector so easily or the offer he had made her. Sell Hector to people or persons unknown. There were people out there who would buy him if given the chance. Strangers, who thought nothing of buying a person, had their sights set on Hector. Somewhere, in the Land of the Dead, there were actually people who contemplated buying him. The paranoia Imelda had was severe. Those people were out there but who were they?

Were they the neighbors across the street? Was it someone she knew? Did they shop at the store? How many people were out there?

Imelda shook her head. How was she meant to weed out those friendly, well-meaning souls from the monsters that were like Ernesto? It wasn’t like they proudly parade their fetish. Or maybe they did. Imelda shuddered. Was it too much to just want to spend the rest of her afterlife with her husband? Without fear of some pervert or fan chasing after Hector? All she wanted was to stay next to him but, she wasn’t given the chance to. There was a knock at her door. It sounded like Felipe.

“Imelda? Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine…” she answered not too loudly as to disturb Hector.

“Can we come in?”

“No.”
She loved her family, she adored her brothers, but she needed time with Hector. She needed to stay with him. Explanations could wait until…Imelda glanced over at her clock. It was morning, nearly noon. Whatever. It could wait. She just wanted to be with Hector. The rest of the world could wait.

“It’s…it’s kind of important, Mela,” added Oscar urgently.

Did her really think using her nickname would actually convince her to leave Hector’s side? They were in for a surprise. Neither hell nor high water could remove her from Hector.

“We really need to come inside,” begged Felipe.

That did sound bad. Was it the fans? Had they storms the house? Were they climbing over the walls? Now Imelda knew why Ernesto lived in a tower. It was harder to break into.

“Can it wait until later?”

“Eh…well….” Her brothers mumbled and stuttered. Then, a new voice asked, “Mama? Can I come in?”

Imelda sprinted to the door. She opened it and standing on the other side with bones as white as snow was her daughter, Coco.

“Hola, mama.”

And that was all it took to break Imelda. She wrapped her arms around her daughter and sobbed. Fear then struck her. Imelda looked back to the bed and Hector, despite the odds, was still here. She had her family together again.

“I’ve missed you so much!” Coco laughed. “Oh, mama, please don’t cry. It was my time.”

“How long…?” Imelda could barely speak.

“Nearly twelve hours, right Julio?”

“Yes, mi amor,” he agreed, placing a kiss on her cheek.

“Where were you?” Oscar asked.

“I was stuck in the worst traffic of my afterlife.” Julio groaned. “Twelve hours stuck in a trolley.”

“Twelve hours stuck in a trolley with me, mi amor,” Coco laughed mischievously. “That wasn’t so bad, right?”

Mixed in with the laughter, there was a small groan. Coco looked over onto the bed. There was little movement.

“Is that…Papa?” she nervously asked.

Imelda nodded. She wanted to tell her dear daughter that Hector was in poor condition to see anyone but after all this time, Coco deserved to see him even if it was for only a moment. The reunion had been delayed for far too long for put it off any longer. Coco crept towards the bed. Decades…she had waited decades to see him again.

“Papa?” she whispered, to the skeletal man asleep in the bed.

Hector’s eyes fluttered open. His eyes were dazed and unfocused but he knew his daughter when
she spoke to him.

“Coco?” he groaned, not truly believing that she was actually here. It had to be a cruel trick that his mind was playing on him.

“Hola, Papa,” she smiled.

Hector was too weak to raise his arms to hug her but Coco was strong. She gave her father the biggest hug in the world. The hug ended too soon as Hector didn't have the strength to stay up. Imelda joined her husband and her daughter on the bed. Hector’s weakened state did not go unnoticed by Coco. This wasn’t the father that she knew. Her father was lively and the man lying in bed, barely conscious, did not resemble her father in any form or fashion. If it weren’t for his voice or her mother outright telling her who he was, she wouldn’t have known it was him. Coco looked to her mother. Fear and worry were etched into her features.

Imelda hugged her daughter and sighed, “It’s a long story.”

Chapter End Notes

A happy ending...done by killing Coco off. Eh, it's canonical and that's good enough for me. Alright, it's been fun! I'm going to take maybe a week off and come back with more stories. See ya!

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