It's been almost two years since Miguel's adventure in the Land of the Dead. Music has been returned to the Rivera family and everything is going great. But why does Miguel keep dreaming about the bridge? And why is this strange tourist asking him about astral projection?

Nell is a graphic novel artist who has come to Santa Cecilia in search of inspiration. What she finds is a strange boy with a marigold glow and strange abilities that he is only starting to realize.

When an old grudge rears its head and Miguel is stolen back across the marigold bridge it is up to Nell and the Rivera clan to bring him back before it's too late.

Notes

Have you ever done that thing where you get an idea for a project but you know you don’t have time for it, so you think “Oh, I will just write some quick notes so I can come back to this when I have time”.

And then the notes themselves end up being fifteen pages long.

And then you think “Ok this went a little far but this is as far as it goes”. And then the next thing you know you’ve written thirty pages of actual story that you shouldn’t have had time to write in the first place?

That is basically this. I have been so inspired by this movie and the varying fics I’ve been reading by all you other wonderful writers I just had to start this one! I hope you like it.

My Spanish is almost non-existent so I am relying very heavily on google translate and some other varying slang references here, so if you do find any errors please let me know and I will fix them.

And as I come from a time when one could actually be sued for writing fanfiction, I will include this disclaimer: I do not own Coco. Any and all characters and settings associated with this film are property of Disney and Pixar.

With that being said, on with the story!
New Arrival

Chapter Notes

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With that being said, on with the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A Year in the Life

Chapter 1: New Arrival

Santa Cecilia was a postcard.

That was Nell’s first thought as the cab wound its way through the small town. With its colorful buildings and half-paved streets, it could have belonged in any decade at all from the last hundred and fifty years, with only a few hints of modernity. This was a place that moved at its own pace, that respected tradition as much as convenience.

This was exactly the atmosphere Nell was looking for, the perfect setting for her next novel.
Well, graphic novel. With a mini-series, a stand-alone graphic novel, and a recently-complete web-series under her belt, Nell was more than eager to start her next project.

There was a kind of familial nostalgia that brought her to Mexico from her home in western Canada. Her great-grandparents had emigrated north at the turn of the century to settle in Montana. Their own children had continued the journey, living a couple of years in Vancouver before eventually settling in Kelowna. Though the small village that her ancestors had once called home no longer existed, Nell could feel the spirit of them here and hoped that the months she planned to spend in Santa Cecilia would help her reconnect with her roots as well as provide the inspiration she needed for her upcoming book.

She had the look of her grandmother when she was young, with soft brown skin and thick chestnut-colored hair. She’d gotten the color from her mom’s side, but the unruly waves of it definitely came from her dad. Most of the time she kept it tied back with some thick ribbon or in a braid of some kind, just to keep it out of her face. The light scattering of freckles that dotted her face came from his side as well. She dressed for comfort as much as style in a pair of cropped blue floral-print leggings and a white sleeveless tunic with crocheted lace insets. The sky-blue sweater she had worn for warmth on the plane was tucked away in her purse, unneeded in the heat of the late-afternoon sun.

Her fingers itched for her pencil as the taxi’s route took them through the town square, her toe tapping to the beat of the song that played through the crackling radio. The driver turned left down a street marked with a shoe, reaching to turn the music down as he did so.

Nell shifted in her seat, moving to gather her purse and carry-on, thinking they might be close, but the driver turned down another street and turned the volume back up again. His passenger gave him a strange look as she released her purse strap. What was that about?

The driver must have caught a glimpse of her expression in the rear-view mirror as he gave a casual shrug. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Pardon?”

The man shuddered and said something about “la chancla”. Whatever that meant.

Nell’s Spanish was passable, the result of a few solid months of binge-studying and review with her mother’s parents. Slang, however, was something she still struggled with. She was pretty sure that a “chancla” was a sandal, but why would someone be afraid of a shoe?
The cab slowed to a stop in front of a three-story building painted a cheerful orange. Nell checked the address on her phone against the map she’d been following and smiled. She was finally here.

Nell stepped out of the car as the driver moved to the trunk to retrieve her butterfly-printed suitcase. She’d packed lightly for this leg of the trip, taking only one piece of luggage with her on the plane. The old steamer trunk that carried the rest of her things she’d shipped off a few days ago, and would be arriving later in the week.

She paid the driver, then moved to knock on the front door, trading the sunglasses that she was wearing for the regular prescription glasses that she had stashed in the case in her purse.

The woman who answered it barely came up to Nell’s chin. She was slight, almost birdlike, the image only enhanced by the bright peacock blue of her day dress. Her dark hair was streaked with grey, tied back in a loose tail.

“Si ñora Montero?” Nell asked.

“Si!” The woman smiled. “Ah, you are Penelope, yes? Bienvenedo! Please, come in.”

Nell tried not to flinch at the use of her full name. “Ah, gracias. And please, call me Nell.” Only her grandparents called her Penelope. Growing up everyone else had called her “Penny”, but she decided to start going by “Nell” once she started university. But Señora Montero had refused to call her anything but her full name since seeing her identification early on in their correspondence.

Her landlady continued to chatter cheerfully as she led her inside. “I see you made good time on your flight. My son, he lives in Mexico City, and he flies all over for work. I do not like planes. I would much rather keep my feet on the ground. Come, I will show you to your room.”

“Thank you, Señora.”

Her landlady waved her off. “No no no. None of this formality. You will call me Tía, or Tía Caro. We are family while you stay with us.”
The apartment she would be renting for the next few months was on the second floor. It was more like a bachelor’s suite, with the bedroom and living room sharing the central space, and a small kitchenette off to one side with a stove and a sink and a small refrigerator. If she needed any more space, Tia Caro told her, she was free to use the main kitchen on the ground floor. Oh, and she hoped that Nell would join them for dinner, as the tenants all ate dinner together most nights.

The furnishings were simple, with a wood-framed couch set against the end of the double bed in the center of the room, a couple of end tables, and a kitchen table with two chairs off to the side. The walls were painted bright white, contrasting with the muted orange of the floor tiles. A pair of hand-knotted rugs framed the bed, a third spread under the coffee table in front of the couch. The windows, Nell was told, could be opened, but did not have a screen. She should make sure that they were locked overnight, or if she was going out for the day.

“Ah, but you are tired after your long trip. I will leave you to settle in and you will join us for dinner tonight, si?”

‘Tired’ was a bit of an understatement. Flying was approximately equivalent to the seventh circle of Hell to someone like Nell, who was prone to debilitating motion sickness. The Gravol that she’d dosed herself with that morning had become her best friend by the end of the day, allowing her to sleep through most of the flight.

“Ah, si. Gracias, Tia Caro.”

“Ah, de nada!” Caro smiled. “Here, I will leave your keys on the counter. The square one is for the front door, and the round one is for your apartment. If you have any questions at all, I will be downstairs.”

Nell saw her landlady out and locked the door behind her. She didn’t bother unpacking, didn’t even take off her little ballet flats. She barely managed to shuffle over to the bed and fall face-down on the covers before falling into an exhausted sleep.
Nell was awoken some time later by a knock on the door. From the sound of it, they might have been knocking for a while. She surfaced blearily, rubbing her eyes with one hand, knocking her glasses askew.

“Penelope, are you awake?”


“Supper will be on the table in a few minutes if you want to join us downstairs.”

Nell’s stomach grumbled loudly in response. “I’ll be right down. Gracias, Sí—as ah… Tía Caro.”

As the sound of her landlady’s footsteps retreated down the stairs, Nell glanced around. Some time during her nap she had kicked off her shoes and wrapped herself up in the covers like a human burrito. She ran one hand absently through her hair, finding it escaping from its braid in mad, staticy frizz. Nell released the braid with a sigh, combing through the tangles with her fingers. That seemed to only make it worse so she dug her comb out of her carry-on to attempt to tame the beast before she met the rest of the residents.

She knew from earlier emails that most of the people who lived in the building were related to Caro in some way. The non-family tenants lived on the second floor with Nell.

It appeared that most of them had already gathered in the dining room by the time Nell had made her way down. She could hear them from the stairwell, a cacophony of loud voices carrying snippets of conversation that she only half-understood.

Tía Caro reigned over the kitchen with a wooden spoon and a floral-printed apron. A younger woman — her daughter? — followed behind her with a giant tray heaped with tamales that she placed in the center of the gigantic dining room table. Three young girls, the oldest maybe eight years old, were seated between their parents at one end of the table. Two older gentlemen, one with a truly impressive greying moustache, sat across from them. There was also a middle-aged couple and another older woman in a white blouse and purple skirt seated next to them.

The landlady grinned when she saw her. “Ah, Penelope! You are awake! Come, come! Join us. Everyone, this is Penelope, our newest tenant. Penelope, mi familia. My daughter Esperanza and her husband, Juan, and their girls, Maria, Anabel, and Lia. Across from them is Antonio, and Carlos. My
sister, Lucia, is there at the end of the table with Nico and Renata.”

 Unsure how she was going to keep all of their names straight, Nell waved. “Nice to meet you all. Is there anything else that needs to be grabbed from the kitchen, Tia Caro?”

“No no, everything is here. Come, sit!” Caro insisted. “We will get to know you.”

The moment Nell sat down she found herself loaded with questions, her plate loaded with food.

“So Nell, what brings you to Santa Cecilia?” Lucia asked.

“Do you have family here?”

“Of course she doesn’t, Carlos. If she did she would be staying with them.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe they don’t have room.”

“Familia es familia. There is always room.”

“Why is your accent funny?” That one from the middle of the sisters -- Anabel?

“Woah, woah! One at a time,” Nell laughed. “First, please call me Nell. Penelope makes me feel like an old Victorian lady.”

“But it is such a lovely name!” Renata protested as she served herself from a plate of arroz con pollo.

“Gracias-- Renata was it?”

“Sí.”
“Gracias, Renata.” Nell said with a nod. “I like it too, but I feel like it’s a little mature for me, you know? For now, I think ‘Nell’ suits me better. I came to Santa Cecilia because I’m doing some research for a new project. I don’t have any family nearby, or at least none that I’m aware of.”

“You are family while you are here,” Caro said with a kind smile from across the table. “Penelope is a very talented artist.”

“A real artist or one of the ones who scribbles on a blank canvas and calls it art?” Antonio asked from behind his giant moustache, flinching away with a sharp ‘ay’ when Caro clipped the back of his head with her hand. “Just asking…”

“I’d call myself a real artist,” Nell answered evenly. “But I suppose that would depend on if you consider graphic novels to be art.”

Maria, the eldest of the girls, raised her hand as if she was in school, waving it in the air. “Ooh! Ooh! What’s a graphic novel?”

“Graphic novels are like… Como lo dices … big, fancy comic books. I have four out in total right now, and an online series that I’ve just finished that will be released in hard-copy volumes in a few weeks.”

“Chido!” The little girl declared. “Can I see? I wanna read comics!”

Nell hesitated. Her work tended to be a little more PG-13 than Maria’s parents might approve of. Shooting them a quick glance, she made a mental note to let them take a look before they let the kids read them. “Ah… I have a couple copies up in my room. But I can show you some of the pictures later if you want.”

“Si!”

Nell slept late the next morning. Having stayed up late into the night getting to know the other residents, she felt she deserved a bit of a lie-in. Today was for settling in and exploring the town.
where she would be living for the next few months.

And, she thought as her stomach growled at her, getting some groceries.

But first, a shower. After spending most of the day before travelling, Nell was feeling more than a little scuzzy and was eager to test out the shower in the bathroom that was opposite the kitchen. It was narrow enough that Nell could have rapped her elbows against each of the tiled walls -- something she did entirely by accident while she washed the soap out of her hair.

Refreshed, Nell stepped out of the shower to dry off. Drying her hair was a battle she simply did not feel like fighting today, so she did the best she could with her towel and spent the next few minutes muttering curses as she tried to fight a comb through the tangles. Then she twisted it up out of the way in a messy ballet bun, securing it in place with a large hooked hairstick.

That done, she pulled a bottle of sunscreen from the drawer under the sink. If she didn’t want to turn into a walking sunburned freckle within five minutes of being outside, she was going to have to make sure she covered herself before she left the building. With this in mind, she double-checked her purse for the smaller, travel-sized bottle that she had packed with her.

Her outfit for the day was a split-back apricot-colored tee-shirt printed with little rainbows, paired with mint green capris and a pair of heather grey ballet flats.

As Nell double-checked her purse, she heard the chime of incoming mail on her phone, and smiled when she saw that the message was from her parents.

Hi honey!

Glad to see you’ve arrived safely. Loved the pictures of your new place. It’s so cute! I can’t wait to see how it looks once the rest of your stuff arrives.

Do you know when your trunk is supposed to get there? Dad is worried that it might get lost in transit. Do you still have your tracking number?

We have been looking up Santa Cecilia on google and it looks like such a cute little place! I am
sure you will find lots of inspiration for your book there.

Dad’s been learning to use the Skype on his phone. He’s almost got the hang of it now. We will give you a call later tonight and you can give us all the details!

Have fun! Be safe.

Love,

Mom and Dad.

Nell chuckled, shaking her head as she typed out a response. Her dad was fairly helpless when it came to technology, her mom not much better. Until recently email had been the extent of their expertise. The idea of her parents im-ing or attempting a video chat was just funny.

Hi Mom,

I checked the tracking when I got up this morning. My trunk should be arriving tomorrow afternoon.

I’m heading out for groceries right now. My landlady gave me directions to the market so I’m going to grab some bruch and explore a bit this afternoon.

I will call you tonight and spam you with tourist pictures.

Love you!

Nell
Message sent, Nell tucked her phone into her purse, grabbed her keys from the kitchen counter, and headed out.

She might have gotten lost once or twice but she did eventually locate the post office, the grocery store, and a little bakery that she couldn’t resist. With a paper bag full of breakfast pastries, Nell wandered off down the street.

She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because instead of finding the grocery store, Nell found herself in a wide stone plaza with a large wooden gazebo erected in the center. A sort of farmer’s market was set up around the perimeter against the backdrop of an old church with a tall bell tower. There were people everywhere, haggling over produce, drinking coffee at the little cafe, or catching up with their neighbours on the latest goings-on in town.

Nell immediately lamented leaving her sketchbook at home. This was exactly what she had been looking for when she came to Santa Cecilia. This sense of tradition married with modernity, and a sense of timelessness behind the daily hustle and bustle. She could spend days sketching here, capturing the imposing sweep of the bell tower, the bright paper banners that criss-crossed between the buildings.

Oh, and the music! Nell’s exposure to mariachi was fairly minimal, but there was something truly incredible about seeing a performance in person. It was the perfect backdrop to the scene.

Nell immediately wanted to get a closer look at their costumes, drawn to the contrast of the gold braid against the deep blue of their charro suits.

All except for one, a kid who looked like he might have just started high school, dressed in worn jeans and a white tee shirt. His fingers flew over the strings of a pearl-white guitar, picking out a complicated melody that blended perfectly with the other band members.

He played well, she thought. For someone so young. And given the ease of which he played off of the other musicians and engaged the small crowd that had gathered to watch them, he was no stranger to performing.

But what really caught her attention was the glow.
An aura of golden orange surrounded the boy, flaring around him as he played, visible even in
the bright glare of the sun.

Well, visible to Nell at least. Seeing auras was not entirely new to her, though it wasn’t
something she experienced very often. But never in her life had she been able to see one so clearly,
and never under direct sunlight!

Damn, who is this kid?

The band finished with a flourish and a series of loud, ringing *gritos* that had Nell jolting.

How did they even make that sound?

Nell shook her head. Not important. What was supposed to be doing again? Right. Getting
groceries. Well, at least she was in the right place for that.

She left the plaza a short time later, wondering if Tia Caro would let her keep some of her
purchases in the main fridge as she might have overestimated how much food her little fridge would
hold.

And if she got turned around a couple more times on the way back home, well the only one
who would know that was her.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have chapter one! I promise there will be more Miguel and Rivera-family
POV starting in the next chapter.

If you liked it, please leave me a kudos or a comment. I'd love to hear your feedback.

Also I am looking for a beta reader to proof-read this before I submit, and to bounce
some ideas off of, so if you are interested please let me know!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 2: A Walk to Remember

Chapter Summary

Nell explores Santa Cecilia by night. But what is the kid from the plaza doing out so late? What is he looking for? And does he realize that he's glowing?

Chapter Notes

Hi Everyone!

Wow, I am just so overwhelmed by the responses and feedback that I've gotten for this fic so far. You guys are the best. Originally I'd been planning on posting a chapter each week but in celebration of 250 hits (omg!!) I've decided to post the next chapter a few days early!

Also for anyone who’s interested or just wants to chat, I've set up a tumblr account just for this fic. You can find me at https://calliopesquill.tumblr.com/. I will be sharing occasional sneak-previews and fun fanart that I find across the interwebs (and maybe even some that I've drawn myself!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 2: A Walk to Remember

Over the next couple of days Nell explored Santa Cecilia, her sketchpad and hoard of drawing implements stashed away in a pastel-striped messenger bag. She captured the tiled roofs of the family haciendas and the faded walls of the little cottages, the jewel-bright colors of the flowers that overflowed from decorative pots and the thin forms of the animals that roamed the streets.

It was a different world than the one she knew, and she wanted to make sure that she did it justice.

Nell also made a point of spending a couple of hours a day in Mariachi Plaza. She’d stake out a table at the cafe, or sit down on one of the worn wooden benches, working on potential character and set designs, or on the occasional commission that she picked up between book releases. It seemed that whatever time of day she came, there was almost always music playing. Musicians came and went, playing solo or in small, choreographed groups, and if nobody was playing then guaranteed somebody would have a radio out within five minutes.

The kid that Nell had seen playing that first afternoon was a regular at the plaza, either cutting through on his way to and from school, or performing in the gazebo. And each time she saw him he was surrounded by the same soft marigold glow. Her curiosity ate at her, and Nell had to remind herself more than once that she could not just walk up to random people on the street and ask why
they were glowing. Besides, he probably didn’t even know he was doing it. People generally couldn’t see their own auras.

At night she took advantage of the router that she’d had installed in her apartment, hooking up the second monitor that she’d shipped in her trunk so she could watch Netflix as she worked.

And one night, after a few days of settling in, Nell decided to do a different kind of exploring.

She switched off her lights and second monitor, drew the curtains across the window, and crawled into bed. It took a few minutes to get comfortable, and when she finally found the right spot she took a steadying breath, closed her eyes, and let herself fall away.

The first time Nell had astral projected she had been barely eighteen, only a few weeks away from the end of her first year of university. She’d been up so late studying for her final exams that she had fallen asleep studying. In her dreams she had wandered her neighborhood aimlessly, returning home only to see herself asleep at the kitchen table. She’d been so shocked that she woke right up and almost fell off her chair.

At first she’d chalked it up to exam stress, but then it happened again a few weeks later when she was studying in the library. To test herself she wandered two floors up, into a different section of the library and read over the shoulder of a student she’d never seen before. That in itself was her first clue because she knew from experience if she dreamed of reading, the words would be blurry and jumbled. His notes were perfectly clear, with some kind of detailed chemical structure drawn across the middle of the page. When she woke herself up and went to confirm, the notes matched exactly. To say that she had been freaked out would be an understatement. Studying forgotten, Nell had immediately started googling out-of-body experiences and astral projection — something that, until now, she’s thought only existed in urban fantasy novels. Now that she knew what it was that she was doing, she could learn to control it.

It had taken focus at first, projecting while awake, especially in places with lots of people. Maybe it had something to do with too many conflicting energies. Now it was almost second nature, something she did on nights where she was feeling restless and it was too late to go out.

The streets of Santa Cecilia were almost completely empty this time of night. Even the late-night delivery places closed at eleven, and the cantinas just after midnight. Not that Nell was particularly worried about being seen. In the almost seven years she had been doing this there had never been a single person who could see her.

It was a different town by night, as all places were. It was a strange feeling for it to be so empty when it was usually so full of life. In the beginning she had found it extremely disconcerting, like being on the last train out of an empty amusement park. Now there was a part of her that found it soothing. This was why she often chose to walk this way at night. She could go wherever she wanted, focus on the place itself without being distracted by the energies of all of the other people.

Her path took her down past the bakery and down a narrow street marked with a sign featuring a large boot. She knew that sign, and the large mural that painted one of the walls. She recognized it from her guidebook. Rivera Shoes -- not only rumored to produce the best custom shoes in Mexico, but had also been the home of a particularly famous songwriter from the 1920’s. Nell made a note to stop in for a visit later, both for the shoes and the history.

It was also, she realized as she walked by, the street where her cab driver had turned the music off for no reason.

Weird.
Curiosity took her to Mariachi plaza next. It seemed both bigger and smaller somehow, now that it was empty of people. The vendor’s stalls were closed down and covered for the night, the gazebo at its center standing empty. Nell could also make out, now that she was looking for it, the statue of Ernesto De la Cruz that also used to stand in a place of honor at the heart of the plaza. Some time in the last year it had been moved, hauled off to one side of the courtyard so those who really wanted to see it could, but nobody else would be forced to look at it.

She wasn’t totally surprised. Who wanted a statue honoring a thief and a murderer in the middle of their town?

A soft gleam at the corner of her eye had her turning. A lone figure haloed in golden-orange light padded soundlessly across the worn cobblestones of the plaza. A child dressed in baggy shorts and a white tank, his feet completely bare. A ghost? That would certainly be a first. Not that she hadn’t had an experience or two there, but never while she was projecting. The boy crossed the plaza, completely oblivious to her presence. He moved with determination, and Nell was startled to realize that this was not some random spirit, but the boy musician who had been playing earlier that afternoon.

Nell let out a soft curse. Shit. Had something happened to him? Had there been an accident of some kind? Something wasn’t right. She knew the energy of teenagers could cause some screwy effects sometimes, but this was totally outside her realm of experience. She had to know what was going on.

Nell followed from a distance as the boy made his way through the gates and out towards the cemetery at the edge of town. She hesitated at the edge of the grounds. Nell hated cemeteries. It wasn’t that she was scared of them. There was just too much to feel there, decades of loss and heartache and pain that had bled into very ground. Every time she set foot in one she found herself swept up in a tide of remnant emotion that kept her in a constant state of tears until she left. It would be one thing if it was her own feelings that she was expressing, but that she was so uncontrollably overcome by those of other people who weren’t even present got to be a little irritating after a while.

Projecting herself into a cemetery was not something she’d even considered before. Would the effect be muted like this, or would it be even stronger?

She had to decide quickly. The boy was getting farther and farther away and soon she would lose him entirely. Steeling herself, Nell passed the gates into the cemetery. It wasn’t that she was scared of them. There was just too much to feel there, decades of loss and heartache and pain that had bled into very ground. Every time she set foot in one she found herself swept up in a tide of remnant emotion that kept her in a constant state of tears until she left. It would be one thing if it was her own feelings that she was expressing, but that she was so uncontrollably overcome by those of other people who weren’t even present got to be a little irritating after a while.

He wove between the gravestones, dark eyes scanning the ground intently. He continued this way for several minutes, circling the entire section of graves before suddenly vanishing without a trace.

“What...the hell?”

The boy was just...gone. Vanished. Poof.

Nell returned to her body more than a little confused. She sat up in her bed, running one hand absently through her hair as she puzzled over what she’d seen. The boy was most definitely alive, of that much she was certain. Had she finally encountered someone that could project like she could? That had to be it. It was the only thing that made sense.

Maybe when he couldn’t find what he was looking for he just woke up.
The boy didn’t come to the plaza the next day, nor did he appear that evening. Nell saw him briefly on the street one day while she was getting groceries. He still carried that subtle golden-orange aura about him, but other than that he seemed completely normal. Twice more that week she saw him walking at night, appearing in the plaza like it was the load point in a video game. Each time he made his way to the cemetery, searching the same section of the grounds until he finally gave up and disappeared.

Nell had heard ghost stories like this, of impressions left behind that repeated the same actions over and over again, but this was the first time she had ever heard of it happening with a living person. What was so important for him to find that it brought him out of his body so often to look for it?

After a week of the same routine, she’d had enough. This time as he wandered through the headstones, she let herself be seen.

“Want some help?”

The boy looked up, shock written clearly on his face an instant before he disappeared again.

Back in her apartment, Nell opened her eyes and sighed. Well, so much for that idea… Did he even know he was projecting at night? It would explain his surprise when he finally saw her. Would he even remember it when morning came? Approaching him about it the next time she saw him was utterly out of the question. A random foreigner walking up to chat with a fourteen year old kid on the street ranked pretty high on the list of sketchy behavior. And what would she say, anyway? “Hey, so I’ve noticed that you’ve taken to wandering the cemetery at night without your body.”

Yeah, no. Definitely not.

If she wanted to get any answers at all she’d have to wait it out. In the meantime…. Well, it looked like she might finally have found the inspiration for her new book.

The kid was playing in the plaza again the next evening with a group of older mariachi. Nell could see in his face the moment he saw her. His fingers faltered at the strings of his guitar, quickly covered by a complicated riff that has the small audience cheering. He played to the crowd, but Nell could see the suspicious glance he aimed her way as she settled at a little table at the cafe at the edge of the plaza.

She gave a small wave in response.

Nell spent the next hour people-watching and doing quick sketches of the passers-by, experimenting with possible designs for her background characters, and generally just soaking in the atmosphere. In between pages of people were sketches of the square itself, the old bell tower and the
market stalls, including an approximate layout of the square as seen from above. Later she would transfer the images to her laptop for reference when she began to work on the main comic. She had several pages focused just on small details; the colors and patterns of the clothing, the arched doorways of the old buildings that framed the square, and the contrast of style between the old and the new. Her pencils flew over the page as she tried to capture the weight of age, the sense of timelessness and tradition that was the heart of Santa Cecilia.

The mariachis finished their set with “un poco loco”, a De la Cruz classic. Or, Nell thought as the boy let out an enthusiastic grito, technically a Rivera classic. Though the song was well-known, it had never been a particular favorite of hers, but listening to it now was like hearing it for the first time. This was what was missing from the De la Cruz version, the balance of innocence, playfulness and sincerity that Nell felt the star had never been able to convincingly pull off.

And as the band played the last notes she cheered as loud as they did.

Miguel almost missed his cue when he saw her, and for a moment he wondered if he was still dreaming. If that was the case he wanted to issue a complaint to someone in charge because dreaming an entire school day was just a waste. Playing off his distraction, he picked out a complicated flourish that had the other musicians nodding with approval. Inside, his mind was reeling. He might have only seen her for an instant, but he knew automatically that this was the same woman who had called to him in his dream last night. And she must have recognized him because she waved at him when she caught him looking at her.

But how was that possible?

He hadn’t been sleeping well the last few months, plagued with weird, half-remembered dreams that left him dejected and more than a little frustrated. They’d only gotten worse in the last couple of weeks. Almost every night he dreamed that he roamed Santa Cecilia, searching for something that, in waking hours, he knew that he would not find.

Or at least… he thought they were just dreams. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

Stubbornly, Miguel shoved those thoughts away to focus on the music, and when Pablo suggested finishing with “un poco loco”, Miguel couldn’t help but grin.

It was no secret that over the past two years that had become one of his favorite songs to perform. Each time he played it was like being twelve years old again, playing on stage with Hector. He clung to the memory, channeling the fun of the performance and trying to imagine what his great-great-grandfather had been feeling when he first wrote the song for Mama Imelda. Sometimes when he played he imagined they played together.

He wished that they actually could.

He wished that they’d had more time.

He wished he knew for sure that Hector was okay, that he’d made it back in time to save him.

That had been Miguel’s secret nightmare for the past two years; that Hector had disappeared before Mama Coco had remembered him.
Mentally, he shook his head. No! He thought forcefully. He made it in time. Hector had not been forgotten and he and his daughter and the entire Rivera familia could spend the next thousand years making up for the time that had been taken from them by that cabron De la Cruz.

Maybe he played the last few bars of the song a little louder than he meant to out of sheer defiance, but nobody listening seemed to notice. They applauded as Miguel and the others took their bows.

An unfamiliar cheer brought his gaze back to the strange woman at the cafe table. She wasn’t a local, of that much he was absolutely sure. Maybe a tourist?

“Good job today, Miguelito,” Annetta, the band’s trumpet player, grinned, clapping him companionably on the shoulder as he stowed his guitar in its case.

“Gracias,” he smiled back. “Have you heard from Señor Velasquez yet? He said he was going to email you about maybe coming to play for our music class.”

“Si, just this morning actually.”

“Are you going to do it? Per favor. Some of my classmates could really use your help. Cheque couldn’t carry a tune in his tia’s van. He sounds like a dying elephant when he plays.”

Annetta snorted. “All right chamaco, I’ll talk to your profe and see what we can arrange for next week. Put an end to your suffering.”

“Gracias, Annetta. Eres un ángel.”

“Hey now, you trying to steal my woman away?” Pablo asked, nudging Miguel teasingly with the butt of his violin case as he passed by.

“Ay, and since when have I been yours?”

“Since you stomped on my foot in church that day.”

“We were ten!”

“Si. I stand by what I said.”

Miguel chuckled, shaking his head at the playful banter. Pablo had been making eyes at Annetta for years and still hadn’t gotten up the guts to ask her to dinner. It had become a running joke among the other mariachi, and considerable bets had been placed on how long it would take him to finally do it. Miguel, being only fourteen, had not been allowed to participate, but personally thought that it would be Annetta who ended up doing the asking.

The woman at the cafe was still there after the other musicians had split off. Miguel turned towards home, paused, then sighed. Pinche Miguel... He should go home. He really should. But he had to know what was going on. With another muttered curse he turned and headed back towards the cafe.

Now that he was actually close enough to look, he thought she might be somewhere in her mid-twenties. She was wearing wire-rimmed glasses, which hadn’t been present the night before, and her loose grey pants and purple zip sweater had been replaced by a geometric print top and navy blue shorts. She watched the people walking the plaza with eyes that absorbed every detail as her pencil passed over the notebook on the table in front of her.
As Miguel drew closer he realized that what covered the page was not written notes, but a surprisingly detailed sketch of the gazebo at the center of the plaza.

“Woah! Está padrísimo!” He exclaimed, surprise overriding any attempt at subtly he might have made. “You drew that?”

The woman grinned at the shock on his face, holding the sketch up so she could compare it to the real thing. “Not bad, eh? I might keep this one.”

She spoke with an accent, he noticed. American, maybe? And with the formality of someone who, while fluent, was not a native speaker of Spanish.

“Definitely. You’re really good.”

“Thanks! You’re pretty good yourself with that guitar. How long--”

“Do I know you?” Miguel burst out suddenly, cutting her off. He flinched back instantly, almost expecting Abuelita Elena’s chancla to fly out of nowhere and smack him for his bad manners.

The woman shook her head, smiling slightly at the outburst. “Not officially, no.”

The boy shifted awkwardly, one hand rubbing his other wrist in a self-conscious gesture. “Lo siento. I just… you look familiar.” Well, that was embarrassing. Muy suave, idiota. Way to be weird to the tourist. But he could have sworn he’d seen her before, just for a second, while he was dreaming.

“Did you end up finding what you were looking for?”

Miguel blinked. “Qué?”

“Last night,” she clarified, grey eyes trained steadily on his face. “In the cemetery. Did you find what you were looking for?”

All color drained from his face. So it was her. “How did you -- that was a dream.”

The sudden look of knowing amusement on her face was more than a little disconcerting. “You’ve been having that dream a lot, haven’t you? On and off for a couple of weeks now.”

Months, actually. With increasing regularity. And that this strange American lady knew that was really freaking him out. “Who are you?”

“Just a girl on a research trip.”

No manches. That was definitely a lie. “How do you know what I was dreaming?”

“Because you weren’t dreaming.” Nell was pretty sure that dream-walking was a thing, but it was definitely not within her skill set. “Neither was I.”

“But… I saw you.” And he had most definitely been asleep.

The woman flipped to another page, her pencil tracing soft lines over the paper, her voice deliberately casual. Nothing to see here, folks. “Have you ever heard of a thing called ‘astral projection’?”

Miguel shook his head.
“It’s like...when a part of yourself splits off on its own, independent of your body,” she explained. “It’s a long-held theory that some people can do that while dreaming. But you don’t have to be asleep to do it. That’s how I was exploring the town last night when I saw you.”

Wait… what? What? How was that even possible?

“What were you looking for?” The woman asked again. “Whatever it was, it had to be pretty important for you to be projecting out of your body multiple times a week.”

Miguel eyed her carefully, debating on whether to answer. How much to tell her. “A bridge.”

Whatever she was going to ask next was drowned out by an excited squeal as a tiny form launched itself at Miguel’s legs, almost knocking him off his feet.

“Gah! Wha--- Soccoro?” He stumbled, barely managing to stay upright as his not-quite-two-year-old sister clung to his legs.

“IIIIGEL!” The girl giggled, her little arms wrapped firmly around his knees. “Up!”

Miguel smiled fondly down at her, then crouched, picking her up under her arms and hoisting her into the air to settle at his hip. “¿de donde vienes, huh? Is Mama with you?”

The little girl nodded, her tiny brown pigtails bobbing. Then she pointed across the square to where their mother waited.

For a moment he hesitated, glancing back at the woman with the sketch pad.

“Go on,” she said with an understanding smile. “I’ll be around. I’ll answer any questions you have next time.”

“Right. Okay. Well...it was nice...talking with you, I guess?”

The woman chuckled. “You too.”

With one more confused glance in her direction, Miguel shifted his sister on his hip, adjusted position of the guitar case on his back, and crossed the plaza to his waiting Mama.

Chapter End Notes

That does it for Chapter 2! Thanks so much for reading. I live for your feedback so if you liked it, please leave me a kudos or a comment! I’d love to hear what you think, and your theories on what might happen next!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 3: Who the Heck is Buttons?

Chapter Summary

Miguel learns more about astral projection, and is offered proof that he is not, in fact, un poco loco.

Chapter Notes

Wow I am completely blown away, you guys. Thank you so, so much for your kudos and fantastic comments, both here and on Tumblr! You have no idea what they mean to me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 3: Who the Heck is Buttons?

This time when Miguel found himself wandering the cemetery he knew what he was doing. But now he wasn’t looking for the bridge. He was looking for the strange woman from the plaza. Maybe she would be able to give him some answers. What the heck was astral projection? How could a piece of someone just split away? How could he have been doing it for so long and not realize it? Was this a side-effect of his night in the Land of the Dead? Had his family’s blessing been revoked somehow?

Miguel would never admit it to anyone, but he still had the occasional nightmare about that night. Visions of being tossed from buildings to fall forever, of being murdered by the man who had once been his idol, or most common of all, watching his body fade away, leaving only yellowed bones behind that crumbled to dust as he watched.

Biting his lip nervously, he glanced down at his hands, releasing the breath he didn’t know he was holding when he saw his skin was still there.

His path took him past the Rivera family plot and he stopped a minute, as he always did now whenever he was nearby, to say hello to each of his departed family members. A new headstone had been added less than a year before, marking the resting place of a man who had died far from home trying to keep a promise. On the stone was a simple inscription:

Hector Rivera

1900 - 1921

Beloved Husband and Father
Remembered Always

It had been the work of months to find where he had been buried. Thank God for parish records -- pun not intended -- and priests who were thorough enough to record the details of nameless men interred in pauper’s graves. After weeks of jumping through legal hoops and fighting through a mountain of paperwork, the body was exhumed. The remains of an old photograph found in the man’s pocket was more than sufficient to prove his identity. And after the autopsy…. Well there had been no doubt. Hector Rivera had been poisoned.

The Riveras already had the proof in Coco’s letters that Hector had been the true genius behind the music of Ernesto De la Cruz, and as the investigation continued, it became clear to everyone that Ernesto had been the one to kill him.

There had been an intense amount of backlash after that. De la Cruz had some seriously die-hard fans and many of them refused to believe that their hero was a murderer. This was especially true in Santa Cecilia, where his fame was the heart of their tourism industry. But the proof was undeniable. And eventually even De la Cruz’s most loyal fans could not do anything but accept it.

There had been talk at first about returning Hector’s body to the original gravesite, something Miguel was very vocally against. In the end it was Abuelita Elena who insisted that the body be returned to Santa Cecilia to be buried in the family plot. He might have been a no-good musico who had abandoned his family, she said, but he was still her grandfather, and he had died trying to get back to them.

A sudden movement had Miguel turning, his blood going cold as he realized whose grave he was now facing. It couldn’t be…

If there was anywhere in town the Nell thought might be haunted, it would be the De la Cruz mausoleum. The once pristine white marble was dingy with neglect, looking grey and worn in the moonlight. The brackets mounted on the wall over the sarcophagus were empty, the instrument once held there gone, returned to the family of its original owner. Wooden planks boarded up the doors. The words “forget you” were scrawled in faded red paint on a battered sign that hung from his statue.

Nell thought that was unlikely. Infamy often lasted longer than fame and Ernesto De la Cruz… Well between the movies and the murder, he’d earned his fair share of both. Though she’d known of him as she was growing up, she’d never been a huge fan. She had been raised watching old movies with her grandparents who, by the time she had hit university, had a collection that rivaled most libraries. She was as shocked as the rest of the world when the truth came out.

She wondered what he’d say if he saw what had become of his legacy.

Nell paused, catching a glimpse of a soft golden-orange glow on the other side of the crypt. She stepped around it, tucking her hands into the pocket of her hoodie.

"You know,” she said conversationally as the boy gave her a wary look. “I always thought he was a much better actor than he was a musician. I guess now we know why.”
Well, she wasn’t wrong, Miguel thought to himself, his own hands relaxing from the apprehensive fists they had been clenched in. For a moment he had been afraid that De la Cruz had found a way to cross between worlds on his own. But that was impossible.

“I wondered if you’d go walking again tonight,” Nell continued. “Any luck finding that bridge?”

Miguel shook his head. “No. It won’t open again until Dia de Muertos.”

Her grey eyes lit with interest. “And how do you know that?”

“Because that’s when I crossed it last time.”

Interesting. “Where does the bridge go?”

Miguel didn’t answer. He wanted some answers himself before he told her anything else. “How do I know this is real?”

“Do you usually lucid-dream like this?”

“Well...no.” Not usually. But spirits leaving their bodies to wander at night sounded crazy. As crazy as magical marigold bridges and neon-patterned spirit guides and giant cities of spectral ancestors.

“You’re pretty new to this, aren’t you?” Nell sat down on the grassy hill in front of the tomb, her eyes not leaving his face. He started much earlier than she had. She’d known since grade school that she was, for lack of a better word, ‘sensitive’. Picking up impressions in places that nobody else could feel, getting the occasional strange intuitive flash of what used to be. It had gotten stronger as she grew up. She’d been almost nineteen the first time she’d astral projected. Hers had manifested on their own. She might have thought his had too, had he not mentioned ‘crossing the bridge’.

“Whatever triggered your abilities had to have been a hell of an experience. I can still see the marigold glow on you.”

Miguel glanced down at his hands in alarm, scanning his bare arms to be certain that they were still there.

“Why do you keep doing that?” Nell wondered. “You aren’t going to disappear.”

She doesn’t know that. It had almost happened once. How did she know it wouldn’t happen again? “No reason.”

Which meant there was a great big scary reason. Her eyes softened with sympathy. “What happened?”

The kid hesitated, rubbing one hand over his other arm in an absent gesture. “It’s...kind of a long story.”

“And one you’re not ready to tell me yet.”

Not to someone he didn’t even know, who just appeared out of nowhere one day. Not until she answered some of his questions first.

“Who are you?”

“Me?” She blinked. “I’m nobody. Well... That’s not true. Everybody’s somebody. I’m Nell.”
“Miguel,” he replied, driven by manners to introduce himself as well, and offered one callused hand to shake.

“Nice to meet you, Miguel,” she said with a smile. “I’ve listened to you play in the plaza a few times. You’re really good. How long have you been taking lessons?”

Lessons? In his family? He snickered, his cheek dimpling in a small smile as he shook his head. “No lessons. I used to watch a lot of… old movies,” he hedged, not particularly wanting to say De la Cruz’s name so close to his tomb. It felt like bad luck. “And I’d copy the fingering until I learned all of the notes. My family… they were really unhappy when they found out.”

“How come?”

Miguel glanced nervously at the mausoleum behind her. “Can we talk about this somewhere else?”

“Sure,” Nell shrugged, pushing herself to her feet and dusting off her baggy grey sleep pants. Not that there could be any dust on them to begin with. It was more of a reflex than anything else. “Lead the way.”

She followed him down the hill, back the way he had come. There was one grave that caught her eye, the stone shiny and new compared to its fellows. “Hector Rivera… Wasn’t he the one who wrote all the De la Cruz songs?”

Miguel nodded, far more at ease now that he was surrounded by family. “My great-great-grandfather.”

Nell almost tripped over her feet in surprise. “Hold up. Seriously?” She let out a low whistle. “Damn. Well, I can see where you got your talent for music.” And unless she was mistaken, the white skull guitar she had seen him playing earlier had once belonged to his ancestor. Now she was even more curious. “So if your grandfather was this great musician, why would your family be so against you taking lessons? I’d think they’d be proud you’d want to follow in his footsteps.”

Miguel snorted. “Proud’ is not exactly the word I would use.”

“I’m sorry. It’s rough when your family doesn’t support you when you’re passionate about something.”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye as they sat down on the path. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Nell chuckled. “Let’s just say my parents were hoping that I’d have grown out of reading comic books by now. But hey, at least I’ve graduated to writing them now as well as reading them.”

“¿Neta? You’re an artist? Like a real one?” He’d watched her draw the first time they spoke but he thought that was just a hobby.

“Yeah, a real one.” It still felt weird sometimes to call herself that, but she supposed she couldn’t really refer to herself as a ‘drawer’ when she actually made a living from her artwork now. That had been a recent development. The mini-series she had completed had become popular enough that between hard-copy sales of that, the commissions she still occasionally took. And the online patrons that supported her work, she had been able to quit her admin job and focus on what she loved. “Even got a couple books published. That’s why I came to Santa Cecilia, to research my next one.”
Miguel looked confused. “Why here?”

“Few reasons,” she shrugged. “I was planning on setting it somewhere near here, but I wanted to make sure I was accurate and respectful to the setting and the culture. I want people to be able to see themselves in what I write. Not a stock-character, not a caricature, but an honest reflection.” It was one of the reasons that Nell was a stickler for research. She had files upon files of reference images, notes on culture, tradition, and worldbuilding for every story she did. It resulted in some really weird internet searches sometimes.

It sounded like a lot of work. But then, Miguel thought, wasn’t his music the same? How many hours did he spend learning to play, perfecting each song that he wrote? Especially the songs he wrote for his family. Music was universal, a way for people from entirely different backgrounds to share in something together. Maybe she treated her comics the same way.

“Where does the bridge go?”

Miguel blinked at her, surprised by the sudden change in topic. “Que?”

“You said you were looking for a bridge, but it only opens one day a year. Where does it go?”

He glanced down at his family’s stones, unsure whether to answer or not. “I’d...rather not say right now.”

“Fair enough.” He was just a kid. She wasn’t going to press him for any answers he wasn’t comfortable giving. “Let’s try another one. When did you start taking midnight strolls?”

“A few months ago?” He shrugged, tugging absently on the hem of his tee-shirt. “I dunno. It just kinda’ happened.” It felt like he was having the same dream over and over again, waking frustrated and disappointed because he couldn’t remember what it was that he was searching for, only that he couldn’t find it.

“Did you ever see other people?”

Miguel shook his head. “Just you. Nobody else is up that late.”

“They probably wouldn’t have seen you even if they were.” Nell told him. “Or at least I’ve never met anyone who could.”

“How long have you been doing this... projecting thing?” He wondered.

“About since university?” Nell answered. “Like you, it just sort of happened. I never saw anyone else, never knew anyone else personally who could do it either. So kind of had to figure out the rules on my own.”

The young musician made a face. Ugh... of course there was rules. “What kind of rules?”

She snickered at his expression. “The kind I made up for myself based on good, old-fashioned common sense. The biggest one for me is ‘just because you can, doesn’t mean you should’.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, like... Think of it this way: Right now, you could go anywhere you wanted. You could walk into someone’s house, poke through all their stuff. See what they do when there’s nobody else around.”
Miguel frowned. “But...that would be weird and, like….creepy.”

“Exactly. It’s an invasion of privacy, and I try not to infringe on that if at all possible.”

“What’s the other rules?”

“That’s the big one. The other other thing to keep in mind is that for the most part, when you project like this, you’re pretty safe. You might see a couple things that creep you out, and you might see a thing or two that you will be able to feel are dangerous, but I’ve never had anything actually hurt me. And if you ever feel unsafe, or want to leave wherever you are, you can just wake up.”

“Really? That’s it?"

Nell nodded. “That’s it. Simple, straight-forward. You are in control of what you do here, so the fun thing is that regular physical limitations aren’t something you have to worry about. You want to do handstands? Go for it. You want to try doing bullet-time like Neo from The Matrix or scream at the top of your lungs for no reason? Have at it. And if you want to stop, you can wake up any time you want.”

“And this is all real? It’s not just in my head?” Miguel confirmed.

“To paraphrase Harry Potter, just because it’s in your head doesn’t mean it’s not real,” Nell assured him. “And if you want proof, next time you see me, as me about Buttons.”

The boy cocked his head, giving her a strange look. “Buttons?”

The woman grinned. “Ask me tomorrow.”

Miguel woke well-rested, if a bit confused. Why the heck did the weird artist lady tell him to ask her about buttons? Maybe it was just a random password to prove that their conversation was real. Or maybe it was just another crazy dream. Un poco loco indeed.

He shook his head, running one hand through his sleep-mussed hair. He had promised to help out in the shop today, and wouldn’t be able to go to the plaza until later in the afternoon. But he’d take advantage of the time he got, now that he was back at school. A standing agreement had been put in place over the last couple of years. He would join his family in the shop on Saturday mornings, learning how to make shoes, and the afternoons were his own, to play in Mariachi Square, or hang out with friends if he wanted. The one condition was that he had to keep his grades up. If his parents thought he was slipping, his focus would have to return to his schoolwork.

Miguel didn’t mind too much. He liked school, enjoyed the challenge of his classes as much as the time spent with his friends. It had been a strange thing, returning to school after his adventure in the Land of the Dead. The family’s music ban had always kept him somewhat apart from the other kids, his cousins on the lookout to drag him away if there was even the slightest chance that his classmates might draw him into a conversation about music. That had all changed since he came back. Now he was he free to converse with his classmates about whatever he wished, and the day Abuelita Elena and his parents gave him permission to join the school’s music classes he almost cried with joy.

He came into the class knowing how to play a tune, but with very little understanding of
musical theory. He threw himself into the lessons enthusiastically, spending extra time after class in the school library, scanning books of sheet music and looking up musical terms on the library computer. In class he’d gone from the last to offer answers to the first, his enthusiasm completely negating the desire to be ‘cool’ in front of his classmates.

But even as he was finally allowed to be close to the other kids, there were times that he felt more separated from them than ever. There were experiences that he would never be able to share with them. Not on this side of the bridge, anyway.

Breakfast in the Rivera household was always a noisy affair, as expected when you had three generations of extended family living under one roof. Prima Rosa chased little Soccoro around the table, both giggling as the toddler avoided any attempt to get her into her booster-seat. Miguel’s papa and his Tio Berto were already seated, engaged in a lively discussion of a new shoe design that they wanted to try. Abuelita bustled around the kitchen, shuttling trays piled high with food onto the table, determined to feed them until they needed to be rolled out the door.

Despite the noise and bustle of the kitchen, Miguel had always found it to be a settled place. There was tradition here, and comfort, something that he had only recently come to appreciate. He wondered if his family felt it the way he did.

That was another recent change, his sensitivity towards the “feeling” of a place. It wasn’t all places, and not all the time, but certain places stood out to him. The family kitchen and the ofrenda room of his own home were the clearest. The parish church was another. When the music ban had been in place he had been banned from going there as well, at least during service, so he would not be exposed to the temptation of music through the choir and hymns. But he learned if he went there at the right time of day and stood close enough, he could still hear the singing from outside. There was a feeling of age to it -- which made sense given it was well over a hundred years old -- but also a sense of peace, and a strange sense of lightness, of a kind of clarity.

Belly stuffed full, his ribs aching with laughter at his little sister’s antics during breakfast, Miguel joined his family in the workshop. It too had a feeling of age and tradition. He didn’t think it had changed too much since Mama Imelda’s day. Maybe the worn wooden tables had been replaced, maybe some of the tools had been upgraded with more modern equivalents, but the soul of what she had started remained, passed down through the family. Most of the work was still done by hand, with the thought that a custom-fitted shoe would always be more comfortable, and would last far longer than something that was slapped together by a machine. Rivera shoes were made to last, and people often took better care of things that they knew had been made especially for them.

Miguel himself had shown an aptitude in decoration and detail work, something he was surprised to find that he enjoyed. He had been meticulous in the crafting of the guitar that he had made, and carried that same attention to detail into his work here, with carefully placed stitches and soft designs etched in with the leather burning tool that his father had only recently deemed him responsible enough to work with.

The workshop had once been a relatively silent place, but that had changed with Miguel as well. A small radio sat in the corner of the room, and there was an almost daily debate on which of the three available channels it should be switched to during working hours. Abuelita had once considered the fight over stations to be yet another reason why allowing music back into the house was a mistake, but now she argued along with the rest of them.

Miguel even caught her tapping her toe in time with the music, which would have never happened before.

There was a client coming in that morning to consult on a commission. The shoes were to be a
birthday gift for her daughter, who was a dancer in California. Her parents wanted to have a piece of home to take with her, and something comfortable to wear when she was not in the studio. They decided on a pair of low-heeled ankle boots with a red lacquered heel, with a floral design embroidered up the back.

After the client left, the Riveras got to work on the design. They had the sizes on file from a previous commission, so they were able to start patterning out the boots right away as Miguel and his mother started working on variations of the floral design.

Between the two of them was a marked contrast in styles. Miguel favored more organic details, often taking inspiration from musical symbology and the curling leaves and vines that decorated the faces of the spirits he’d met in the Land of the Dead. Simplistic, but organic. His mother’s sketches were definitely more elaborate, but he admired how she used multiple shades of thread to create depth and shading within the design.

After lunch Miguel dedicated some time to finishing his chemistry homework and getting a start on the book report that he had due later that week. When he was finally satisfied with the progress he had made on his outline he pushed away from his desk, linking his fingers and stretching until they popped. That was definitely enough for now.

It was later than he’d intended when Miguel finally made his way to Mariachi Plaza, but as soon he heard his twin cousins playing discordant harmonies on their recorders he knew it was time to get some air. Best to try to save his hearing while he still had it. He tapped an absent tune against his leg as he walked, the strains of a half-finished song playing in the back of his mind, and when he heard the soft sound of music coming from the plaza his mouth curved in a small smile. He didn’t feel like performing tonight, but he was always in the mood to listen. Maybe hearing some of the other mariachi play would help him with the song he’d been working on. He’d been hoping to get some decent headway on it this weekend but at this point it was looking like it was going to end up in the “eventually” pile. The melody was coming along great but the lyrics could only kindly be called a “work in progress”.

The market in Mariachi Plaza did steady business on the weekends, with much of the available space packed with farmers and artists and craftspeople eager to chat up a prospective customer or to share in the latest town gossip. Right away Miguel spotted at least a dozen people he knew, including one of his neighbors, his physics profe, and a few of his classmates. He almost didn’t recognize Nell sitting on a bench on the other side of the gazebo. Her ball cap and sunglasses hid her face almost entirely, but who else would be sitting in the middle of Mariachi Plaza with a sketchbook and enough pens to sink a cruise ship?

Miguel hesitated. Had he really spoken to her in the cemetery last night, or had it been just another weird dream? She’d given him a “password” to prove it but he was almost afraid to ask, and he couldn’t help but question which would be worse: if it had all been real, or just a dream. It wasn’t like anyone was forcing him to ask her, he reminded himself. And he didn’t have to do it today. Or next week. Or ever. But if he didn’t ask he’d never know, and he’d always be wondering.

He took a steadying breath and crossed the plaza towards her.

“So...why ‘buttons’?”
Nell glanced up from her sketch pad and grinned. “Buttons is my pet crow.”

“No manches!?” Miguel snorted as he gave her an incredulous look. “Crows can’t be pets.”

“Okay, not exactly my pet,” she amended. “But she was my friend when I was little.”

The kid cocked his head curiously. “How do you become friends with a crow?”

“You feed them.” Nell closed her sketchbook, shifting her bag off the bench she was seated on in case he wanted to sit down too. “They’re really smart, like really really smart, so they remember people, and tell their babies if you’re nice to them, or if you are someone they should avoid.”

“But aren’t they kinda…dirty?” He’d have been running from la chancla if his abuelita ever caught him trying to feed crows as a kid.

“Kinda, but you don’t really think about that when you’re five,” Nell chuckled. “And my parents definitely would have stopped me if they’d known. But I used to go feed the birds in the park with my grandparents, so I figured it was okay with all birds. Next thing I know I’ve got a crow bringing me buttons on the playground. So that’s what I called her.”

Miguel, for all he had seen, didn’t believe her. “¿En serio?”

“Serio. I have a whole box of stuff she and her chicks brought me as a thanks for feeding them.” The buttons were currently strung on a piece of pink ribbon that was draped around her window. “She died when I was in my senior year of high school, but some of her babies stuck around. Shells brought bits of shell mostly, Lady brought ribbons and little flowers, and Ashes brought candy wrappers. They even managed to find me after I moved out and got my own place.”

She’d even based characters in one of her comics after Buttons and her flock, a family of shapeshifters that, of course, turned into crows. That had been first book she’d ever had published, and cameos of her old friends appeared occasionally in all of her other work. Kind of like Robert Munsch and his pterodactyls.

If that was true then crows were way smarter than Miguel had ever given them credit for. “Maybe they’re your alebrijes,” he suggested after a moment of thought.

“Aren’t alebrijes those animal figures with the crazy colors?” She’d read up on them briefly a while back. Hybrids inspired by an artist’s fever dream some time in the early nineteen hundreds. There was a table full of them across the plaza.

“Yeah but like, it’s what they represent,” Miguel explained. “Alebrijes are like… spirit guides.” Like his own Dante or Mama Imelda’s winged jaguar, Pepita. Who, he now knew, had once been her pet cat when she was alive.

Nell smiled fondly at the thought. “I like that idea.” Maybe she’d use it in her new series. She made a mental note to interview the craftsmen about the meaning of the figures later.

“So this…astral projecting thing,” Miguel started, remembering why he had been asking about Buttons to begin with. “It’s really real. I’m not crazy.”

“You know, I always thought ‘crazy’ was relative,” Nell chuckled. “But yeah, it’s real. A little trippy sometimes, but real. Ghosts and hauntings too, if you were wondering.”

That he definitely believed. But it begged the question: how did that work? Spirits could only cross the bridge on Día de los Muertos, so how could there be hauntings and spirit activity on other
“Hey, uh… This might be a weird question but…is there more than one afterlife?”

Well...that was unexpected. Nell adjusted her glasses as she considered how to answer him. “Ah...I’m not sure. I mean, I definitely think there is and that where you go depends on what you believe in. Saint Peter and the pearly gates, Anubis and the Scales of Ma’at, or just your next incarnation.”

“Oh across a bridge of marigold petals."

The artist’s gaze sharpened immediately. Oh, how she wanted to ask him about what had happened. The curiosity was killing her -- pun absolutely intended. How had he crossed the bridge? Had he died and come back somehow? Or had he projected there by accident?

“Yeah. If that’s what you believe.”

Oh, he definitely believed it. He’d already crossed it. Not that he was eager to cross it again, though… he kind of was? Not to stay. Definitely not. He had way too much to do in the Living World first. But the Land of the Dead was a pretty cool place. And his family, the other half of his family, were all there too. He wanted so badly to see them again, to find out if Hector was okay. But outside of being cursed again, he didn’t think it was possible. Not that it was an experience he wanted to repeat. Definitely not. Coming that close to dying that many times in a single night was more than enough for Miguel Rivera, thank you very much. Not to mention Mama Imelda would probably kill him for real if she knew that he had considered it. Forget la chancla. Mama Imelda’s boot would be way worse.

“Do you see ghosts?”

Nell shook her head. “No. Well… like, I have? But it’s not an all-the-time kind of thing. I’m more ‘sense’ than ‘see’, though you may find that you work a bit differently. It’s all pretty subjective, honestly.”

Well… that kinda made sense. And given what had started this whole thing with him, maybe his...abilities, or whatever, would work a little differently. “And your...projecting and stuff, it just started on its own?”

“Pretty much,” she answered. “There wasn’t any ‘big moment’ or experience that started it all. It was more a bunch of little things, on and off since I was a kid. They just got stronger as I grew up.”

Did that mean it would get stronger for him too? “Do you ever...feel things? Like in places?”

Nell grinned. “Oh yeah. Man, I could tell you stories. I’m guessing you could too.”

Miguel nodded. “Sometimes. At home. Or in church.”

“Churches can be good places to feel things. Especially old ones,” she agreed. “I find lots of old places of worship are. What do you feel when you go there now?”

Miguel frowned, tapping a beat absently with his fingers as he searched for the words. “It’s like...weight. But a good kind. It’s not really heavy, but more...settled. Tranquilo.”

That was another place that she intended to visit for her research. She wondered if the priest would be opposed to her sitting and sketching for a while, maybe tell her some of the history. “It
sounds like a beautiful place,” Nell said with a soft smile.

It was, one he had only recently started to really appreciate. It would be cool, he thought, to see what he could pick up other places, if he ever got the chance to travel.

Miguel spent the night with his guitar and his songwriting notebook. His latest piece was fighting him a bit. He had the melody and parts of the chorus, but the words he wanted were eluding him. Not for the first time he wished he had someone to talk to, to bounce ideas off of. His family was not particularly helpful in this area. Nor, unfortunately, was his music teacher. The man could play half an orchestra but he was a downright crappy lyricist. And his mariachi friends rarely attempted any original work.

What he needed was someone who understood him, who would get what he was trying to say, even if he couldn’t find the words himself.

He needed Hector.

But that, he thought with a sigh, was impossible. Even if he had a way to share his music with him -- and he now had a private notebook to leave on the ofrenda every year for specifically that purpose -- there was no way for him to ever get a response. The Land of the Dead did not have a cross-dimensional postal service. Or email. Or skype.

He made some progress. The first verse was okay, and the second one he was really proud of. And working on that had given him an idea for the bridge, which he’d also been struggling with. The chorus, however, was a total loss, and after a while Miguel just got tired of fighting with it.

As Miguel plucked out a slow tune on his guitar he wondered if Hector had ever had difficulty with his own songs. Proud Corazon had come so naturally to him, like he’d woken up one morning with the words just there, waiting to be written. Some of his songs were like that, as easy and natural as breathing. Others were more elusive, like trying to capture starlight in a bottle.

Actually… that wasn’t bad.

Miguel immediately returned to his songbook. Okay. Okay okay okay. And if he did the next part like… Yes! Perfect!

And there it was. Nowhere near perfect and only half-finished but so, so much closer than he was. This was what he was trying to say.

Maybe he’d actually finish this one after all.
And there ends chapter three! I hope you've all enjoyed this section because I really had a lot of fun writing it.

As always I'd love to hear your feedback on what I have so far, and where you think the story might be heading next. (And if you see any errors at all in the text, particularly my Spanish translations, please let me know and I will fix them right away.)

I am also on Tumblr at https://calliopesquill.tumblr.com/, where I will also share sneak-peeks of upcoming chapters, and fun fanart that I've found!

Thanks for reading, and I will see you next chapter
Chapter 4: Once Upon a Time

Chapter Summary

Nell looks into alebrijes and Miguel decides to open up about what happened to him during Dia de los Muertos.

Chapter Notes

I can't thank you guys enough for the great response to this fic. All of your kudos and comments have really made my week.

Special thanks to PictionFiction, SmilesThroughFandoms, moonwings, DaphneTheAdipose, Lizzy_Lizard, FrisktheFandom, Atrixmity, charminghex99, and OperativeNumbuh227 for your sweet comments.

I've had such fun writing this, I even started to do some of my own fanart for it (which can be found here: https://calliopesquill.tumblr.com/post/172578593128/decided-i-needed-a-bit-of-a-writing-break-so-i-did).

Now without any further delay, here is Chapter 4!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4: Once Upon a Time

Miguel spent his lunch hour that monday in the library. After discovering that they didn’t have a particularly wide selection of graphic novels he turned to the internet. Nell had said that she’d done a webcomic as well. Maybe her website would help him figure out who he was dealing with. Just because Nell seemed decent so far didn’t mean she actually was. His experience with Ernesto De la Cruz had taught him that. Hadn’t De la Cruz been kind at first? Hadn’t he saved him from drowning? But behind the smiles and dramatic persona was a selfish, self-absorbed creature who was more than willing to kill to get what he wanted.

Not that Miguel thought that Nell would be anywhere as bad as De la Cruz had been, but he wanted to get a little more background on her before he decided to tell her anything else.

A quick Google search had given him the basics. Penelope Rey. (Miguel snorted at that. Penelope? No wonder she went by Nell.) Twenty-five years old. Born in Kelowna, Canada. (Okay, so she wasn’t American, but he’d been close.) Published her first stand-alone graphic novel at twenty-two and recently released the last volume of the trilogy she’d been working on. Most of her
books were of the urban-fantasy sort, or contained some hints of “other”. The webcomic, which she’d started while she was in university, was about a magical girl who discovers that she has inadvertently been working for an evil power the whole time, and sets about on a quest of redemption to make things right.

Not really his thing (he was more into the masked-crusader/folk-hero/luchador genre) but the splash pages and banners on the website intrigued him enough that he clicked the link that would take him to the first page of the comic. Right away he was hooked. The art-style was dramatic but not cluttered or overdone, and her heroine spoke like someone he would meet on the street, with only a minimum of cliche comic book-style dialogue. Her characters were diverse and compelling and her villain…. Miguel shuddered. Oh she was so creepy! Sly and manipulative and calculating under a veneer of support and encouragement. You didn’t even get the hint that there was something wrong about her until you were over a year into the plotline.

He had just gotten to the part of the story where the main character discovered she’d been played when the five-minute warning bell rang.

Miguel jumped, almost falling out of his chair. How had the lunch hour gone by so fast? Quickly he closed the browser, logging off of the computer as he grabbed his book bag, then took off out of the library to get to class.

Miguel’s talk of *alebrijes* stuck with Nell, and after a few days of independent research she decided to approach one of the craftsmen from the plaza.

Sebastien Berardo had been in the business for many years. Some of his earliest memories were of sitting with his father in his workshop, watching him work. He learned the craft at his father’s side, how to shape and sand the wood to bring out the fantastic creatures inside, and the types of paints and glazes that brought out the best color. He also learned how to deal with the public, from the closest of neighbors to the loudest of tourists.

When Nell first started asking questions he started with the basic history of the craft.

*Alebrijes* had first been created by the artist Pedro Linares in the early 1930’s. The story went that he had become very ill, and had dreamed of a beautiful forest populated by incredible, colorful hybrid creatures that called themselves *alebrijes*. Horned roosters, winged snakes and donkeys, a thousand creatures of infinite strange and wonderful combinations. Inspired, he began to create carnival masks and religious figures of these creatures to sell in the markets of Mexico City. His unique pieces had attracted the attention of a prominent gallery owner who wanted to showcase the pieces, and even Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo sought him out for commissions. Now most *alebrije* figures were carved from copal wood, in the pre-Hispanic woodcarving tradition of the local Zapotec culture.

“And you still make all of these by hand?” Nell asked, crouching to take a closer look at the delicately articulated figure of a winged snake that was coiled upon the table.
Sebastien nodded proudly. “Each piece is crafted in our family workshop. My son Filipe, he is studying art in university. He painted many of these.”

“They’re beautiful. I love the colors.” It was like seeing an entire summer’s worth of color condensed into a single small figure. “At what point did they started becoming associated with spirit guides? By some of the descriptions they are kind of similar to the Aztec nagual.”

“It is possible,” Sebastien conceded with an uncertain shrug. He’d never really considered that, but there were certainly some similarities.

Nell liked the idea. After Miguel had first brought up the idea of spirit guides she’d ended up going on a bit of a research binge on the topic, compiling a series of notes about guardian spirits in world mythology. She’d been particularly intrigued by the the concept of the nagual, the Mesoamerican spirit guide or spiritual double. Depending on the myth, the nagual functioned as either a reflection of the self, or as a separate spiritual advisor. According to some of the myths that she’d found, a person’s nagual could even go wandering while they slept.

Or in other words, they could astral project.

There were also stories about shapeshifters but Nell was reasonably sure that wasn’t going to end up as part of her skill set.

After a little more discussion on the history and process behind the art and history of the alebrije figures Nell decided to leave Sebastien to his work, but as she turned to leave one of the figures caught her eye. A small, brightly-painted bird.

She couldn’t have stopped the grin that spread over her face if she tried. “Señor, how much is the crow?”

Over the next few weeks Mariachi Plaza became the unofficial meeting spot for astral hangouts. By this point Miguel had learned to successfully project while awake, and was confident enough in this new ability that their occasional late-night chat was often more friendly than lesson-like. Honestly it was nice just to be able to talk to someone and not worry about letting something slip and having them think he was crazy. He’d already made that mistake once with friends at school, and had had to play it off as a weird dream.

At least will Nell he didn’t have to worry about that.

He grinned when she appeared across the plaza. "What, you couldn't sleep either?"

"Nah. Finished some book planning and wanted to go for a walk. Then I saw what time it was and thought... yeah this way is better."

Miguel chuckled. He knew what it was like to get wrapped up in a project and lose all sense of time. How many times had he stayed up late working on a new song, forgetting entirely that he had class in the morning?

“How was school?”
“Fine,” he shrugged. “Annetta came to visit my music class yesterday. That was pretty cool.”

“She’s the trumpet player, right? The one the violinist has that debilitating crush on.”

“That’s the one. She played for us during class, then did sort of a tutorial session with the other trumpets.” God willing, they’d actually be able to stay in tune from now on. “You get any farther on your book?”

"A bit, yeah. Started doing research on alebrijes and I found some really cool stuff.” She answered excitedly, eager to share what she’d found. “You know the Mayans and Aztecs had stories about spirit guides too? And some of the magic users in the old myths could astral project, just like us! So of course that turned into a crazy research binge. I swear I filled up an entire flash drive just with ideas for character alebrijes .”

"Sweet!” He grinned. "You'll have to show me later. I can tell you how they compare to the real thing."

"The real -- Man, you've been holding out on me," she groaned, dropping onto the step of the gazebo to sit next to him. "You see alebrijes too?"

Miguel shrugged. "You probably have too. They just look different this side of the bridge."

"Different how?"

"Different like.... You know, normal."

That was interesting. She hadn't considered that guides could take different forms between worlds. That was something she'd have to think about later. "So there's a lot of alebrijes on the other side of the bridge?"

"Loads," Miguel told her. "And they're huge! Well, some of them. I used to think they were just a myth, like vitamins--"

"Vitamins are real, Miguel."

"People keep saying that but I really don't think they are. Anyway," he continued. "They're, like, everywhere! Some people have them as, well not exactly pets, but they have ones that stay with them. There might be some wild ones but I didn't really see any."

Oh God the curiosity was killing her. She wanted to respect his boundaries and not ask questions that he wouldn't be comfortable answering, but she also really wanted to know what had happened. But just asking how the bridge worked wouldn't hurt, would it? "So you just found the bridge and walked over?"

Miguel gave a sheepish smile, rubbing one hand over his forearm in a nervous gesture. "Not exactly... It was an accident. Well, the first time was. I kind of....stole something."

Nell stared. "You what? Damn, kid, what did you steal? Some cursed ancient idol or something?"

"HA! No!" He laughed. "No, no, no. Nothing like that. It was a guitar."

“A cursed guitar?"

“No! The guitar wasn’t cursed. Nothing was cursed. I mean I thought I was for a while, and
then I actually was for a while, but no.”

Now she just blinked at him. “What… What? Okay. I am officially confused. You stole the guitar and it took you across the bridge. And then you got cursed?”

“No. Taking the guitar got me cursed, but I crossed the bridge after. It’s… kind of a long story.” But maybe it was about time he told someone the truth. Miguel sighed, brushing one hand distractedly thought his hair as he hunched forward, bracing his arms across his knees. It would be nice to have someone to talk to about what happened, someone who would actually believe him.

“I didn’t mean to steal it,” he told her. “Well, I did. But I was going to bring it back. I just wanted to play it once, here in the plaza.”

It all came pouring out, the reason for the Rivera family’s ban on music and the events that led to him believing that Ernesto De la Cruz was his ancestor, trying to steal the guitar, and the curse that resulted.

“Hold up, hold up,” Nell interrupted, holding up her hands in a ‘stop now’ gesture. “Your great-great-grandmother told you that if you didn’t give up music that she was going to let you die?”

“She didn’t mean it that way,” Miguel said defensively. “She thought she was doing it to protect me. That music was dangerous. And I kind of did almost die three times that night.”

“What?!”

“Anyway, so I thought, fine, if the rest of my family refused to give me the blessing, I’d track down the one family member who might understand.”

“Ernesto De la Cruz.”

Miguel nodded.

“Except he wasn’t your grandfather.”

“Gracias a Dios. ” Now that would truly be a nightmare, now that he knew what De la Cruz truly was. “But I didn’t know that at the time. So I ran off and tried to find him.”

He told her how he met a shabby-looking skeleton who claimed to know De la Cruz, and how he disguised himself with shoe-polish so he wouldn’t stand out. Their attempts to find the man, which took them all over the city (and he met FRIDA KAHLO! HOLY CRAP!), and their quest for a guitar that took them to Shantytown. Nell listened raptly as Miguel continued his story, snickering to herself when he told her about Hector singing “Everyone Knows Juanita”. She wasn’t familiar with the song but she could certainly guess what word “knuckles” might have been meant to replace. And even though she knew full well what kind of awful human being De la Cruz was, hearing first-hand how he’d murdered Hector back in 1921, and then tossed both him and Miguel into a cenote to rot in the Land of the Dead, had her clenching her fists in helpless anger. She wished she could cross the bridge herself so she could punch that creature in his stupid face.

“And then Mamá Imelda and Pepita showed up and pulled us out! Dante had found them and helped track us down. Turns out he’s an alebrije too.”

“Wait a sec. You are telling me that you were being followed around what is quite literally the afterlife by a dog who turned out to be your alebrije, and you named him Dante.”

“Yeah?”
Nell snorted with laughter. “Oh, that is perfect. Absolutely beautiful. I love it.”

“Um...why?”

“Look up Dante’s *Inferno* at school when you get the chance. Let’s just say your dog is really appropriately named.”

“Um… ‘kay. Anyway…”

He took her through their infiltration of the Sunrise Spectacular with the entire family in Frida Kahlo cosplay, right up to their final confrontation with De la Cruz when he threw Miguel off the top of the building. Thank god for *alebrijes* that were large enough to ride on. Pepita had earned her chin-scritches for eternity that night.

“And then...they sent me back,” Miguel finished. “I ran back home. Mamá Coco… I couldn’t let her forget him. She’d had problems with her memory for so long but I had to try. But when I played their song, it was like it all came back somehow. She’d kept everything hidden in her drawer. Hector’s letters, some of his song drafts. And the corner of the picture that had been torn away. We taped it back on and put it in a new frame. It’s on the ofrenda now but… I don’t know if I made it in time.”

Tears stung at his eyes but he wiped them away stubbornly.

“And you’ve never tried to go back, just to see?”

Miguel shook his head, giving a watery chuckle. “I think Mamá Imelda would have killed me for real if I tried. I thought… For a moment last year I thought I felt him, like he was playing right next to me but…”

“Then I’m sure he made it,” Nell told him, resting one hand reassuringly on his shoulder. “You would know best, right? My great-grandma passed away when I was ten and I will swear on whatever you want that I still feel her in my grandparents’ house, so if you say you felt Hector playing next to you that night, then you did.”

He let out a shaky sigh as a feeling of relief washed over him. He didn’t know how badly he needed to hear that until that moment, for someone else to have such absolute faith that what he felt was real. Hector had become one of his best friends even before they’d found out they were related. The fear that he had been too late had been eating at him for so long...

They sat in silence for a moment as Miguel collected himself. Then he sighed again. “Thank you.”

“Any time,” Nell smiled. “Seriously. And hey, we could always try an experiment this year.”

“What kind of experiment?”

“Projecting during *Dia de los Muertos*. I’ve never tried it before but who knows, maybe you’ll be able to see them.”

Miguel’s face lit up like a christmas tree. “*En serio?* We can do that?”

“We can try,” Nell promised. “All the old stories say that the veil is thinnest that time of year, so if there’s any time it would work, well it’s worth a shot right?”
The boy jumped to his feet, letting out an enthusiastic *grito* that would have woken the entire town if he’d been in his physical body.

“I take that as a ‘yes’ then?”

“Yes! Absolutely yes!”

Nell didn’t sleep well that night. She wanted to, oh how she wanted to, but one thought kept circling in her mind. There was something about that guitar. She couldn’t help but feel that there was more to the story. Miguel had said that it wasn’t the guitar that was cursed, but if it was nothing more than a harmless musical instrument, Nell was a fire-breathing monkey. There was just something way too coincidental about it.

Annoyed with herself, she rolled over to scribble a reminder to herself on the notepad she kept on her bedside table in case of midnight bursts of inspiration. She would look into it in the morning. Surely somewhere on the internet was stories of haunted instruments.

Apparently, as Nell found the next morning over breakfast, stories of haunted or possessed musical instruments were not uncommon. There were even long-standing legends cultural legends related to the phenomena, and when Nell came across the myth of the Japanese *tsukumogami*, she knew she’d found what she was looking for. Though there was no cultural crossover of this type of legend the correlation of events was just too close.

Immediately she opened up a new document on her laptop and started to take notes.

In old Japanese culture there was a belief that if an object was owned for over a hundred years, it would develop a soul of its own and become self-aware. Musical instruments were particularly common *tsukumogami* because they were often crafted with great care and carried great monetary value, so they usually ended up passed down through generations. But the descendants of the masters who once owned these instruments were not always musically inclined themselves, causing the instruments to fall into disuse and become resentful. And Hector Rivera would definitely be classified as a “master”. Between what Miguel had told her and her own research, Nell could see that this was a man who put his heart and soul into every note he played. That was a lot of emotion for an instrument to absorb in the approximately three years that he had owned it. A lot of love. And for him to be betrayed, murdered for his music, and the instrument stolen and paraded around by the
murderer? Someone who only played for fame and attention? Nell figured that would result in a pretty pissed-off guitar.

And the guitar itself was a freaking showpiece. Hand-made and perfect to the last detail. That kind of love and care being put into its creation had to leave a mark as well. Nell wondered how Imelda had been able to afford it.

The writer sat back in her chair, biting absently at her lip as she contemplated. Another quick google search had her frowning. Hector had died in November of 1921, at the age of twenty-one. Ernesto De la Cruz had been crushed by a falling bell during a performance in 1942, almost exactly twenty-one years later. No way in hell was that a coincidence.

And according to the date stamp on the video taken that night, the date of the concert was… the second of November. *Día de los Muertos.*

“Well… holy shit.”

Nell scrubbed her hands over her face, almost dislodging her glasses. That was a hell of a kick for an instrument that hadn’t even hit twenty-five years yet. It didn’t hit one hundred until 2017. Displayed like a trophy in the tomb of the man who murdered its master until some kid breaks in and steals it. A kid whose motivations might not have been entirely pure, but who had a musician’s heart, and who happened to be a direct descendant of Hector Rivera, its original owner.

Most stories of cursed objects just dealt with bad luck and deadly accidents. She’d never heard of people being shoved into astral planes and being taken to the Land of the Dead. She could only concluded that the guitar wanted Miguel to meet Hector, wanted him to find out the truth. Had it known that Hector was being forgotten?

When Miguel returned at sunrise the first thing he did was run to his grandmother. The guitar would have known her too. This was the child that Hector had loved so dearly, who he had played for every night. It had held onto that love, those powerful memories for all those years, and Miguel said that when he played for her she came back somehow. Nell’s own grandfather had passed away when she was in university. Over the last few years of his life, dementia had robbed him of most of his memories. The last time she had seen him, he thought she was her mother. To bring someone back from that was nothing short of a miracle.

“Okay. So. The guitar might be sentient.”

After some thought she found she kind of liked the idea. It was reassuring in a way to feel that treasured things could love people in return. And if they developed spirits of their own, could they be considered *alebrije* too?

Nell grinned, reaching for her tablet and plugging it into her laptop, breakfast entirely forgotten. A sentient, haunted guitar. It looked like she finally had a real plot for her new book.

Chapter End Notes

And so ends Chapter 4!
Researching for this fic has been really educational for me. I've tried to stick as close to the known facts as possible, though I may have had to use a bit of creative license to get everything to mesh properly with my plotline. One of those details was the date of Ernesto's last concert. It was never really specified in canon, but based on the stage design and how when the scene was originally planned for the opening number the introductory song was about Dia de los Muertos, I went with that being the date.

One of the most fun things about writing Nell for me is getting to play with all of the meta storylines and fan theories that I can't get to fit within the regular plot. I want to give a special shout out to im_fairly_witty, whose discussion of the sentient guitar theory has inspired the basis of Nell's novel.

Thanks so much for reading! If you want to see any more fun content or fanart, please follow me at https://calliopesquill.tumblr.com/. Send me your asks, your fun theories, or any comments you have! I can't wait to connect with you!
Chapter 5: La Familia Rivera

Chapter Summary

Nell finally meets the family.

Chapter Notes

You all are seriously amazing, you know that? The responses I have been getting for these last chapters have been incredible and I can't thank you enough.

Special thanks to all of you who left me such wonderful comments, and especially Maraviri, who pointed out some spelling errors I had made in earlier chapters.

With that said, on to chapter 5!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 5: La Familia Rivera

Nell needed to start setting alarms when she worked. She’d gotten so buried in her novel planning and concept sketches that it was three in the afternoon before she finally surfaced, and that only happened because her stomach had let out a growl loud enough to wake the dead. She pushed herself away from the table with a groan, letting out a muttered curse as she stretched, her back protesting at the hunched position she’d been in for the last three hours. It was definitely time for a break.

She shuffled across the kitchen to her fridge, only to find it almost totally empty. Right… I was supposed to go grocery shopping this morning.

She sighed, shutting the fridge again. Better to do that now, and maybe grab an early supper on the way. She was too hungry to cook. But first she should probably get dressed. Her style may be casual, but it definitely wasn’t “leave the house in pajamas” casual. Nell traded her pajamas for a pair of comfortable flower-printed shorts and a white tee shirt, twisting her hair up in a messy bun as she stepped into her pink ballet flats. After a quick double-check that both her keys and wallet were still in her purse, she was out the door.

As she walked, she went over what she’d come up with for her new novel so far. It would be narrated by the guitar itself, a twist that she would not be revealing until near the end. She didn’t have much for her protagonist yet, but was toying with the idea of him stealing the guitar for himself at first, so the story could be something of a redemption arc for him as well. There would be no familial connection between the hero and the guitar’s original owner, however. She wanted to tell her own story, not just re-tell something that had already happened.
She was contemplating the design of her main character when she was nearly knocked off her feet by a small, bony form. The dog continued on past her to dance around the feet of an old woman in a blue button-down dress.

“¡Oye!” The woman protested, shifting the grocery bags she carried to one arm so she could shoo the dog away. “¡Abajo! Abajo, perro tonto. ¡No saltar!”

The dog, completely ignoring her commands to get down, jumped at her again, knocking her bags from her hands in its attempts to smother her with affection. It only backed away when it saw her reaching for the sandal on her foot, electing instead to plop down next to her and begin chewing on its own leg.

Muttering to herself, the woman began to pick up her spilled groceries, letting out a muttered oath when she saw the strap on one of the bags had snapped. She looked up when she saw a second set of hands gathering up the spilled fruit and reached for her sandal again, prepared to fight off any tonto stupid enough to try to steal from her. But instead of running off they pulled a folded-up cloth bag from inside their purse and began putting the spilled food inside to make it easier to carry.

Nell stood, brushing off the road dust, and offered the woman a hand to help her up. “¿Estás bien?” She asked, picking up the bag of groceries she’d helped pick up.

“Sí, gracias,” the woman answered, then shot a fond but vaguely frustrated look towards the dog that still sat at their feet. “No thanks to you, silly dog.”

“Is he yours?”

“He thinks he is,” the woman shrugged. “He comes to the house sometimes, looking for food. He is very fond of my grandson.” Now that she could actually get a good look at the person who had helped her, she recognized the young woman who often sat in the plaza. “You are one of Coro’s tenants, sí? The artist.”

“My name’s Nell,” she said with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you. Did you want some help getting these back home?”

“Ah, I will be fine,” the woman said, waving her off. “As long as someone--” Here she shot another look at the dog, who gave her a harmless doggy smile. “--does not jump on me again.”

“Aww, you won’t jump again, will you?” Nell asked the dog, giving him a scratch behind the ears. The dog gave a small huff, leaning into her hand as his skinny tail beat a tattoo against the ground. “Cuz you are a good boy.”

The dog barked the affirmative.

“You are a nice girl,” the woman decided. “My grandson, he says very good things about you.”

“Your grandson?”

“Sí. My Miguelito. He talks to you sometimes when you draw at the plaza.”

“Oh, you’re Miguel’s abuelita!” Now it all made sense. “It’s a pleasure to meet you at last. And that must mean that this handsome boy here is Dante.”

Elena snorted. ‘Handsome’ was not exactly the word that she would have chosen. What he was was dumb as a bag of rocks, but he was sweet-natured and very dedicated to her grandson, and
the rest of the family by extension, so she’d developed a soft spot for the silly thing. “You are very
good with dogs,” she noted, seeing Dante roll over so Nell could scratch his belly.

“I always wanted one growing up,” Nell confessed as she gave in to his desire for pets. “But
my dad was allergic to the hair. Couldn’t handle cats either, so I never had a chance to have a pet
growing up. And then after I moved out on my own I couldn’t really afford one so… “ She
shrugged.

“This one seems to like you,” Elena said with a small nod. “He is very foolish, but he knows
good people. You will come for dinner.”

“Thank you. I -- wait, what? Oh, no, you don’t have to. That’s very generous but --”
But Elena overrode her protests. “Nonsense. You will come tonight and meet the family.”

“I --- okay.” What else could she say? “Is there anything you’d like me to bring? I could make
dessert.”

“No, no. I have all that I need. You will come tonight for six and we will have a nice dinner.”

“Ah… Okay. Thank you.”

Despite protests, Nell insisted on escorting her home anyway, telling her to keep the cloth bag
that the extra groceries had been carried in as Elena’s other one was broken. The moment the door
had closed Nell dashed off down the street to the grocery store.

She ended up making chocolate chip cookies, though she’d had to borrow a pair of baking
trays and a serving platter from Tia Caro. She had been told not to bring anything but she had been
strictly mother-trained not to arrive empty-handed when it came to dinner invitations. As the cookies
cooled, Nell traded her shorts and tee-shirt for a casual emerald green maxi dress topped with a
candy pink knit bolero sweater. Mindful that she was visiting a family of shoemakers, she paired her
outfit with a pretty pair of black and gold strappy sandals. Her hair she tied back in a low, looped
ponytail that would keep the curls out of her face, but would not give her a headache as the night
went on.

She walked carefully towards the Rivera home, praying that she wouldn’t trip and spill all of
the cookies before she got there. It might have been early October but to Nell it still felt like mid-
summer. The leaves would have just started to change color back home and the neighborhood kids
would all be in a tizzy picking their Halloween costumes. She smiled fondly at the thought.
Halloween had always been her favorite holiday, though more for the costumes and the candy than
the spook-factor. Funny enough, Nell could not handle horror movies or haunted houses at all. Her
friends had tricked her into watching A Haunting in Connecticut one night and she barely slept for a
week.

She’d be missing Halloween this year, but would be trading it out for her first experience with
Dia de los Muertos. Already people had begun decorating, draping colorful cut-paper banners
between the buildings. There were areas of Santa Cecilia where the little flags were always present,
but there were always more come fall. It was a little early for people to be putting out the elaborate
calaveras figures that were also used to decorate, but Nell did spot one or two between her place and
Thankfully she made it to the house without incident and knocked on the front door at promptly five minutes to six.

The woman who answered the door was just shorter than she was, dressed in a cheerful yellow blouse and a bright pink skirt. Her hair was dark and straight, tied back in a low, loose braid. She had a youthful face, with smile lines just appearing around her eyes -- some of which, Nell guessed, could be attributed to the toddler at her hip.

She smiled when she saw her. “Ah, you must be Nell. Mamá told us you would be joining us for dinner. Please, come in.” She nudge the door open with her foot, stepping back so Nell could follow her into the courtyard.

“Gracias, Señora Rivera.”

“Please, call me Luisa,” the woman insisted, resettling her daughter on her hip as she closed the gate. “And this one here is my youngest, Soccoro. Miguel has told us so much about you. He says you are an artist.”

Nell nodded. “Yes ma’am.”

“Miguel really likes your books. He wanted to bring them home from the library so he could show his prima Rosa but they did not have them, so he has been showing her on the computer during their lunch hour. She really likes your heroine.”

“I’m glad they’re enjoying it so far,” Nell smiled. “I had a lot of fun writing it.”

“It shows. Ah, but you must be tired of carrying that tray. Come, I will show you to the kitchen. Mamá should be just about done with dinner.”

“She told me not to bring anything but I wanted to contribute somehow,” Nell admitted, following Luisa through the courtyard. “I’m better with desserts than actual meals, so I figured chocolate chip cookies would be a good option.”

Luisa chuckled. “We will have to hide those from Miguel until after dinner. And this one too,” she added as little Soccoro reached for the tray.

No sooner had she said that than Miguel burst from his room, still dressed in the white button-down shirt and navy pants of his school uniform. “Mamá I’m done my -- hey! Nell! What are you doing here?”

“Ay! Manners mijo. Your abuelita met your friend this afternoon and invited her over for dinner.”

Miguel cocked his head curiously. “How did you meet abuelita?”

“A certain affectionate xolo decided that the best time to give her kisses was when she was carrying groceries,” Nell told him. “I just happened to be nearby and helped her pick them up.”

He laughed. “Dante is still working on his timing. Are those cookies for us?”

“After dinner, mijo,” Luisa told him. “Your abuelita should be almost ready, so why don’t you get out of your school clothes and you can help set the table.”
“Okay Mamá.”

Abuelita Elena was the undisputed head of the Rivera family. She was a life-long shoemaker but it was in the kitchen where she truly reigned supreme. Everything was timed to the minute on an internal clock born of practice and instinct. Nell, who could not put a perfectly-timed meal on the table if her life depended on it, wanted to applaud. Elena seemed to know everything that was going on in her kitchen at all times and even though her back was turned, she was instantly aware of other people entering her domain.

“Ah, Luisa! You are just in time,” she said, not even turning around as she plated up a tray of ribs in a spicy-smelling sauce. “And you have brought Penelope with you. Good. I like it when people are on time.”

“I’m obsessively prompt,” Nell smiled. “And please, call me Nell. I brought some dessert for later. Is there somewhere I can put it where little cookie-monsters won’t be able to help themselves before dinner?”

Elena gave a short snort of laughter. “Anyone in my house knows there will be no desserts until after their dinner. For now you can put them on top of the fridge.”

Not for the first time Nell was grateful for her height, as she barely had to stand on tiptoe to set the tray atop the fridge. As with many homes it was a local showcase of family achievements; well-graded assignments and art projects from the varying Rivera cousins covered the door, fixed with colorful magnets. As she turned away she could see Elena glancing at her sandals out of the corner of her eye.

“Your shoes. They are pretty, but they were not made for you. They are too flat. You move like a dancer, but in those things you walk like a duck.”

Nell let out a snort of laughter. “I was a dancer, from about the age of four. Quit after I finished university because I moved out and couldn’t pay for lessons anymore. Took three years as an adult to train myself out of that turn-out so I could walk with my feet parallel again.” She still caught herself standing in ballet-third when she wasn’t paying attention. “I have a hard time finding sandals a lot of the time because most of them come in four styles: cute but flat as cardboard so zero arch-support at all, cute but with massive heels and can only be worn for like an hour before you want to die, cute but eat your feet and leave raw patches and blisters, and comfortable but really ugly. There is no place for ugly shoes in my wardrobe.”

Elena nodded in approval of the sentiment. There was no place in the world for ugly shoes at all in her opinion. Cheap shoes were an insult to her craft. No Rivera would be seen wearing cheap, poorly-constructed shoes, and if she had her way then no friend of the Riveras would either. “Come, you take that plate there and help me set the table and we will talk about shoes that you can wear for the rest of your life.”

“I -- okay.” What else could she do? She didn’t want to come out and say that custom-made shoes were not a luxury that she could afford right now. Most of what she had had gone into this trip, and though her book sales and commissions were keeping her afloat, they didn’t leave much room for luxuries. She took the plate and followed Elena into the chaos that is the dining room.

Seeing the number of people gathered, Nell stopped short and stared. When Elena invited her to dinner she didn’t think it would be with the whole family. It looked like half of Santa Cecilia had managed to fit itself around the table.

“Come, come. Put that plate down right here. Sí, right next to the tamales. Manny, Benny, stop
teasing your *prima* Rosa and come sit down. Abel, you shuffle down and make room for our guest. *Todos, esto es Penelope. Penelope, mi familia.*

“Ah...hi everyone.” Nell set the plate down and gave a shy wave. “Please, call me Nell.” Should she start wearing a sign? She really felt like she should start wearing a sign. Something simple like ‘*Please do not call me Penelope until I am over the age of 65. Thank you.*’

A seat was left for her between Elena and a woman who introduced herself as Miguel’s Tia Gloria. She then introduced Nell to the twin boys, Benny and Manny, who were the younger siblings of Abel and Rosa, and were a couple of years into elementary school. They weren’t particularly interested in introductions, and were much more focused in which of them could stuff the most food in their mouth at one time.

Miguel’s father Enrique, a tall man with a dark moustache, passed a platter of food to his wife before turning to Nell. “So, Miguel says you’re an artist.”

The question was offered casually but Nell had the distinct impression that what she was being asked was actually something very different. “Yes, sir. I write graphic novels -- comic books -- but I take other commissions as well. I’m setting my next series in a place similar to Santa Cecilia so I’m living here for a few months as I work on it because I want to get an authentic feel for the culture and the lifestyle and the architecture. I spend a lot of time doing reference sketches in Mariachi Plaza. It’s got really great atmosphere and that’s something I really wanted to capture. Then that one over there --” She nodded at Miguel. “--got curious one day and decided he wanted to know who the weird *turista* was who kept writing everything down in a giant notebook.”

“You should see her sketchbook. It’s really good,” Miguel told them. “She was drawing the bell tower yesterday and it was just with pencils and it was perfect! It looked like one of those old-timey pictures.”

“We read your comic at lunch sometimes,” added Rosa, who sat a few seats down from her cousin. “We just got to the part where Polaris and Astra start working together.”

“Have you gotten to the mirror incident yet?” Nell asked.

Rosa shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Let me know when you get there. That was one of my favourite chapters in the whole series.”

The conversation flowed freely throughout dinner, catching up with the goings-on at school. Abel was taking some online CAD courses for the business, and there was some discussion between the other family members on designs and techniques that they were experimenting with. Miguel mentioned briefly how he’d started reading Dante’s *Inferno*, which had the entire family in stitches when Benny and Manny asked how the little doggy wrote a book. Nell also got a more in-depth history of the business itself.

“I think it’s really admirable what Imelda did,” Nell said honestly. “Running a business is really difficult, and at the time, being a female entrepreneur would have been that much more challenging. Never mind being a single parent on top of that. So that she created such a successful business that has stayed in the family for so long is really incredible. Add the complication of foreign investment and multinational companies with giant factories, it must be challenging sometimes to stay competitive.”

“*Si*, it is sometimes,” Miguel’s father answered with a shrug. “Much of our business is local.
Most people here, they would rather be able to see and feel the thing that they are buying, so that is a benefit to us.”

“We did get that magazine placement a couple of years ago,” Gloria added. “That telenovela star. What was her name? She mentioned us in an interview and wore a pair of our boots for a photo shoot.”

“There is always a market for quality custom work,” Elena nodded. “Work that lasts. That is a legacy worth protecting. Would you like some more tamales?”

Nell leaned back in her chair and shook her head. “No, gracias. They are delicious but I am stuffed.”

“No, no, there is plenty of room left. You are so skinny! Have another.”

“You know, I think I’ve heard that from everyone at Tia Caro’s building,” Nell laughed as she accepted one more tamale. “I think she might have decided to adopt me. Ten bucks says she must be half-way through the paperwork by now.”

Elena gave a nod of approval. “Caro is a good woman. She takes care of her familia.” It didn’t matter if they were related by blood or simply lived in her building. All were considered family. And that, to Elena was the most important thing.

How anyone at that table had any room for cookies after that meal, Nell had no idea. But somehow they did, and managed to empty the tray in record time.

“Have you figured out the plot yet for your new comic?” Miguel asked as he and Rosa started clearing up the dishes.

“Part of it,” Nell answered. “I was working on some of the background and lore this morning. The story is going to center around a cursed guitar.”

Miguel paused, setting down the plates that he had been stacking, memories of her inquiries about is own guitar immediately springing to mind. “How did it get cursed?”

She hesitated for a moment. As much as she really wanted to be able to use this idea for her books, she worried it might hit a little too close for Miguel. She would leave it for him to decide if he was comfortable with her continuing, or if he wanted her to write something different. So she gave a cursory explanation of the concept of the tsukumogami and how the guitar had developed a spirit of its own. “And what the guitar wants is to finally see justice done for its murdered owner, and to be played again by someone who is worthy.”

“Cool!” Rosa declared. “Who killed him?”

“No spoilers,” Nell grinned at her. “But if you guys want I can show you some of the concept art I’ve got later.”

Miguel hesitated, not entirely sure how he felt about the idea. On the one hand, it was a little weird knowing that part of his family’s history, even a small part, was going to be used in a book. But if there was anyone that he trusted to do it respectfully, it was Nell. He’d caught the look she
gave him when she explained her idea and knew that she would not proceed with it without his go-ahead. And aside from that... a graphic novel series about a sentient guitar would be really, really cool.

He flashed a crooked, one-dimpled smile and nodded. “Can’t wait!”

When Miguel met with Nell that night, he knew that he was right to trust her. What she had planned did briefly allude to the history of Hector and Ernesto, but not in any way that would be recognizable to anyone but him.

In her story, the guitar was a family heirloom. The father was a brilliant musician with a poet’s heart. He and his wife had two sons. The eldest son was bold and adventurous and loved music too, though more for the attention that his talent brought him than for the music itself. The younger brother was just like his father, who loved the music for its own sake. And when the father died, it was the younger son that he gave the guitar to. But the older brother was a jealous sort, always seeing himself as second place, even though he was the oldest. He was determined to be liked, and cultivated a fine and charming manner in order to endear himself to those around him, but he could never match the simple sincerity of his younger brother. They were both talented, but when they performed together it was easy to see whose heart was really in the music. They travelled together, performed together, and all that time the older brother’s jealousy festered within him. Until one night, after a particularly bad fight and a few too many drinks, he smothered his brother in his sleep.

The death was mourned as a tragedy, a sudden failure of the heart in a time where forensic evidence and investigation barely existed. Nobody even considered the possibility of murder.

The older brother inherited the guitar by default, and did become a fairly well renowned musician on his own. He would never admit that the guitar that had become his trademark never sang as beautifully for him as it did for his father and brother. He performed until his death in 1931, when an earthquake caused the roof of the theater he was rehearsing in to collapse on top of him, burying him alive.

The guitar was salvaged from the wreckage without a scratch on it and was held in private collections until the mid-1990’s, when it was installed as part of a music history exhibit in a local museum. Stories say that sometimes, late at night, you can still hear the sad melody it plays, mourning its lost musico.

“You gotta write that,” Miguel insisted after hearing what she’d planned. “What happens next? Is that it?”

Nell laughed. “Nah, that’s more of the backstory that sets up the main plot. The main character is a paranormal investigator who heard the stories of the ghostly music, so he breaks into the museum at night. Next thing he knows he’s seeing ghosts everywhere, and the guitar quite literally seems to have a mind of its own and won’t leave him be.”

Miguel snickered. This was going to be fun.

“For real, though. You’re okay with me writing this? If you’re not comfortable with it, you’ve
got to tell me. There’s no time-limit so I have all the time in the world to think up something else.”

He shook his head. “No, I like it. It’s different. And I like the guitar being the narrator. That’s kinda cool.”

Nell sighed with relief. “Okay. Okay. Cool. But like, if you ever change your mind, let me know.”

“I will,” Miguel promised.

They walked for a while longer, taking in the quiet, their path taking them past the painted gate of the Rivera house. Dante trotted companionably at their side. They’d discovered when they met up that night that the little xolo could indeed see them when they were projecting, and after spending several minutes jumping all over them, he designated himself their official companion for the evening.

“So what did you and abuelita talk about when you were touring the shop?”

“Ah, not much. Got a little more on the history of the business. Some of the process. Your abuelita is really determined to get me into a decent pair of shoes.” Nell chuckled.

Miguel snickered. “Fifty pesos says you’re in a pair if Rivera shoes by Christmas.”

“You’re on. And I’ll put my winnings towards buying my pretty new Rivera shoes after New Years.”

“Hey!” He laughed. “That’s cheating.”

“You set the rules, not me.” She reminded him. For a moment she was silent, then she spoke again. “Your abuelita is really proud of you, you know. Your whole family is. You can see it in their faces when they hear you play. I’m glad I got to meet them tonight.”

“They really like you,” Miguel told her. “And Tia Gloria really wants your cookie recipe. Benny and Manny would have eaten all of them if they could have.”

Nell laughed. “I’m glad I passed inspection. They were definitely a little concerned about me at first, not that I blame them.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it’s one thing for their fourteen year old to have adult friends among the local musicians, but it’s a little different when he’s suddenly friends with a random tourist eleven years his senior.”

She had a point. And it wasn’t like either of them could explain the particular circumstances behind them becoming friends to begin with, not without earning themselves a happy little trip to the hospital in the city for a psych evaluation.

What Nell didn’t tell him was how worried his family had been for him over the past few months. They’d known he wasn’t sleeping well, but as he refused to tell them what was going on there was nothing they could do. He’d been doing so much better since summer ended. He no longer came to the breakfast table with tired eyes, dragging his feet -- or at least, no more than any other young teenager. A question had been left unspoken of whether he had told Nell about what had been bothering him, to which she’d had to claim complete ignorance.
“Side note: I don’t know how the hell you survived that music ban,” Nell confessed, shaking her head. “I’d have completely lost my mind.” Music had always in some way been on the periphery of her life. She couldn’t imagine being cut off from it.

“I felt like I was some days,” he laughed. “And I was raised into it. Mamá had to give it up when she married Papa and I don’t know how she did it.”

“People will do a lot for love. If it meant being with your Dad, it was probably a sacrifice she was willing to make.”

Miguel nodded. He’d almost made the same one before Hector and Mamá Imelda had sent him back. To be able to return home and have a chance to save Hector, he’d have given up music without a moment’s regret. “Could you do it?”

“Give up music for someone?” Nell asked. “Don’t know. There’s never been someone that mattered enough that I would consider it. If it was the right person, I think I could. But then if it was the right person, I wouldn’t have to.”

Chapter End Notes

And there ends chapter 5! We met the Riveras, Nell finally got her plot sorted out, and we got to see Dante!

Next chapter will be the start of Dia de los Muertos, so buckle up buttercups because it’s going to be a wild ride.

For more fun content and fanart, feel free to stop by my Tumblr page!
Chapter 6: Día de los Muertos

Miguel woke early on Día de los Muertos, more excited for today than he’d been for anything in a very long time. Tonight he would finally get to see the other side of his family again. Maybe. He hoped he could. There was something in the air today, a kind of charge that he’d never felt before. It felt like a good omen. Miguel’s parents, Abuelita Elena, Papá Franco, Tío Berto, Tía Carmen and Tía Gloria were all seated at the table enjoying their morning coffee when Miguel came in for breakfast. Each and every one of them stared at him as if he’d grown a second head.

¡Chale! Was he glowing? Nell said she could see it on him but had it become actually visible to normal people now? Miguel glanced down subtly. Nope. No glowing that he could see. Was his shirt inside out? Was there something on his face? “Um...why are you guys staring at me?”

“You’re up early, mijo,” Luisa commented as she set her mug down on the table. “We thought you’d sleep at least another hour.” And have to be pried out of bed with a crowbar.

Miguel shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. Too excited for tonight.”

“You have a new song for us, right?” Tía Gloria smiled.

“Oh, yeah. That.” He nodded, scratching the back of his head absently. That was totally what it was. It had nothing at all to do with projecting tonight and maybe getting to see the other side of his family again. Nothing at all. “I think it’s finally ready.”

“I like this new tradition,” Tío Berto commented as he stood to retrieve the coffee pot and refill everyone’s mugs. “Celebrating family with music. Rosa has been practicing all month. She’s really
excited to play tonight.”

Miguel nodded as he retreated to the kitchen to pour himself some cereal. She’d seen a video online of two dueling violinists and had been bugging him for weeks to try it. It had been a pretty good way to practice actually, challenging and riffing off each other. Rosa had come a long way in the last year and a half, especially considering she’d never even touched an instrument until abuelita had lifted the music ban.

Actually the rescinding of the ban seemed to have the entire family breathing a collective sigh of relief. It had been a particularly difficult transition for his father and tio Berto and abuelita, who had gone their whole lives without the comfort of song. For months afterwards you could see them just cringe whenever they heard a song play, and more than once had caught themselves before they scolded Miguel for playing, having forgotten that he was now permitted. Mamá and Tía Gloria, on the other hand, had immediately searched out their old record collections, and had spent an entire weekend rediscovering old favorites and introducing them to their family.

The Ernesto De la Cruz records -- for of course there had been a few of those -- were disposed of as soon as the truth came out. As much as the family wanted to listen to what they now knew were the songs of their grandfather, they refused to hear them in the voice of his murderer. Miguel briefly considered simply taking a hammer to each and every one of them, but cooler heads prevailed and the records were donated to the library instead.

He’d been stunned when it was abuelita that suggested he play for the family last Día de los Muertos. He’d been working on Proud Corazon for months and had planned to play it in secret for his deceased family members after his living family had gone to sleep but this… this was so much better. And tonight he might finally see them again.

Everything had to be perfect. If abuelita Elena had been a stickler for it before, it was nothing on how Miguel was today. There were times when he seemed to be everywhere at once, baking with his abuelita, helping to set up the ofrenda, helping the twins scatter the marigold petals through the street to guide their family home. After being chased out of the kitchen for what must have been the tenth time that afternoon, he retreated to his bedroom and spent the hour tuning his guitar to perfection and polishing the surface to a mirror-bright shine.

At last his mother knocked on his door. “Mijo, are you ready?”

He nodded, pulling on his suit jacket. Miguel had unfortunately grown out of his red suit over the last year. He’d been sad to part with it, as it had been to him a physical symbol of his family’s acceptance of his music. The new suit was more of a pinkish buff color, with gold braid decorating the collar. “Si, Mamá. I’m ready.” And with a bright grin of anticipation, he stepped out to join the rest of the family.

The queue that led to the checkpoint seemed to take forever. Each step that Hector took towards it brought a fresh wave of excitement and anxiety coursing through him. Almost a hundred years of trying to cross the marigold bridge and it wasn’t until last year that he had finally been able to do it. So much had changed in the last two years. The first time he felt the bridge solidify under his feet he could have cried. In fact the only thing that stopped him from doing just that was the fact that he no longer had tear ducts.
He knew, objectively, that he would be able to cross again this year, and every year after, but decades of rejection was a hard past to overcome. Maybe Miguel had forgotten to put his picture on the ofrenda. No, no, he would never do that. But what if he hadn’t been allowed to? What if there was a fire and his picture was burned away?

*Stop it!* He ordered himself firmly. It was fine. Everything was fine. There was no fire. His picture would still be there. He wasn’t being forgotten. He wouldn’t be here, fighting off an anxiety attack, if he was.

Delicate fingers twined gently with his as Imelda took his hand. He leaned against her briefly, reassured by her presence.

Sometimes he wondered if all of this was just a dream. He had everything he’d ever wanted: his beloved wife at his side, his beautiful daughter and her loving husband right behind them. Family all around him, and in the living world who remembered his name. And the incredible great-great-grandson who had made it all possible. That beautiful, amazing, wonderful child.

Miguel had saved him that night, and not just from the Final Death. The last few years had become increasingly desperate. He’d know that he was living on borrowed time, but that almost hadn’t mattered anymore. Sometimes he even wondered if he actually deserved it. He’d almost stopped caring then. It didn’t matter if he was forgotten, if his bones went to dust just like all of his friends. As long as he could see his daughter one last time he would face whatever came next with a smile on his face. It ceased to matter what promises he broke, what borrowed things he’d never return, if he could only do this one thing.

And then Miguel crashed into his life. That night he had found a part of himself that he hadn’t even been sure existed anymore. He brought the joy back to the music when it had become a source of nothing but pain for him. In that, in him, he had found himself again.

Miguel had risked everything for him and in the end it had almost been to late for both of them. He’d been too weak to even lift the petal that could send Miguel home. He could feel himself falling apart from the inside. Feel his bones, his spirit, crumbling away into nothing…

“Next!” The turnstile operator called, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Go, mi amor,” Imelda urged gently. “I will meet you on the other side.”

Hesitantly Hector approached the gate. He recognized the agent from previous attempts to cross. She was the one who finally let him through last year. He thought her name was Carla. “*Hola.*”

“*Hola* Hector,” she smiled welcomingly back at him. “Step up to the scanner, please.”

He removed his hat, smiling uncertainly, his heart -- metaphorically -- in his throat. He swore he could still feel it pounding in his chest, so loudly that he almost didn’t hear the machine’s ding of approval. He wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to that sound.

“Have a wonderful visit, Hector.”

“*Gracias.*” With a sigh of relief Hector passed through the gate to where his family waited. In what he hoped would become a yearly tradition, his wife hugged him tightly and kissed his bony cheek. Together, hand in hand, they made their way across the bridge.

It never ceased to amaze him how much the world had changed in the time that he had been dead. And how much it had stayed the same. They crossed onto the street, Dante and Pepita dancing...
along ahead of them, racing across to the house. Already the could hear the strains of music, a lively
tune played between violin and guitar. Already his fingers itched to join them. Grinning, he pulled
his wife through the gates and into the courtyard.

Rosa and Miguel faced each other in the center of the yard, trading turns in an improvised
melody. All around them the family gathered, toes tapping and hands clapping as they played. For a
moment Hector just watched them, his pride beyond any words he had, and smiled as he watched his
daughter pull her husband into a spirited dance. Not to be outdone, he turned to Imelda. “Shall we?”

They danced themselves breathless, or close enough to it for those who didn’t technically need
to breathe, and when the song finished with a flourish the entire family burst into applause.

The cousins bowed, nudging each other playfully as they straightened.

“So, you finally going to let us hear your new song?” Rosa asked her cousin. “You’ve been
stalling all afternoon.”

For a moment Hector would have sworn that Miguel looked right at him. But that was
impossible. Wasn’t it?

“Yeah, I think it’s time now.” Miguel adjusted the pegs of his guitar, making sure it was in tune,
and once again glanced right at the spot where Hector was standing. Then after a steadying breath he
started to play.

The song started slow, almost nostalgic in the opening melody, and when he sang he sang of
memory and moments he wished could last. The desire to stop time if only for a little while, and how
how no matter how you tried to hold onto it, it was as impossible as catching starlight in a bottle.
And how important it was to appreciate those moments when they came because so little lasted
forever.

He finished to roaring applause.

There was more music to come, with Miguel and his cousins trading off whenever a new song
was requested, taking their breaks to grab bites of food when they could.

All of this Hector watched with a beaming smile. His family. His amazing, beautiful family.
There was Coco and Julio standing behind their Elena, with Victoria close by. Oscar and Felipe
stood behind Berto as he and Abel laughed over some joke. Rosita stood by the table, smiling fondly
as little Soccoro chased Dante across the yard. And Imelda, his Imelda, at the center of it all.

Look at you, he thought to himself as he watched her. Look at what you’ve built. Everything
here was because of her. Her strength, her vision, her passion, and her love. Ah Diosa, you are
incredible.

He must have been staring longer than he thought for when Imelda’s eyes met his, they were
full of concern. He smiled back, giving a small nod.

She came to him anyway, wrapping one arm comfortably around his waist. “You’re so quiet,
mi amor. Is something wrong?”

Hector shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m just...happy. So, so, so happy right now. Being here.”
For a moment she looked as if she didn’t believe him, and her worried frown was so endearing he
could not help but kiss her. “Everything is perfect. I promise.”

Imelda sighed, leaning her head against his chest. “If you are certain.”
“I promise you mi amor, there is nothing that could make me happier than I am right now.”

“Not even a look at your great-great-grandson’s songbook?” She teased, laughing as he instantly started to glance around in search of Miguel. “That’s what I thought. I saw him heading towards the ofrenda room. Go, see what he has for you this year.”

Hector stepped away, bowing low to press a kiss to her hand. “As mi diosa commands.” He smiled, dodging her playful swat at his head to skip off to find Miguel.

He followed the trail of marigold petals to a small room off the courtyard. Miguel stood in front of the ofrenda, fingertips brushing almost absently over the orange-gold petals that cascaded over the tablecloth.

He’d grown so much in the year since Hector had last seen him. At fourteen his face was losing its childish roundness, and Hector noted with pleasure that the shape was very reminiscent of Imelda when she was young. The ears though, and the smile — that was all him. He was, Hector thought with no small amount of pride, a perfect blending of him and his wife. He’d always wanted to give Coco a sister or brother. Maybe, in another life, they could have had a son as well, one who looked just like Miguel.

“Hola, Papá Hector.”

Hector jumped, startled at being addressed so suddenly. Was...was Miguel talking to him? No, that was impossible. It was just the picture he was talking to.

“I don’t know if you’re there, or if you can hear me but... I think you can.” Miguel ran one hand uncertainly through his messy black hair, then sighed. “It’s been... a crazy year. Like really, you have no idea. Mamá and Papá and Abuelita let me join the music classes at school this year. I’m a lot better at reading music now, so I’ve been borrowing books of sheet music from my profe so I can practice. I have a few new songs to share with you this year.” At this he placed a small black notebook on the ofrenda, right in front of Hector and Imelda’s picture. “Most of them are done, but a couple are still a work in progress. I don’t always have the words that you do. It’s hard to find the right words when even I’m not sure what it is I want to say sometimes.”

“I get it, chamaco.” Hector said with a small smile. “Sometimes the right words take time.” He reached out to ruffle the kid’s hair, but the moment his hand made contact, Miguel froze.

Slowly, so slowly, he brought his hand to his head, until his fingers and Hector’s overlapped. A soft laugh escaped him and he closed his eyes for a moment, as if savoring the contact. “Maybe you can hear me after all. If you can... can you wait for me tonight? In the courtyard. The whole family. There’s something I want to try. I don’t know if it will work but... I hope it does.” Smiling, he let his hand fall to his side. “And if I don’t get the chance to say it later... I miss you, and I wish we’d had more time.”

Miguel could hardly contain himself as his family made the trek to the cemetery. He had been sure, when he had spoken by the ofrenda, that someone else had been in the room with him, and would swear on whatever you asked that he’d felt the touch on his hair. He couldn’t help the broad
grin that covered his face, prompting even his twin cousins to wonder what was wrong with him.

Shortly before midnight he claimed a headache and returned to the house, closing himself in his room. If anyone came to check on him, he thought as he traded his charro suit for his pajamas, it would look like he’d just gone to bed early. They wouldn’t be entirely wrong. He would be in bed. He just wouldn’t technically be asleep.

As he tucked himself under the covers, he cast a nervous glance at the clock on his bedside table. Five minutes to midnight. He rolled over, taking a few deep breaths to steady himself, pushing back his worry and his doubt until all that was left was quiet. He decided to project himself into his bedroom instead of the courtyard, just so he could take another moment to settle himself. When he reached the door he found himself hesitating, glancing back to his bed. Nell was right, it was really weird to see yourself when he was projecting…

_Basta, Miguel. No more stalling._ With another steadying breath he passed through the door into the hall.

He heard his family before he saw them, and that in itself gave him courage. Even if that was as far as his abilities extended, that would be something.

“I don’t get it. Why did Miguel want us to wait for him here?” That was Tía Victoria, sounding justifiably confused.

“I don’t know, _mija._ Perhaps he has something to tell us that he did not wish for the others to hear.”

Miguel pressed his fingers to his mouth as he heard his Mamá Coco’s voice. He’d missed her so much since she’d passed last year and to hear her sounding so happy and healthy had his eyes stinging.

“You said he told you he wanted to try something,” Imelda said. “He did not tell you what?”

There was the rustle of cloth, as if someone had shrugged. “He didn’t say. But…for a moment I could have sworn he knew that I was there.”

At the sound of Hector’s voice Miguel could not hold himself back any longer. He dashed out into the courtyard, making a beeline for the center of the gathering. He didn’t stop to second-guess himself, but simply flung himself at his great-great-grandfather, tackling him to the ground in a clatter of bones.

For a moment the other Rivera stood in stunned silence before exploding.

“How did he do that?”

“Why is he glowing?”

“Is he cursed again? Quick, somebody get me a petal!”

Miguel, meanwhile, had yet to release Hector, who was clinging every bit as tightly as he was once he realized who had tackled him. Tears streamed freely down his face. “You’re here. Thank God you’re here. I thought I was going to be too late. I thought -- but you’re here. You’re really
Hector was equally overwhelmed, holding onto the shaking boy as if he might never let go. “Ay, mijo, I’m here. I’m here.”

“Miguel,” Imelda started softly, face drawn with concern. “Mijo, how are you doing this? Did you take another offering or --?”

Miguel pulled away just enough to shake his head, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. “No. Being cursed once was more than enough.”

“Then how? You should not even be able to see us, let alone…” Hector trailed off.

“I told you it’s been a crazy year,” Miguel answered with a crooked, one-dimpled smile. “Have any of you guys ever heard of astral projection?”

The moment Nell looked out the window that night she was instantly in love. The streets glowed with soft light from each of the houses, and the scent of marigolds filling the air. All around her was a sense of celebration and joy. Children with painted faces chased each other through their yards and onto the street, scattering flower petals in their wake.

The common living room on the main floor was also set up with an ofrenda that served everyone who lived in the house. Tía Caro had suggested that Nell add some of her own departed family members’ pictures to the altar a few days before, so Nell emailed her dad and asked him to send a couple of pictures of his dad and Nell’s great-grandparents so she could put them up as well. Seeing them there, clustered on the small flower-strewn table, made her smile. She didn’t know if that was the afterlife that her family members had gone to, or if they had any way of coming back tonight, but she thought they would appreciate having their pictures displayed in the small frames she had painted for them.

Without anyone in particular to visit, Nell wandered through the streets of Santa Cecilia just taking in the atmosphere. Occasionally she stopped, taking out her phone so she could take a few panorama shots of her surroundings for set reference, or close-up pictures of things that she wanted to try to paint later. After a couple of hours of exploring she followed the trail of families to the cemetery. Everywhere around her was filled with color and soft candlelight. Families crouched at the graves of their ancestors, sharing traditional foods and sweets and sharing stories of the last year.

Nell smiled as she watched, keeping herself carefully separate so as not to interrupt. Seeing this made her think of her own grandparents. Her grandfather had been cremated after his passing, but her grandmother still had yet to part with his ashes. The urn sat upon the mantle on the second floor of the house they had once shared, and more than once Nell had heard her grandmother talking to him when she thought that nobody else was inside.

She returned to her apartment shortly before midnight, taking some time to transfer the pictures she’d taken to her laptop to play with later. As she worked she wondered how Miguel was doing, and if their experiment had worked. He’d plan the meeting for midnight, so she decided to give him a little time to catch up with his family, should he actually be able to see them.
At half past twelve Nell shut down her laptop and climbed into bed. She’d considered briefly putting her pajamas on before she went, as she could technically control what she was wearing when she projected, but that took focus and she would rather not have to deal with that kind of distraction tonight. Instead she stayed in the ruffled white tunic dress and blue cropped leggings that she had chosen earlier.

Projecting during Día de los Muertos was a thousand times different than anything she’d ever tried before. Halloween back home had been nothing. Here there were skeletal spirits everywhere, each haloed with a soft marigold glow.

She took it all in with a low whistle of amazement. “Woah.” Between the lights and the spirits she’d be doing sketches of this night for years.

Nell had chosen to project herself just outside the gate of the Rivera home. She could already hear a number of unfamiliar voices from inside and when she peeked through the gate she found Miguel at the center of the courtyard, surrounded by his departed family.

To his right was a spindly skeleton in a purple vest and striped brown pants. Given the animation with which they spoke to each other, Nell assumed this was Papá Hector. The elegant woman in the violet gown to Miguel’s right must therefore be Mamá Imelda. The tall, identical skeletal men standing close by would then be her brothers, Oscar and Felipe -- though Nell had no idea which was which. The short woman with the braids she recognized as Miguel’s Mamá Coco, and guessed that the skeleton next to her with the truly impressive moustache was her husband, Julio. That would make the woman in the pink dress Rosita, and the woman in green Victoria.

The aura of sheer joy and love that radiated from the yard was enough to bring tears to her eyes. She sniffled softly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

That small motion was enough to attract Miguel’s attention. “Nell!” He called out, positively beaming at her. “Nell, it worked! Mira, mira! Can you see them? They’re all here!”

She smiled back at him, stepping fully into the courtyard. “I see them. And I’m so glad you can see them now too.”

“Everybody, this is Nell. She’s the one who’s been teaching me.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you all,” Nell said with a small wave. “Miguel’s been telling me all about you. Just...wow. This is crazy. I’m so glad this actually worked.”

Imelda frowned. “You allowed him to try this without knowing it would be possible?”

“If by ‘this’ you mean ‘astral projection’, Miguel has been doing it on his own for months,” Nell clarified. “I’ve just been giving him a few pointers. The thing is with these kind of abilities… They’re kind of subjective? Different things work for different people, so I couldn’t say for sure whether he’d actually be able to see you like this or not. Given the event that sort of kick-started this for him it was a definite possibility, but there was no way to be sure.”

“And you are sure it is safe?” Imelda pressed.

“I have been projecting for six years and I have never once encountered something that has hurt me,” Nell promised. “If I’d thought there was any way Miguel could get hurt doing this, I wouldn’t have suggested it. But as long as we stay on this side of the bridge, everything should be fine.”
“And if anything weird does happen, I can just wake up,” Miguel added.

The Riveras exchanged looks. Collectively they had decades of experience with the spirit world between them, but this was completely unfamiliar territory. They would simply have to trust that Nell and Miguel knew what they were doing.

As the night’s festivities continued, a hooded figure passed through the streets, a scowl on his face. It had been years since he had set foot in the living world, and longer still since he had walked the streets of Santa Cecilia. Once he had hoped to leave this place behind him for good. Now it was almost a relief to return. The Land of the Dead was no longer the paradise for him that it had once been. In the space of one night he had gone from being its most beloved son, to being reviled by all who saw him, forcing him into a life of poverty and solitude. Forced to abandon his great house on the hill, abandoned by his friends. He needed, if just for one night, to get away.

He still had some fans in the human world, ones who refused to believe that their hero was a thief and a murderer. Ones who continued to put his picture up on their ofrendas even after the rest of the world had abandoned him. Getting around the customs agents was easy enough as long as you knew who to bribe, and the bridge would remain steady beneath you as long as even one portrait was displayed in the living world. He could pass anonymously as long as he kept his hood up. His face was still too recognizable for him to do otherwise. Gone were the days of perfectly tailored suits that glittered under the spotlight and silk ties that flowed like water between his fingers. The clothes he wore now had been stolen off a clothesline some months before, and while he did his best to keep them in good repair, some of the seams had started to come loose and fray.

For the great Ernesto De la Cruz to be reduced to this, all because of that mocoso-- He gritted his teeth at the memory. He should have let the little rat drown in his pool and saved himself the trouble that had come after.

Raucous laughter from a nearby family of spirits had him turning away, heading down a side street to avoid being spotted. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all. Even here he could find no peace, not with such blatant reminders of his failure shoved in his face wherever he went. His tomb was overgrown and neglected, the statue of him that had once drawn tourists and locals alike to Mariachi Plaza shoved off to the side like some kind of shameful secret. What was truly shameful was how quickly the public, his familia, had turned their backs on him. He had brought them music and laughter and love, had given his heart to them, given his life to them, and they abandoned him.

Ernesto clenched his fists in hopeless fury. This was a mistake. He should never have crossed the bridge. He should go back, try to salvage what was left of the night. Even the prospect of stealing an offering or two and drinking himself into a stupor was better than this. Surely there was a gate nearby somewhere.

He kept to the back streets, out of sight of the other visiting spirits, until he reached a long residential lane. The nearest gate was at the other end, his path blocked by a number of other spirits eager to visit their families. He’d just have to make a break for it. But just as he was about to step into the road he heard a sound that made him stop in his tracks. Music. But not just any music. Those voices he knew, and he was certain they would haunt him for the rest of eternity.

Santa Maria Purisima… Anyone but them. Ni madres. Could his luck get any worse? Of
course the gate would be on the same fucking street as the Rivera house. He could see them now, strolling along in their happy little cluster, completely oblivious to his presence. He almost didn’t notice the two newcomers that walked with them -- two strangely non-skeletal spirits. One was a young woman, the other ---- Ernesto let out a low growl. *The brat...* He could happily have gone another century without seeing that little runt’s face again. How he had managed to pull off this little jaunt, Ernesto had no idea. *Heh... Maybe he got cursed again.*

And if he had… A slow smile spread over the musician’s face. Well… maybe the night wouldn’t be a total waste after all.

He had to time it perfectly, so he waited until they passed his hiding spot, counting the paces in his head before he fell into step a few feet behind them. Then, just as they walked by the gate, he sprung into action. With a sudden burst of speed Ernesto dashed forward, shoving the non-skeleton woman out of his way before snatching the kid off his feet and throwing him over his shoulder. Before any of the Riveras could react, Ernesto disappeared through the gateway, Miguel in tow.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun!

Well, that was exciting.

I had a lot of fun with this chapter. This reunion was something I know a lot of us were hoping for in canon, so it was important to me to at least give them a few moments to spend together. My favourite part of this section was writing Hector because he just feels so deeply and he's a character you can really throw yourself into when you write.

What awaits Nell and the Riveras across the bridge? Will Ernesto succeed in getting his revenge? Tune in next week to find out!
Chapter 7: The Mariachi's Revenge

Chapter Summary

Ernesto has stolen Miguel across the bridge. But he can just wake up... Right?

Chapter Notes

Is it getting annoying that I keep thanking you guys at the beginning of the chapter? Cuz I'm going to do it again. You are all wonderful. Special thanks again to @Maravivi for beta-reading for me, and to @GayFairyRoyalty, who has dealt with me ever since the day this fic clobbered me over the head.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7: The Mariachi’s Revenge

Nell hit the ground hard, almost taking Victoria with her when she fell. What words she had for the person who shoved her died in her throat when she saw Miguel disappear a few feet away. She let out a curse, shoving herself to her feet and diving after him, not even stopping when the cobblestones turned to golden petals under her feet. She paid no mind to the skeletal spirits that blocked her path, dodging and weaving between them as she tried to keep her friend’s red hoodie in sight.

She could see clearly now that Miguel had not passed through the gate of his own volition, having been slung over the shoulder of a solid figure in a hooded black coat. He fought with every step, kicking out and beating his fists against his captor’s back.

“Stop him!” Nell burst out, darting around a mother and child who had just not gotten out of her way fast enough. “Stop that man!”

He glanced back and in that moment his hood fell, revealing his face. Another skeleton -- of course -- but Nell could just make out the swirls of silver at his cheekbones, and a distinctly large chin. He picked up speed, bowling over the security agents that blocked his path, scattering them in a shower of bones.

They had reassembled themselves just enough by the time that Nell reached them to keep her from passing through the customs gate.

“Move!” She insisted, attempting to shove them out of her path, but this time they were prepared. “Damn it, he’s stolen a living kid! Get out of my way! We’re going to lose him!”

That surprised them enough that she was able to duck around them but it was too late. Miguel and his captor had been lost in the crowd.
“Fuck…” She shut her eyes tight, trying to focus on Miguel’s energy so she could at least have some idea what direction they might have gone, but it was like trying to find a glass bead in a hurricane. Back in Santa Cecilia she could have tracked Miguel blindfolded, but here she could do nothing. Everyone was a spirit here, so trying to locate a single one was next to impossible.

The security skeletons questioning her didn’t help.

“What do you mean, he’s stolen a living kid?” One of them asked, straightening his skull so it sat right-way up again.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Nell answered sharply. “He went across the bridge and grabbed my friend and took off like a bat out of hell across the damn bridge! Now will you get the hell out of my way so maybe I can find him before that psycho tries to murder him again?”

“Wait, murder? Just a minute--”

Nell let out a growl of frustration and tried to push past again but they would not let her by, and when she tried to shove them out of the way again one of them caught her arm, hauling her back. “Not so fast. You are going to tell us exactly what is going on, and how a living spirit managed to cross the bridge.”

“God damn it, I don’t have time for this.” She was seriously considering just punching the officer in the face and running away when the Riveras caught up to her.

“Nell, what--” Coco started, glancing between her and the guards.

“He got away. I’m sorry. I tried to catch them, but these guys got in my way and I lost them in the crowd and--”

“You said this was safe,” Imelda accused angrily, coming to a halt behind her daughter.

“It is but --”

“You said nothing could hurt him.”

“I didn’t know --”

But Imelda was far from finished. She turned on the security officers, who immediately took a step back. “And you! What are you doing? You see a man carrying a living child and you do nothing?”

The officers could not find a coherent word between them, stammering our half-finished excuses, wilting visibly under her glare.

“It is safe,” Nell cut in hotly, drawing the Rivera matriarch’s attention back to her as she shook off the hand that restrained her. “On the other side of the bridge. When I started giving him pointers on astral projection I didn’t think he’d get kidnapped by a vengeful mariachi with a chin the size of Texas!”

Low curses sounded from the twins. Imelda looked murderous. Hector’s face had frozen into carefully controlled lines, but the fear and strain in his eyes remained evident. “Ernesto. Are you sure it was him?”

She nodded. “I only caught a glimpse of his face, but given past history, yeah I’m sure. And I can’t --- I can’t track him. I don’t know how it works here but I can’t feel him and I --” She trailed
off, afraid to continue. She didn’t want to scare them any more than they already were.

But Hector, it seemed, could see right through her. “You don’t know if you can get back.”

Nell shook her head. “We -- living spirits, we’re not supposed to be here. I don’t know if we can cross back over but I swear I will get him back. If it kills me, I swear I will get him back.”

“We will get him back,” Hector assured her firmly. “You said before he could just wake up, right?”

“In our world he could. Here… I don’t think that’s an option.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’m sure. Because I can’t wake up right now either. I think the only way back is across the bridge.”

The Riveras exchanged concerned looks. “Last time we had until sunrise to return him to the living world with a blessing.”

“We may still have time,” Imelda breathed, relieved. There was still a chance. “Oscar, Filipe, go to the Department of Family Reunions, see if their devil boxes can tell you if that rule still applies. If it does, it means we have a few hours to find Miguel and get him back across the bridge.”

Her brothers nodded, then dashed off down the street.

“You two.” Imelda turned to the guards, who immediately stood up a little straighter under her scrutiny. “You will help. Use your little talk-boxes and find out if anyone has spotted De la Cruz or a living boy. Claro?”

They gulped. “Si, claro.”

“The rest of us will split up,” Coco said, meeting her mother’s eye determinedly. “We will cover more ground that way.”

Imelda nodded in agreement. “Each of you take a petal with you. A blessing from us worked last time. It may work again. If you spot him, whistle for Pepita. She will come to help.”

The others nodded. They would get their Miguelito back, no matter what it took.

Coco and Julio headed east, while Victoria and Rosita went west. Hector, Imelda, and Nell headed north down the main road, moving as fast as they could between the crowds of skeletons that filled the streets.

Ernesto wove through the heavy foot-traffic, heedless of the people he shoved out of his way as he returned to the side-streets. These he had learned like the back of his hand in the last two years. When one was a pariah you learned what areas to stick to where you would not be seen. Squirming teenagers were unfortunately more than a little obvious, so best to keep out of sight whenever he could.
Miguel fought him every step of the way, kicking and cursing as hard and as loud as he could. As his captor turned down from the side street into a narrow closed-in stairway between two adjacent building towers, Miguel reached out, grabbing hold of a rusted out ladder that had once been part of a building’s fire escape, and twisted out of his hold. He hit the ground hard and had barely gained his feet again when a bony hand shot out like a viper to grip his arm. It was only then that he saw the face of the man who had abducted him.

His blood went cold at the sight. “You!” He struggled against his hold, even more desperate to break free. “Let me go!”

But Ernesto’s grip held fast. “Not this time,” he ground out between gritted teeth. He would not lose this chance.

Miguel jerked to the side, using his free hand to try to unzip his sweater so he could slip free. It almost worked. He could feel his hand sliding from the sleeve when De la Cruz tightened his grip, flinging him hard against the old brick wall. Stars exploded behind his eyes as he fought to stay upright. This wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to be hurt in this form. But this was another world, and he realized with horror that the same rules that governed the World of the Living might not apply in the Land of the Dead.

He had to get away.

He shoved himself away from the wall and tried to run, but he was too slow. De la Cruz caught him by the hood of his sweater and flung him down the stairs like a rag doll, where he crumpled to the ground in a heap.

For a moment Ernesto stood over him, unmoving. Well, wasn’t that interesting. The brat might be in some kind of spirit form, but as long as he was in this world he could still be hurt. Maybe even die. He should just kill him outright. Wring his scrappy neck and leave him somewhere public for the Riveras to find. He wondered if that would work. It wasn’t his style to get his hands dirty, as it were, but in this case it would be very, very satisfying to try. But would it stick, was the question. Could you actually kill a spirit? Short of the Final Death, he did not think so. And this, this he wanted to last. The last time the brat had come to this world he had until dawn to return to the Land of the Living. It was a fair assumption that some similar guideline would apply tonight.

He would take no chances. He would take the little rat to farthest reaches of the city, and there he would wait. They would come for him, he knew they would. And when they found him at last he would have a front row seat as the sun rose on their failure.

A slow smile spread across his face. But first he needed to make sure the little mocoso couldn’t escape again.

It was all that Nell could do not to just shove everyone out of the way as they ran, all she could do to force down the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. How could she have been so careless? She’d never considered that Ernesto might come after Miguel, never considered that he’d ever cross the bridge at all. She was the experienced one. After what Miguel had told her about that night, she
should have seen it coming. It might not have been her fault that Miguel got kidnapped, but it was very much her responsibility to get him back. All she had to do was track him across an unknown afterlife and get him away from a vengeful skeleton that might do who-knows-what to him in retribution for ruining his reputation, and find a way to get back to the bridge by dawn. And definitely, definitely not let herself dwell on the fact that in going after him she may have trapped them both here forever.

Stop that, she ordered herself firmly, shaking her head as she ran. Those kind of thoughts weren’t going to help anyone. Just focus on one thing at a time. Find Miguel first, then worry about getting home. But the city was huge. It could take days to find them and they only had a few hours.

Finding their path blocked by a parade route was the last thing they needed.

“For eff sakes,” Nell growled as they skidded to a halt, glancing around the street to try to find an alternate route. “We don’t have time for this. They could be anywhere by now.” They had to step back somehow, find a better plan. “You both know him. Where would he go? Where would he take him?”

Hector frowned, forcing himself to push away the fear and the blind panic, to think. Once he would have said he’d known Ernesto better than anyone else on earth. But that was before. Before his friend had abandoned him. Before he learned the truth of how he had died. Now he questioned whether he’d ever really known Ernesto at all. In his worst nightmares he’d never imagined that Ernesto—his best friend, his brother—had been the one to kill him. He’d never suspected a thing until Miguel had pointed out the similarities between the events leading up to his death, and a particular scene in one of Ernesto’s movies. If anything, Ernesto’s ego was his biggest failing. He could never resist an audience, the chance to put on a show. He would not hurt Miguel, Hector thought. Not until they were around to see it. But where would Ernesto take him?

His first thought was the mansion on the hill, or the theater where the Sunrise Spectacular had taken place. There would be symmetry in that, something he knew Ernesto would appreciate. But it was too easy. He had to think harder. They only had a few hours before.... And then it hit him. Sunrise. The time limit. Ernesto had known about it too. If they needed to get Miguel back across the bridge by sunrise...

“He will take him as far away as he can,” Hector said to himself, finishing the thought aloud. “He won’t want to risk us getting Miguel back across the bridge in time.” Ernesto would want to hurt them, to punish them all for ruining his reputation. And what better way to do so than to end Miguel’s life by trapping him here?

“What do you mean --”

“--You don’t know?”
The clerk at the desk cringed in his chair as Oscar and Filipe glared down at him. “Lo siento, but this case—I’ve never heard of anything like this.” He hunched over his desk, blinking myopically at the screen as he typed. “You say he is a living child? But is separated from his body?”

“Yes,” Filipe sighed in aggravation. “Look, do your records have any kind of precedence for this?”

“I -- well --” The clerk adjusted his tie nervously. Thirty years working at the Department of Family Reunions should have taught Ricardo Alvarez not to be surprised at anything. This, however, was the last thing he had expected for the night. He forlornly bade his plans to visit his family in the living world goodbye until next year. This would not be a quick case in the slightest. “It is still searching. We have centuries worth of records and not all of them have been digitized, you see.”

“Then what is even the point --”

“-- of your little boxes if they cannot tell us what we need to know?”

“Look here, sirs,” the smaller skeleton said, drawing himself up to his full height. “These things take time. And with a case as unusual as this one, I can’t imagine there is a lot of data out there.”

“We do not have time,” Oscar reminded him firmly. “Our nephew has been kidnapped by that--that-- “

“Cabron?” Filipe suggested.

“Sí. Gracias, hermano. That cabron, and we need to know whether we will be able to send him back to the living world!”

“And I am telling you that the computer is still searching our records,” Ricardo told them.

“Well then is there anyone else that we can speak to?” Oscar asked. “Who has been here the longest?” Surely in all the years the Department had existed, there had been even a hint of a rumor or urban legend about living souls in the afterlife.

“Ah--- well that would be Lina, but --”

“Great! Perfect. Where is she?”

“She is in her office but --”

The two brothers leaned over the desk. “Would you please go find her?”

“Or shall we do it ourselves?”

Lina Chavez might have been one of the oldest — and oddest — skeletons that Oscar and Filipe had ever seen. Normally you could tell what era a spirit had come from by their manner of
dress, but Lina was the special kind of exception that proved the rule. She dressed in jeans and a white tee shirt, but paired them with distinctly Victorian ankle boots and what looked like a fifteenth-century doublet worn open as a jacket. She wore her snow-white wig braided in a low chignon, topped with a small black velvet cap. Despite her strange clothing there was an aura of age to her, the weight of one who remembered far too much.

Between the stacks of paper and the massive bookshelves that lined the walls were priceless artifacts, some dating back to the days of the Aztec empire. There were also a pair of antique clocks, a single eighteenth century buckled shoe, and a collection of action figures.

From what Ricardo had told them, nobody was really sure how long she had been on staff at the department. They weren’t even sure if Lina was her real name. Rumor has it that she had been one of the first women to sail over on one of the Spanish colonial ships, but she could have been even older. They figured her name and some image of her had survived in a museum somewhere, which would explain why she had lasted for so long when most of her assumed contemporaries had been long forgotten.

For the past five years she had served as the head archivist for the Department of Family Reunions and if there was anything she didn’t know, Ricardo said, then nobody did.

She sat behind a solid wooden desk piled high with paperwork, muttering to herself as she sorted through a pile of yellowing documents.

Seeing her there, Ricardo stepped back. “Good luck, muchachos.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Back upstairs,” he answered. “I have work to do, and honestly… she kind of creeps me out.” With a last brief wave, he dashed back up to the main floor.

Oscar and Filipe exchanged looks. How bad could she possibly be?

“So are you going to tell me what you want, or are you just going to stand there admiring each other’s mustaches?”

The sudden question had them jumping in surprise. They hadn’t thought she’d even noticed them come down.

“Señora Chavez?” Felipe ventured uncertainly.

“Si. What is it? I haven’t got all night,” she answered, waving them in impatiently. “Some absolute tonto has been messing with my filing system again, so ask your questions and go away so I can get this done.”

It was Oscar who dared to speak up first. They had to know, for Miguel’s sake. Besides, there’s no way this woman could be scarier than Imelda when she was in a temper. “We wanted to know if you knew anything about --”

“--rules governing living spirits in the Land of the Dead.”

Her eyes snapped up away from the file she was holding and she let it fall back to her desk with a careless gesture. “Living spirits. In the Land of the Dead. Bit of a contradiction, don’t you think?”

“Si.”
“But it is very important.”

Lina frowned in thought. “This wouldn’t have something to do with that living kid who got cursed a couple years ago, would it?”

“Our nephew, Miguel.”

The woman’s eyes sharpened at the admission. “Ay, you are Riveras. Do you have any idea the trouble you caused that night? Do you know how much paperwork we had to do? I’m still not done filing the hard copies! Do not tell me the child got himself cursed again.”

“No, no, but… he has been kidnapped,” Filipe told her.

“By Ernesto De la Cruz.”

Lina bared her teeth in an angry snarl. “Pendejo! I think you two had better sit down and tell me exactly what has happened.”

Chapter End Notes

Well things are really heating up now. I'm dying to share the next couple chapters with you guys. I started writing this fic just to write this sequence of events, and it's crazy how far it's taken off.

I'm on Tumblr at @CalliopesQuill so if you have any burning plot questions, or want to share so cool theories, or just share pretty pictures you found, I'd love to interact with you guys!

Callie out!
Chapter 8: The Edge of the World

Chapter Summary

The chase across the edge of the world continues. Ernesto thinks about his past and Nell encounters something unexpected.

Chapter Notes

It's Saturday and that means new chapter time!

Thanks to my beautiful betas for all of their help, and thanks to all of you readers! Your feedback has been awesome and getting to share the new chapters with you every Saturday is the highlight of my week.

This chapter is going to get a little intense and I am going to include a *trigger warning* here. Hector looks back on a pretty dark time in his afterlife, one where he had considered doing something irreversible. If you wish to skip over this section, I have marked the beginning with a star (*) and closed it with two more (**), so you will know when it is safe to read again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 8: The Edge of the World

There were places you went in the Land of the Dead if you did not want to be found. These were places frequented by the lowest of the city’s residents; the criminals, the scavengers, and those about to be forgotten. Places where nobody looked too closely if you kept your head down, and nobody could say if they’d seen you. Ernesto De la Cruz had become very familiar with those parts of the city over the last couple of years. Not that anyone there seemed to recognize him, or even care who he was -- or if they did they never approached him. Maybe being a known murderer was good for something after all. Whatever the cause, those who spotted him with a rolled-up cloth bundle slung over his shoulder simply looked the other way. There were stranger and more interesting things in the lower city than a man with a rug. Even if the rug did occasionally move.

Ernesto continued his journey downwards, past the modern levels with their shining skyscrapers and apartment buildings, past the bungalows of the 1970’s and 80’s, and further into the early twentieth century. It always felt strange passing through the levels, like walking into a time capsule. Even the residents continued to dress and behave as they did in life, completely ignoring that life and society moved on, even when their lives technically did not. Hadn’t he been the same? He thought as he jogged over the crooked cobblestones of a stone plaza and down a flight of stairs to a neighboring tower. Why move on when the life you had was perfect? Hadn’t he worked hard to make it that way? Didn’t he deserve to enjoy it after all he had been through?
A dark scowl crossed his face as he passed under the the shadow of a turn-of-the-century style church. He’d come so far from where he started, a nameless bastard left on the steps of the church in Santa Cecilia, with nothing to his name but the name itself. It hadn’t bothered him much, not then. After all, he’d been too young to even remember his parents’ faces. Too young to know what that would mean for him. But like every child raised in the Orfanto De la Cruz, he had his own private version of why he had been left behind. He’d been almost ten years old when one of the older boys had decided to shatter that image.

Even after a hundred years Diego was a shining example of why Ernesto secretly detested children. He had been a rat-faced boy, a bitter, angry child who could always be counted on to stab at someone when they were most vulnerable. Being a few years older, Diego claimed to remember the cold January night when young Ernesto had been left on the doorstep. Abandoned without even a shawl or blanket for protection, he was almost frozen by the time the priests discovered him the next morning. He’d been barely two years old.

“How must it feel,” Diego had asked one day. “To know that your own mother would rather see you freeze to death on the steps than to keep you around any longer?”

Ernesto hadn’t responded. Not with words, anyway. He’d been big for his age, even as a child. His first hit had blacked the other boy’s eye. He came out of the fight with a broken arm for his troubles and a number of punishment duties for fighting. It didn’t matter that it hadn’t been his fault. It was all the same to them.

Hector had been brought to the orphanage a couple of months later. He, at least, had a family. Or he did, until a late summer fever had taken all but him. He’d been a small, timid thing, who barely spoke a word the first six months he was there. The only thing that seemed to make him come alive even a little bit was music. In fact the first time Ernesto had ever heard Hector’s voice at all was during the morning service a few weeks after Hector had come to them. Of course the moment Padre Alejandro heard his voice he immediately assigned him to the choir and ordered Ernesto to look after him.

To say it wasn’t the role Ernesto had been hoping for was an understatement. Hector had stuck to his side like a burr to wool trousers. He never spoke, or laughed, but was just kind of ...there. Occasionally he’d break the silence by humming an improvised tune as they did their daily chores. They worked well together, as far as that went. Ernesto could pick up a tune easily enough once he’d heard it a couple of times, and music seemed to be the only thing that made the kid seem more human and less like a silent, creepy doll that followed him around.

The caretakers that ran the orphanage praised their seeming friendship, and almost seemed to make a point of assigning them certain duties together. Ernesto felt keenly what he felt was a lack of independence, but did have to admit that there were certain benefits to having the kid around. This was particularly true if they were ever sent out into town on errands. After all, an orphan boy on his own was good at getting handouts. Two orphan boys, one of whom was small and frail and sweet-looking -- Who could resist? Ernesto learned a great deal from those excursions, most importantly how to be charming, and how to use his appearance -- and Hector’s -- to his advantage.

And it wasn’t as if Hector had complained at all. In fact he had been more than willing to go along with almost anything Ernesto had planned, especially if it got them treats. Or took them anywhere near Mariachi Plaza. He would watch the musicians play with undisguised wonder until Ernesto finally pulled him away.

“Why do you even like them so much?” Ernesto had finally asked one day. “They aren’t even that good.” He could be so much better if he ever had the chance to learn.
“Mamá used to take me here,” Hector confessed softly, surprising the older boy. In all of the months they had known each other, he had never talked about his family. “At night, to hear them play.”

“Oh.” What could he even say to that?

“She said that her Papá used to play for her when she was little. I wanted to learn how so I could play for her too but…”

But he had lost his family to a fever before he had ever gotten a chance.

“Then we’ll learn,” Ernesto told him. “You and me. We will find someone to teach us and we will play for the world! The world will be our family.” And no one would ever leave them again.

Or that had been the plan, anyway. And it had gone so well at first. There was more than one local musician willing to give a few pointers to some eager-looking kids, and they took advantage whenever they were able. Their first instruments, such as they were, had been cobbled together from discarded string and bits of old plywood. Hector’s first songs had been scribbled with stolen bits of charcoal on scraps of newsprint and butchers paper. They practiced after their lessons every day, whenever they could. Learned the songs and practiced their harmonies as they swept and cleaned. They became the next thing to brothers in every way that mattered.

It didn’t go unnoticed. Padre Alejandro had heard them and encouraged them. It had been he who had taught them to read sheet music for the choir, and his guitar that they used to practice. Most of the time, with his permission. Sometimes Ernesto had had to convince Hector to help him borrow it. It wasn’t like they weren’t going to return it, and it had been for a good cause, hadn’t it?

They had worked so well together. Everyone loved it when they performed. They were going to change the world with their music!

And then she came along. That uptight, boot-wielding bruja. Hector had never, to Ernesto’s recollection, made any noises about settling down and having a family until Imelda Rivera stomped into their lives. They had a plan. It was supposed to be just the two of them, travelling the world. Rich and famous and beloved by everyone! But one look at her and suddenly the dream they’d shared since they were children hardly seemed to matter anymore.

He almost hadn’t noticed at first, it had started so slowly. Just Hector sighing over a pretty girl in the market. It hadn’t been the first time his friend had mooned and made a fool of himself to win the favor of a pretty face. He was a teenaged boy. It was practically a right of passage. And they usually got a couple of new songs out of it, which worked just fine for Ernesto. But then something happened one day that made it clear that this was something very different. Hector just would not stop talking about her! Her hair, her smile, her voice—ah, Dios, her voice. He started giving her sappy titles like “mi diosa” and “mi corazón” and any other number of sickening things until Ernesto had to beg him to shut up. And when he finally did shut up, it was because he was madly scribbling yet another song about her.

Now don’t get him wrong, they were very good songs. Ernesto’s later fame could attest to that. But there were days where he swore if he heard Imelda’s name one more time he would scream. Then by some bizarre miracle he won her over and it just got worse! Instead of getting her out of his system, Hector was even more sickeningly in love. The boy, Ernesto determined, must have been a masochist. And why leg-shackle yourself to a woman like that when he could have had the pick of any woman he wanted once their careers took off?

Why did he insist on leaving when they were finally making progress? Why had he decided to
abandon their dream when he knew Ernesto could not do it on his own, not without his songs? If he had only done what he was told, if he had only stayed… None of this would have happened.

Nell continued to glance up at the sky every few minutes as they made their way between the towers. Time was impossible to judge here. She didn’t know how much time had passed, how precious little they had remaining. Each time she started to question, to consider what might have already befallen Miguel, she forced the thoughts away. Somehow the streets seemed to become more and more crowded the farther into the city they went. Frustrated, Hector took the lead, turning down a side street and a set of narrow stairs that brought them down to the colonial level of the next tower. These, he knew, would be far less populated than the more modern parts of the city. Most of the people who lived in these sections now did so for the novelty of it as most of the colonial-era spirits had been lost to time. Often they found entire sections that were abandoned, falling into disrepair as those who lived there were forgotten. More than once they had to find alternate routes between structures. Bridges could be made of anything from solid brick to old ladders and bits of plywood. Being the Land of the Dead, nobody was particularly worried about safety codes when building because everyone who lived there was already dead. If something collapsed beneath them while they were walking, they could just put themselves back together again and continue on their way. It took a dangerously near miss for Hector and Imelda to remember that while they could put themselves back together in seconds, Nell most definitely could not. Thankfully she’d only been a few feet from the ground when the rickety wooden ladder had snapped under her weight.

Nell landed hard, her breath rushing out of her in a painful woosh as she hit the stone platform below. For a moment she lay where she was, dimly aware of the voices calling her name. Slowly, carefully, she pulled herself upright. “Mother fu----- ooow. God damn that hurt…”

“Nell! Nell, are you alright?”

“Yep. Fine. Oh fuck me, ow…” She groaned, leaning forward to brace her aching head gingerly on one hand as her companions reached her. Well, at least she’d reverted back to English for her cursing.

“Slowly, mija,” Imelda cautioned, coming to crouch beside her, laying one hand gently on her back. “Cuidadoso. Are you hurt?”

“Estoy bien. I think.” She answered, taking a slow breath. “Nothing broken. Don’t even know if I can break anything. Except obviously ladders.” Okay. Lesson learned, she thought as she shifted to her knees, accepting Imelda’s help to get stiffly to her feet. She could actually get hurt in this form. The realization struck her cold. If she could get hurt…

Nell swore again, lurching unsteadily forward.

“Woah, woah!” Hector stepped in, steadying her as she stumbled. “Take it easy. Just go slow.”

“I can’t,” she gasped, clinging to his bony arm, desperate to make him understand. “We gotta -- Hector, we have to hurry. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Miguel -- he can be hurt here. If De la Cruz finds out…”

“Easy, easy! You will be no help to Miguel if you kill yourself in the process.” Even as he spoke Hector shot a worried glance towards his wife. The Ernesto he knew was not a hands-on kind
of man, but who knew what two years of resentment and bitterness had changed in him.

“This is my fault. I never should have suggested projecting tonight,” Nell said softly. “I should have been watching. I was supposed to look out for him.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Imelda told her. “None of us could.”

Nell snorted. “Weren’t you the one who was ready to beat my head in with a boot a couple of hours ago because I made the mistake of thinking he would be safe?”

Well, she couldn’t exactly deny that. It was not the first time that panic had driven her to a boot-first reaction. “We all thought he would be safe. But you did not hesitate to go after him, even knowing what might happen.”

“Of course I went after him! He’s like my kid brother. I wasn’t going to let that walking chin hurt him, or any of you.” She straightened stubbornly, holding back a low hiss as her back gave a sudden throb. “I won’t go home until he does.”

They could see in her face that there would be no convincing her otherwise. She would see this through to the end.

“Are you sure?” Imelda asked. She respected her wish to continue, but if she thought Nell might not be able to go on, she would call Pepita and send the girl back to the bridge herself. “If you are too hurt to continue, you must tell us.”

Nell nodded, grey eyes hard with determination. “I won’t slow you down.”

“I know you won’t,” Hector replied with a small smile. “Come on, one more level to go. Then there won’t be anything else to fall off of.” Years of practice had him skipping ahead before the swat she aimed at his head could land.

“I do not want to hear that from someone who fell off a wall twenty minutes ago!” Nell retorted, chasing after him.

“I didn’t fall. I just didn’t want to take the stairs.”

“Liar!”

The oldest level of the Land of the Dead was both the most awesome and the absolute creepiest place Nell had ever seen. It was built as a blending of Mayan and Aztec architecture, with great step pyramids framed by brightly-colored temples and adobe brick houses. It was a city meant to house an entire civilization, one that was never meant to be empty, but as the spirits who resided there were forgotten and the new levels were built on top of it, it had become an ironic kind of ghost town -- one without any ghosts left. Nothing grew in the Land of the Dead; no trees, no flowers, not a single blade of grass. An unsettling sort of stillness hung in the air, the only sound the occasional rustle or cry from the wild alebrije that called this place home. Nell could feel the eyes on them as they passed. She had already seen a winged snake that had wrapped itself entirely around one house, a hummingbird the size of a labrador retriever, a troupe of neon-colored monkeys, something that looked like a very small wild boar, and a family of echidnas. Had they all been spirit guides at one point or another? What happened to an alebrije when the soul it guided was forgotten? Did they
disappear as well, or could they just hang out until they found someone else they wanted to guide? Could an alebrije follow a soul that had been reincarnated?

An ear-splitting screech split the silence. Hector, Imelda and Nell glanced around in alarm. The rustle of feathers drew their eyes to the massive green and violet bird that had been perched atop one of the pyramids. The one that was staring right at them.

“Alebrije don’t just...attack random people, do they?” Nell asked tentatively.

Imelda shook her head. “I have never heard of such a thing.”

The bird let out another deafening cry as it unfurled its massive wings. Then it dove off the building straight at them.

Hector turned around so fast he almost left his head behind. “RUN!”

The three of them scrambled down the street, the bird in hot pursuit. They ducked down narrow alleyways and under fallen pillars, through ancient abandoned houses and over the remnants of a crumbling stone bridge. Still the giant alebrije kept pace with them.

“I thought you said that alebrije don’t attack people for no reason!” Nell panted, letting out a squeak of alarm as the bird’s claws barely missed her.

“They don’t!” Hector replied, ducking around a cracked stone pillar. “This one must be guarding something!”

“You don’t think it’s De la Cruz’s, do you?”

“Definitely not. Last I saw he had a pack of chihuahuas tailing after -- look out!”

Nell tried to duck, but ended up tripping on an uneven paving stone that sent her sprawling into the dirt. The massive bird was on her in an instant, looming over her with vibrantly yellow eyes. She couldn’t look away. So this is how it ends. Eaten by a giant bird in some strange afterlife. What happens to your body in the living world if you die here?

The bird leaned in close, but right when Nell thought she was going to be swallowed whole, it turned its head and nuzzled against her chest affectionately.

What the….what?

“Nell! Nell, are you alright? Get off of her, you --”

“I’m fine!” Nell called out, waving one hand around the mass of vibrantly colored feathers. “I’m not hurt. It -- she? -- is just being aggressively snuggly? And apparently decided to be terrifying about it.”

Hector and Imelda exchanged slightly baffled looks. They had never heard of an alebrije behaving like this before. But then, nothing about this night had turned out at all the way that either of them had expected.

“Maybe she decided she wanted to be your alebrije?” Hector ventured uncertainly. “Just...really enthusiastically?”

Nell let out a muffled laugh. “Ha! Maybe. Or maybe -- “ And then it hit her. “Buttons? Buttons, is that you?”
The bird raised its head just enough to let her sit up, then let out a low caw before butting its head against her again.

“Buttons?” Imelda asked.

Hector shrugged.

But Nell didn’t even notice. She had thrown her arms around the giant crow’s head, burying her face in the green and violet feathers, tears stinging at her eyes. “It is you. God, how did you even get here? I missed you so much.”

“Nell, you know this...bird?” Imelda questioned, eyeing it warily.

Nell nodded. “Buttons is an old friend of mine. Miguel said she might be my alebrije. Guess he was right.” And now they might finally have a proper lead. “Buttons, did you see a man run through here? Long black coat, chin like the front end of a truck?”

Buttons gave another caw and nodded.

“Did he have someone with him? A boy? Or was he carrying something large and vaguely human-sized?”

Caw.

“Can you show us where they went?”

Caw.

“Guys, I think it might be time to call in Pepita.”

It was uncertain whether Pepita just had really fantastic hearing or if alebrije could simply track their humans wherever they happened to be, but only moments after Imelda put her fingers to her mouth and whistled, they heard the flap of wings. Buttons shifted against Nell, her feathers fluffing up in discomfort as a gigantic winged jaguar flew through the pyramids to land in front of them.

Nell just stared. Miguel had of course told her all about Pepita, but there was a big difference between having something described to you, and actually seeing a ten foot tall, bright green, winged jaguar with ram’s horns and a long reptilian tail land twenty feet away from you. “Well...that was just cool.”

Buttons gave an insulted squawk and Nell reached up to scratch the ruff of feathers at her neck.

“You’re still my favourite, Buttons. I promise.”

“Ay, and it looks like Pepita brought a friend,” Hector smiled as a neon-colored Dante flapped along behind her to crash gracelessly on the ground at his feet. After their adventure two years before he knew that Dante would be able to track their Miguel wherever he was. He crouched down to scratch the dog behind his ears. “You’ll help us find him, won’t you?”

Dante barked the affirmative, looking about as serious as Hector had ever seen him.

“Everyone ready?” Nell asked. “Okay Buttons, lead the way.”

Buttons took to the sky, Pepita following close behind. Dante remained on the ground, his little wings fluttering as he ran. They followed the alebrije to a massive pyramid at the edge of the city. Buttons circled twice around it before alighting at the top. Pepita circled back to await the others,
They caught up a moment later. Imelda frowned up at the structure, releasing the skirts she had hiked up in her run. “You are sure this is the place?”

Dante gave a soft whine, pawing at the ground.

“Guess that’s a yes,” Nell commented. “What is this place? It feels like the edge of the world.”

“That is because it is,” Hector said softly. At his wife’s questioning look he gave a small shrug, a rueful smile on his face. “There are places not even the almost-forgotten go willingly, but we have all ended up here at one time or another.” He reached out almost absently, trailing bony fingers over the glyphs that framed the door. He’d wondered once if somewhere in these carvings were the names of those first spirits to come to the Land of the Dead, and what stories they might have told, the songs that had been lost with them. “They say that when the first spirits awoke here this was the first thing that they built -- a temple to honor Mictēcacihuātl, Nuestra Señora de la Santa Muerte. Of course, nobody knows for sure. Anyone who would was forgotten long before any of us got here.”

He almost didn’t feel his wife lay her hand gently on his shoulder. “You have been here before?”

“Once,” he answered softly. “A long time ago.”

* 

It had been a particularly low point in his afterlife, some time after Imelda had first come to the Land of the Dead. He’d spent weeks trying to speak to her, to explain what had happened, but each time she turned him away. At last she had snapped, declaring that she didn’t want anything to do with him, in this afterlife or whatever came after. That the thing he could do to make her happiest was to be forgotten, just as he had forgotten her and their daughter. It had been no use to say that he had never forgotten, that not a single moment had passed since the day he left home that they hadn’t been in his thoughts, at the center of his heart. She had already turned away from him, storming off across the plaza, disappearing like smoke into the crowd.

Hector didn’t know how long he had stayed rooted to that spot, or when he had started to move. He wandered the city in a haze with no heed to where he was going as his heart crumbled inside of him. When at last he returned to himself he found himself standing on a rocky outcropping, gazing out into the endless night at the end of the world. What would happen, he wondered, if he simply stepped over? How far would he fall? Was there even ground below or would he simply fall forever? Carelessly he nudged a pebble off of the edge, watching it disappear into the void. Would anyone care if he followed?

Certainly not his family -- and hadn’t that been a bitter pill to swallow. Did they really think so little of him to think that he would just abandon them that way? Did they really think he was that kind of person? The kind of low, gutter creature who could walk away from their family without a second glance? Hector’s fists clenched in heartbroken, indignant fury at the thought. He had spent every day of the last fifty years trying to get back to them, and this is what they thought he was? Did they even know him at all?

Chicharron might care, if only because he had little patience for melodrama. Cheech had little patience with most things though, particularly with Hector’s maudlin moods. There had been days of late where not even music could reach him, when playing out the pain seemed to only make it worse. Cheech, he remembered, had been less than sympathetic. He had cuffed Hector over the head with his broad-brimmed hat and dragged him off for a drink. Where exactly he kept getting the tequila,
Hector never knew, but it was always there, just like Cheech was. It was Cheech who reminded him when he was at his lowest that maybe Imelda would have nothing to do with him, but there was still a chance that his daughter would.

It was that thought that had him stepping away from the ledge. If he gave up now he would never see his Coco again, never have the chance to tell her how sorry he was for leaving, how he had tried to come home to her. He couldn’t disappear, not yet.

With that thought he had walked away and never looked back.

**

“Mi amor?” Imelda’s voice cut through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present.

“I’m fine,” he said with a small smile, laying his hand over hers. “Just old memories.” There were more important things to think about right now. “Let’s bring our Miguel home.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Nell asked. “We don’t have a lot of time left.”

“Ernesto will be waiting for us.” Of that much Hector was absolutely sure. “He won’t move until there is someone to see him. Imelda and I will go in through the front and we will confront him. You go around the other side and -”

“And Ernesto will throw Miguel off the edge the moment he sees you,” Nell pointed out, cutting him off. “He blames you for destroying his reputation, you and Miguel. And he knows that the best way to hurt you, both of you, is through Miguel. I’ll do it.”

“Wait, what?” They both turned to stare at her. “No no no no. You can’t --”

“I can and I will,” she insisted. “He doesn’t care about me. He won’t do anything until he sees you, so I will distract him until you can get into position. And Pepita can be ready to catch Miguel if De la Cruz gets impatient and decides not to wait.”

Husband and wife exchanged looks. “What if I went --” Imelda started.

Nell shook her head. “No way. He hates you just as much as he hates Miguel.” If he hadn’t he’d have written and let her know that Hector had died while they were travelling and not left her to conclude that her husband had abandoned her. “I can do this, but you have to trust me. Please.”

They exchanged looks again, then Hector sighed, running one hand distractedly through his hair. “Okay. Okay okay okay. Okay. You go in. Find Miguel. Keep Ernesto busy until we can get into position.”

“Then we take our grandson back to the bridge,” Imelda finished. And if that cabrón De la Cruz happened to meet the business end of her boot a few times on the way, well he would certainly have deserved it. “But what about you?”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Nell answered. “Buttons will be waiting on standby so don’t worry about me. Just get Miguel home.”

Just as she turned to walk away Imelda laid one hand on her arm. “Are you sure?”

Not even remotely but it was the best shot they had at getting Miguel back before sunrise. “I’m sure,” she said, forcing a confident smile onto her face. “I won’t let you down.”
Chapter End Notes

Well that was fun. Will they be able to save Miguel in time, or will Ernesto throw him from the edge of the world? Join us next week to find out!
Chapter 9: Ill Met by Moonlight

Chapter Summary

Nell and the Riveras face off against Ernesto and race back to the bridge.

Chapter Notes

I am so excited to share this chapter with you guys. Not going to lie, I started this fic at first because this one chapter just would not leave me alone. So here it is!

Thanks again to my wonderful betas, and to all of you for your amazing feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 9: Ill Met by Moonlight

Nell crept through the empty temple, fighting back nerves, Dante at her side. How in the hell was she supposed to pull this off? What if she was too late? What if she couldn’t keep his attention or De la Cruz got impatient and threw Miguel from the cliff the moment he saw her? What if she stalled too long and they couldn’t get back in time?

“Oh my god, shut up!” She hissed at herself, giving her head a determined shake. She had to stay calm, to focus. Miguel was depending on her and she wouldn’t let him down. The question was, how was she going to distract De la Cruz?

Between what Miguel had told her and what Héctor had said, she knew that Ernesto’s biggest weakness was his ego. If she could get him talking then maybe, just maybe, it would give them the time that they needed.

She could see moonlight up ahead. Nell slowed her steps, keeping her back to the wall as she padded towards the open door, her heart pounding a near-deafening tattoo in her chest. She could see two figures at the edge of the cliff with their backs to her. One of them wore a familiar red hoodie. Nell let out a sigh of relief. Miguel was safe, or as safe as could be under the circumstances. He appeared unharmed, though his hands had been bound with a tattered strip of cloth. What might once have been a tie was knotted at the back of his head. Dante surged forward but Nell held him back, whispering for him to stay. If De la Cruz saw the little alebrije, who knew how he’d react? Dante let out a soft whine, pawing at the ground again, but stayed where he was.

Nell released him slowly just in case, then she stood, hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. Hang on, kid. Help is on the way.
She wasn’t an actress by any means, but years of writing taught her how to script an entrance. She pressed herself against the door frame and took one last steadying breath before stepping out into the night. It was time to put on a show.

“I’ve got to hand it to you,” Nell said conversationally as she made her way towards them. “You sure do know how to pick a suitably dramatic setting for a confrontation. But then, drama was always your strong suit.”

De la Cruz whirled on her with a snarl, the hand that clutched the back of Miguel’s sweater dragging the boy with him. “You!”

“Yeah, me. Aren’t you lucky?”

“What are you doing here?” How had she found them?

“What, you thought you could just kidnap Miguel and nobody would come after him?” Nell shook her head. “Come on. You know the Riveras better than that.”

Ernesto’s grip on the boy tightened as his eyes flitted over the rocky ground in search of the other Riveras, but there was no one in sight -- only silent stones and the whisper of wind.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s just us tonight,” Nell said, drawing his attention back to her. “Do why don’t you let the kid go? You’ve got nothing to gain keeping him here.”

De la Cruz let out a low chuckle, a dark smile spreading over his face. “Now that is where you are mistaken. This little brat cost me everything. My reputation in the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead.”

“And how will killing Miguel make any of that better?” She asked, taking another step towards them. “Hurting him won’t get your reputation back, it won’t make them love you again. It won’t bring back your fame. It will only make you more infamous.”

“You are right, of course,” Ernesto said coolly. “Killing him will not restore my reputation. If I thought it would, well----” A wicked light glinted in his eyes. “We would not be having this conversation. I would have thrown him from the bridge the moment we passed through the gate.” He shifted back and Miguel let out a muffled sound of alarm as he was dragged back closer to the edge.

“So let him go. You have nothing to gain in doing this. Let me take him home.”

“Nothing to gain?” He shook his head, almost as if he were disappointed. “Oh no, I have a great deal to gain. Satisfaction, most of all.” He wanted them to find him, to see the horror on their faces as they realized their failure. He would wait until the sun rose and look them in the eyes as he dropped the little rat off the edge of the world. “Unfortunately you are not the audience I was hoping for. But since, as you say, it is just us… I suppose there is no need to wait.”

No no no! It was too soon! Pepita might not be in place yet! She had to do something. Anything.

“How long had you been planning to kill Héctor?” She burst out, desperation speaking before she had the chance to second-guess what she was doing.

Ernesto froze with Miguel inches from the edge of the cliff.

Well, she had his attention now. This was not the way she wanted to do this, and she prayed to anything that was listening that Héctor and Imelda would not hear what she was about to say. “That
night, whatever you used to kill him… You already had it on you, didn’t you?”

Miguel had told her enough about Héctor’s murder that she could fill in the blanks of what happened that night. Research, done even before she had come to Santa Cecilia, had given her a more. Back when she had planned to write her book about the murder of Héctor Rivera.

“What are you talking about?”

“It had to be premeditated.” Nell continued. “You weren’t seen doctoring the drinks, and you drank as well so it wasn’t the tequila that was poisoned. So it had to have been the glass.”

Ernesto’s eyes narrowed as she spoke. She kept going, praying he would stop her.

“What did you use?” She wondered. “Was it arsenic? Odorless, tasteless… and with symptoms very much like food poisoning. That’s what you told him as he died at your feet, wasn’t it?”

Miguel looked sick. He had managed at last to spit the gag from his mouth but in his horror he had no words to speak.

“It would have been easy enough to get your hands on, considering what they put in medicine back in the day. Funny enough, it was commonly used as a topical treatment for STI’s. So tell me, did you already have the tonic on you, or did you buy it specially?”

Ernesto remained silent, his stony gaze locked on Nell as he unconsciously too a step towards her.

Emboldened, Nell kept talking. If she could get them away from the edge, get Ernesto to even momentarily loosen his hold on Miguel…

“You know, I have this theory.” It was a painful thought, one that she had written into her planning notes for added drama but didn’t believe for a moment. Surely he’d never have gone this far. “You tried to make him forget about Santa Cecilia and the people waiting him for him there, show him the life you could have once you made it big. What was the love of two small-town nobodies when you could be loved by everyone? The whole world as your family. But that didn’t matter to him, did it? His family was his world. And you were afraid that that no longer included you.”

Ernesto took another unconscious step towards her.

As Nell stepped back she caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye -- Héctor and Imelda moving into position. She closed her eyes, offering a silent apology for what they were about to hear.

“How long had you been poisoning him for? Did you slip a little in his food, in his drinks, every time he made noises about leaving? Not enough to kill him, but enough to make him a little sick. Enough to keep him nearby a little longer, give you more time to convince him to stay. Play it off as bad food, or a hangover. A sign that he was meant to stay.” She prayed that he would deny it. Cut her off and tell her what really happened. She didn’t dare look away, couldn’t risk drawing attention to the others. She couldn’t bear to see what must by now be written on their faces. “But you knew it couldn’t last. His protests were getting more and more frequent and you knew that one day he would leave for good. And once he returned to his family he would never come back to you. He found a new dream, and that meant leaving yours behind.”

Ernesto said nothing. He wasn’t denying it. Why wasn’t he denying it? Oh god, this wasn’t
supposed to happen. He was supposed to correct her, get defensive and tell her exactly how he did it. Monologue like the villain that he was. She wasn’t supposed to get it right! She had just considered this for her plot because it made for a more dramatic betrayal than a murder done in the heat of the moment. Never once had she thought he would do something so deliberately cruel.

“Because you knew, you knew the moment that Héctor saw Imelda that you wouldn’t be able to keep him to yourself anymore. That he would leave you.” She finished.

And in that moment Héctor stepped out from behind a fallen stone pillar.

Nell couldn’t have scripted the moment better if it was in one of her novels, and wished desperately that she’d had nothing to do with it.

His face was haunted, heartbroken. It had been bad enough to be betrayed by his best friend, his brother in all but blood. To be murdered by him for his songs because he’d wanted to be with his wife and daughter. It was bad enough when he thought it had been an impulse decision. Knowing that it was planned, that it hadn’t been the first time… All those times he had been sick on the road… The pain of poison had been nothing compared to this.

“Is it true?” He asked, his voice a rasping whisper in the dark. “Ernesto, is it true?”

“I -- I had to.” Ernesto insisted. “For us. For our dream. The first time… it was an accident."

“Liar.” Disillusionment had won a hard battle with history and nostalgia. Two years of knowing the truth had at last shown him what Ernesto De la Cruz really was. “You poisoned me because you were afraid. And even after a hundred years your only regret wasn’t killing me, it was getting caught.”

“If you had only listened to me for once this would not have happened!”

“For once?” Héctor sputtered indignantly. “I spent my whole life listening to you! From the time I was six years old. You were my best friend. I’d have done anything for you. I loved you like a brother and you murdered me!”

“Anything!” Ernesto let out a bark of wild laughter. “Anything, he says. Anything but stay. Anything but leave me the songs that were our ticket to everything we ever wanted.”

“Everything you ever wanted, Ernesto. The fame and the glory never mattered to me. Just the music.”

“And that’s what you wanted? To live and die in that nothing little rat-trap town, playing house with that maldita bruja for the rest of your life?”

“Don’t forget our daughter,” Héctor added, as Imelda stepped out from behind the rocky outcropping where she’d been concealing herself and moved to stand at his side. “Any life with them would have meant more to me than a thousand sold-out stadiums.”

Ernesto’s face went thunderous with rage and it took all the control he possessed to return his expression to something remotely civilized. “Fine,” he spat bitterly. “You know, I did make a mistake that night. I should have just let you go, maybe even gone back with you for a time… And then killed your bitch and the squalling brat myself. But since that is no longer an option -- “ In a smooth movement he stepped back and shoved Miguel off the edge of the world.

“Miguel!”
They darted forward instinctively but Pepita was already in place. She swooped down off the ledge, catching the boy in her claws and soared back to retrieve the others with Dante circling protectively around them. For a split second Imelda hesitated, torn between the raging desire to see justice for what had been done for her husband, and the desire to see Miguel safe back home with her own eyes. In the end getting Miguel home had to be the priority. They had all the time in the world to deal with Ernesto De la Cruz. She threw herself off the cliff, catching hold of one of Pepita’s hind legs as she flew by. Héctor, just behind her, caught the other.

Nell was only feet behind them but just as she was about to jump a strong hand caught her hair, dragging her back and flinging her to the ground. Ernesto stormed towards her and she scrambled back, her gaze flicking up to her friends, who were circling back around. “Go! I’ll catch up! Just go!”

For a moment it seemed like they wouldn’t listen, but then Pepita banked again, soaring over their heads back towards the bridge with Dante trailing behind.

Nell let out a soft sigh of relief. Thank God. At least Miguel could get back. Now she just had to call her own ride.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Ernesto snarled, moving to grab her again.

Nell rolled out of the way, pushing herself to her feet and raising her fists in a defensive position as he whirled on her. “Sorry, but I’ve got a flight to catch.”

Sheer luck had her evading as he swung at her. Nell wasn’t a fighter, not even close, but she was fast and used that to her advantage, managing to just stay out of his reach. Barely. Ernesto had been a big man in life, and he was spitting mad to boot. She’d robbed him of his revenge and it didn’t take a genius to see that he was determined to make her pay in blood for it. He swung again and she blocked with an upraised forearm, the contact singing up her arm. But she held steady, then stepped in to deliver a punch with her right hand that left his head literally spinning.

Nell turned to run but only made it a few steps before a bony arm wrapped itself around her throat, pulling her back. She struggled fiercely, kicking back against his shins as he hauled her off her feet.

“You should have left with your friends when you had the chance,” he said, his voice low in her ear as he tightened his grip, cutting off her air. “Pity you sent them away. Looks like you might be staying a while.”

Spots danced before her eyes. She clawed desperately at the coarse fabric of his coat as her vision grayed. “B-Buttons---”

“What was that? I couldn’t quite hear you.”

She tried again but all she could manage was a strangled squeak. Buttons -- please --- help-- Her heartbeat thundered in her ears, the world seeming to spin beneath her, and then, so dimly she almost wondered if she imagined it, she heard the rush of wings.

A furious caw split the night as a violent force tore Ernesto away from her, sharp claws shredding his coat as Buttons flung him against the side of the pyramid. Nell dropped to the ground, coughing and gasping for breath. She had to go, had to stand somehow. She was running out of time.

Grimly she forced herself to her feet, staggering as she tried to keep herself upright. With one
more desperate call of “Buttons!”, she jumped off the edge of the world. There was a moment of panicked free-fall, her breath leaving her in a woosh as she landed atop vibrantly green feathers.

Buttons gave a triumphant caw!, glancing back briefly to make sure she was okay as she turned to fly back over the city.

Nell sprawled forward on the crow’s back, hugging her as tight as she could. “Thank you for saving me.”

As they flew over the city Nell could see the barest glimpse of gray, watery sunlight on the horizon. “Crap. Buttons, we gotta hurry.”

Buttons gave a soft affirmative caw and swooped down, picking up speed so that Nell had to flatten herself on her alebrije’s back or risk being blown off entirely. She could just make out the vibrant orange of the marigold bridge in the distance. Please, please let them have gotten Miguel across okay.

But as they drew closer Nell could see a cluster of people gathered about a quarter of the way from the end of the bridge. The wrong end.

Buttons came in low, allowing Nell to drop down onto the bridge from only a few feet up. She didn’t exactly stick the landing, but at least she hadn’t fallen on her face this time. “What the hell, you guys! You were supposed to make sure he got across. Why are you still here?”

“Nell! You made it!” Miguel cried, almost tackling her in his enthusiasm. “Are you okay? De la Cruz, it looked like --”

“I’m fine,” she promised. “Buttons threw him into a pyramid. But you have some explaining to do.”

“He would not let us take him back until he knew you were safe,” Héctor told her, giving his great-great-grandson a look that said how 1000% done he was with his behavior. “We have been trying to get him across ever since we landed.”

“It’s fine!” Miguel insisted. “You guys can just give us a blessing and we can go home right away, right?”

“Wait!” Cried a voice from behind them. Oscar and Filipe raced through the customs gate, pushing past the security guards and waving a piece of paper in the air.

“Oscar, Filipe, what --” Imelda started, but her brothers cut her off.

“The blessing,” Filipe panted, slowing as he hit the bridge. “It won’t work.”

“It wasn’t a curse,” Oscar continued. “They have to -- “

“—cross back over the way they came.”

Nell and the Riveras glanced frantically towards the sky, where the faintest edge of blushing gold was just becoming visible in the dark.

Nell swore, grabbing Miguel’s arm and dragging him towards the gate.

“Wait!” Miguel protested. “We haven’t --”

“There’s no time,” Héctor shouted back as Oscar and Filipe shepherded him and Imelda back
towards the customs gate. “Go!”

Nell and Miguel raced across the bridge, exchanging looks of panic as they felt it begin to soften under their feet. Stray petals flew around them as entire sections fell away. There had only moments left. Buttons swooped in from above to help but the unstable gravity of the bridge had them falling just out of reach when she tried to grab them, forcing her to circle back. Their steps faltered over the ever-weakening bridge. Nell picked up speed, dragging Miguel behind her, but he could barely keep up. He stumbled as a piece of the bridge crumbled behind his boot. There was only feet to go. They weren’t going to make it.

Desperate, Nell turned. She grabbed Miguel’s wrist with both hands, planted her feet, and with all of her strength flung him through the gateway to the Mortal world as the bridge collapsed beneath her.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was intense. And just when we thought Ernesto couldn't get worse, eh? (I'm sorry Hector, I am so mean to you...)
Chapter 10: The Other Side of the Door

Chapter Summary

Miguel has returned to the Land of the Living, but what happened to Nell?

Chapter Notes

First thing's first: I love you guys. There was a lot of screaming over the last chapter and I'm not going to lie, I've been re-reading those comments all week. I'm so glad you guys are enjoying this story so much.

A big thank you for all of my betas who looked over this chapter before I posted. I couldn't do this without you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 10: The Other Side of the Door

Miguel sat up in bed just as the sun rose over the horizon. He collapsed back against the pillows with a sigh of relief. He was home. He was safe. He made it through the gate in time.

But what about Nell?

He scrambled out of bed, yanking on his boots as he stumbled through his bedroom door, nearly bowling over abuelita Elena as she made her way to the kitchen for her morning coffee.

“Oye! What -- Miguel, where are you going so early?”

“Lo siento, abuelita but I have to go,” he managed as he sprinted across the empty courtyard and flung open the gate. “I’ll explain later!”

Miguel ran through the streets of Santa Cecilia, the marigold petals left from the previous night’s celebration scattering in his wake. There were more people on the street today than there would have been, with what seemed like half the town just now returning from their vigils at the cemetery. He skidded to a halt outside of Nell’s apartment, glancing up at the second story windows. There was no movement behind the curtains and when he tried the front door he found it locked. The boy swore, ducking around the corner into the alleyway beside the building, leaned against the wall, and closed his eyes. The “do not invade privacy” rule was one of the first things Nell ever taught him, but if there was ever a time for a rule to be broken, this was it. He would only be there for a second, just long enough to be sure that she had gotten back safely. He projected himself into the
middle of her apartment, his eyes racing through the room in search of his friend. It didn’t take long. She lay across the bed, curled up on her side as if she had just fallen asleep.

“Nell! Nell, wake up!” He was across the room in a second, but when he tried to shake her awake his hand passed right through her. No no no no no no no no. This wasn’t right. She was supposed to be right behind him. She was supposed to wake up.

Miguel returned to his body, almost frantic as he raced back to the door, fighting to get it open.

“¡Oye! ¿Qué estás haciendo?” Asked an irritated voice from behind him.

Miguel turned to see a very annoyed looking woman in a purple floral dress standing behind him.

“Ah, lo siento, but—”

“You are one of the Rivera boys,” Caro realized, her mouth turning down in a confused frown. “The one who plays in the Plaza. What are you doing here?”

“I’m -- friends with Nell,” he answered, thinking quickly. “We were supposed to meet up this morning but she isn’t answering her phone. I was getting worried.” Never mind that he didn’t actually have a cell phone. Nell’s landlord didn’t need to know that.

“It is very early to be meeting, don’t you think?” Caro commented as she moved past him to unlock the door.

“Ah...yeah... “ Miguel admitted, following behind her. “I guess she had an idea last night and wanted to get some feedback on it before she did a Twitch stream or something this morning?” She’d done a couple streams since coming to Santa Cecilia. Actually she’d told him she’d done one a couple of nights ago, sharing a few work-in-progress character designs from her new series. Come on, come on, come on. Just let me upstairs.

“Would you like to try phoning her again?” Caro suggested, shutting the door behind them.

“I--dropped my phone,” Miguel answered quickly. “On my way here. Screen cracked and everything. Maybe she just slept in. I’ll just go up and check.” Before she could protest he was already gone, dashing up the stairs.

It took several minutes of knocking before Caro finally came up after him. “Maybe she is not feeling well. You can always come back later.”

He worried that there might not be a later to come back for. “Look, I’m sorry. Can you please let me in? She said she wasn’t feeling well last night and she doesn’t have any family here and I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

Caro knocked on the door herself this time. “Penelope? Are you awake? Your little friend is here to see you.”

There was no answer.

Miguel looked at her pleadingly. Something in his eyes must have given away just how worried he really was because Caro relented with a sigh, pulling the spare key from her pocket. “Penelope, we are coming in. Lo siento, but he is very worried about you and --”

“Nell!” Miguel burst past her, dashing across the room. “Nell, wake up.” No response. He
reached out, laying one hand on her shoulder to shake her awake. Still nothing. “Nell, come on. This isn’t funny. Nell, wake up!”

Now even Caro was afraid. “Check her breathing.”

It was even, as was her pulse, but no matter what they did they could not wake her up. Caro scrambled for her purse, fingers fumbling as she searched for her mobile phone. She passed it to Miguel. “Call the medico. I will keep trying.”

The Riveras watched with horror as the bridge disintegrated under Nell’s feet, the petals scattering on the wind as she plummeted into the dark. Buttons dove after her, a flash of green against golden-orange, and they both disappeared out of sight. For a moment there was nothing but silence, then they heard the distinctive sound of Buttons’ cry.

A powerful beat of wings sent the alebrije soaring up over their heads. She circled the customs gate once, twice, before gliding back towards them, Nell clutched gently in her claws. When they were just a couple feel from the ground, Buttons released her grip, allowing Nell to slip free, rolling onto the cobblestone where she lay on her back for a moment, staring up at the slowly brightening sky.

She sat up slowly, dimly aware of the voices calling her name. Everything seemed far away and not particularly real. Her hands flexed and stretched absently, burying themselves in the dark tangle of her hair as she curled in on herself. A choked whimper sounded from her lips.

Gentle hands laid on her shoulders and she looked up into a pair of concerned amber eyes framed with elegant violet petals. “Nell, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

Nell blinked in confusion. Why should that even matter right now? “I...He made it.”

“¿Perdón?”

“Miguel. He made it across. I made sure he made it back.” She had to make sure they knew that. Was the world shaking or was it her? Did they get earthquakes in the Land of the Dead?

“Oh Mija,” Imelda sighed, pulling her in close and holding her tight. “I know. We saw what you did for him.” And knew that she would have made it across safely if she had let him go.

“There was no time. I had to -- had to throw him,” she sniffled, her voice muffled against Imelda’s dress. “He had to go back. But the bridge -- It’s gone. I can’t---” What would happen to her now that the bridge was gone? What would happen to her body in the Living World?

“Sh, sh. Está bien,” Imelda told her softly, laying one hand soothingly over Nell’s hair, just as she had done for her own daughter when she cried. “Está bien. We will figure it out. We will find a way to take you home.”

Nell drew a steadying breath, then another, trying to keep her voice from shaking. The next
words out of her mouth were barely audible. “Am I dead?”

Imelda glanced up at her husband, who had come to kneel just behind them. He shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.” There were no bones visible, at any rate. But there was no way to know for sure.

“Okay.” That was something at least. She didn’t think she was dead either, but then how would she know for sure? She’d never died before. For now she’d take whatever tiny sliver of hope they could give her. But if she wasn’t dead, then what? Would her physical body just...stay asleep, like in some twisted fairy tale? How long would it take for someone to find her? Probably not that long. Miguel, she was sure, would want to make sure she got back okay. God, that poor kid. He’d been through enough tonight. He didn’t need finding her comatose in her apartment on top of everything else. And he’d somehow have to convince Tia Caro to let him in. And her parents… her parents would be frantic.

“Do you know...if I can ever go back?” Would she reside in this afterlife until her physical body just gave out? What would happen to her then?

Héctor and Imelda glanced towards the twins, who shrugged. “We don’t know.”

“We think so?” Filipe admitted. “The head of the archives said that the only way for a living spirit to return to the living world --”

“-- was over the bridge,” Oscar finished. “And since the bridge only opens once a year…”

“So this has happened before?” Héctor asked.

“We didn’t have time to ask,” Oscar told them. “We were barely able to figure out that they had to cross over the bridge again before we ran to meet you.” And even then they had been too late.

“Well then, we’ll just have to ask them, si?”

The Department of Family Reunions was housed inside a massive Victorian-style building that looked to Nell like it might have once housed The Grand Exhibition back in the 1850’s. The stained glass windows were in themselves a work of art, with calavera faces staring down at them from every wall. She gazed around, wide-eyed, as the Riveras led her through the enormous front doors into the lobby. The sheer grandeur of it had her fingers itching for a pencil and sketchbook. With Día de los Muertos officially over now the lobby was nearly empty, with the exception of a few stragglers. Unfortunately that made Nell’s presence that much more noticeable.

A trio of inebriated skeletons stopped so abruptly to stare at her that they crashed into each other and fell to pieces. A security guard talking into a walkie-talkie found himself unable to continue as his jaw literally dropped to the floor. Two more women in professional-looking skirt-suits kept whispering and shooting glances their way. Nell had never felt more exposed. Normally she was more than comfortable in front of a crowd but this made her feel like the main attraction in a freak show. She slowed her pace, intentionally putting herself in the center of the group, and ducked her head so her hair would conceal her face.
They led the way across black and white checkerboard floor to the reception desk. A short, female skeleton in a pressed white blouse and black skirt stood to greet them. “Buenos días! Welcome to the Department of Family Reunions. How may I help you?”

“We need to speak to someone regarding an...unusual circumstance,” Imelda started. She stepped aside, gesturing for Nell to step forward.

Nell brushed her hair back out of her face and gave a hesitant wave. “Hola.”

“Ah! Dios mio!” The receptionist stumbled back, almost tripping over her chair. “That’s---you’re---”

“Alive?” Héctor finished helpfully.

“Ah, yes. Um… how -- Oh my. Let me just…” She shook her head, glancing frantically towards the departmental directory. This was so, so far above her pay grade.

She recognized them now. The Rivera family had become almost notorious within the Department of Family Reunions since the incident two years before. Longer, if they counted Héctor’s varied attempts at getting across the marigold bridge. Between him painting himself purple in an attempt to disguise himself as an alebrije, and Imelda Rivera’s violence towards their computers, they’d had more trouble from the Riveras than an entire tower of extended families. After the incident with the living boy they thought they’d seen everything. Apparently they were wrong.

At last she found what she was looking for -- or at least, someone far better equipped to deal with the mess that she was about to drop in their laps. There wasn’t exactly a formal department for “What in the name of Santa Muerte is this insanity?” But there was one person, at least, who had dealt with the Riveras’ particular brand of familial strangeness before. She dialed the extension on her phone and called up the head of the Department of Family Grievances.

“Ah, Señor Bolivar? Si, I am still here. I, ah…I have a family to see you. They have a rather...unusual problem.” She paused, fidgeting nervously with the phone cord as she awaited his response. “Si. Si. I will send them right up.” Then she hung up the phone, offering a polite but nervous smile in their direction. “Señor Bolivar will be right with you. His office is just up the stairs and to your right.”

“Gracias.”

“Oh, and if you could call Lina Chavez, the archivist,” Filipe added.

“That would be great,” Oscar continued. “She’ll know what it’s about.”

“Um...sure?”

The moment the diminutive Señor Bolivar saw them he contemplated locking his door and pretending that he had already gone home. Instead he sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nasal cavity in aggravation. “Not you again. Don’t tell me your boy got himself cursed again.”

Nell couldn’t help the snort of laughter that escaped her. “Does the entire Land of the Dead
know what happened that night?”

“Oh that story traveled faster than a -- WOAH!” He jerked back, wide-eyed. “You -- you’re alive? How--?”

Nell sighed, fidgeting self-consciously with the ruffle at the hem of her dress. “It’s...kind of a long story.”

“Well….I guess you’d better come in then.”

Lina the archivist arrived a few minutes later, forcing Nell to start her tale again from the beginning. Even though it had only been a few hours it felt like another lifetime. There were times when she faltered, when Imelda or Héctor spoke up to add something she might have forgotten, or to fill in what had happened in those few moments they were separated. By silent tacit agreement there were things none of them spoke of, only saying that Nell kept De la Cruz distracted so they could get into position but not going into the specifics as to how. Throughout it all Lina and Señor Bolivar remained silent, allowing the chunky tape recorder on the desk to record uninterrupted.

When at last they finished, Lina let out a sigh. “Ugh this is going to be so much paperwork… A living spirit trapped in the Land of the Dead. *Que poca madre.*”

“So...I really am trapped here?” Nell asked softly, almost afraid to here the answer. “There’s no way for me to get home at all?” Okay. Great. Stuck in an afterlife that was technically not even hers for who knows how long. She’d do it again, all considered. Of course she would. But it still sucked rocks.

“I didn’t say that,” Lina said, leaning back against the heavy wooden desk. “But no *nagual* has managed to find their way across the bridge since m--- well, more years ago than I’ve been working here.”

“So then, how does it work? Do I have to wait until next year to cross? Do I need a photo on an *ofrenda* in order to get through customs, or does that only apply to dead people?” Her family had never put up an *ofrenda* but there were pictures of her growing up all over their house. Would that count? Oh god, where was she going to stay for the next year? What was she going to do? Did they need comic artists in the afterlife? Or hell, she’d make a decent novelty act. Someone in this world with skin! Or would they find that offensive?

“Woah there, chill out *niñita.*” Lina raised her hands in a ‘time out’ gesture. “We don’t know yet. I’m going to assign some clerks to go through the archives and see if we can find any record of similar cases.”

Imelda looked annoyed. “And what are those devil boxes for if not for looking at the archives?”

“I can tell you what they are not for,” Bolivar said in a warning tone. “Whacking with boots. We have several hundred years of case files stacked in the archives. It may surprise you to hear this, but we haven’t exactly had the time or resources to load every single page onto a digital database.”

“What he’s saying is it may take some time to find what we’re looking for,” Lina cautioned.
“Do you have any family here, someone you can stay with?”

“I...I don’t know,” Nell admitted. “I mean….maybe some really extended family?”

That, at least, they could find in their system. “Name?” Bolivar requested.

“Nell.”

He sighed, shooting her a markedly unimpressed look from behind his glasses. “Your full name, please.”

“Oh. Um. Penelope Augustina Michelle Rey.”

A few clicks of the keyboard had the processor groaning, the internal fan kicking into overdrive as it searched. At last they had their answer.

“Penelope Rey, aged twenty-five… Nope. No family members in this afterlife,” Bolivar told them, leaning back in his chair. “You got yourself some really distant extended cousins, but anyone who’d actually know you went somewhere else.”

“Oh... ‘kay...” Nell bit her lip nervously, glancing hesitantly around the room. What was she going to do? She was afraid to even ask. She had nothing on her but the clothes on her back, and she knew enough about this world to understand that there is still an active economy here, one that would very likely require her to pay some form of rent. Maybe she could stay in the office and help look through the records? And if worse came to worst, she could always find her way to Shantytown.

A pair of bony hands on her shoulder cut off her mental spiraling and she looked up in surprise to see Héctor and Imelda on either side of her.

“She will stay with us,” Imelda said firmly.

Nell stared between them, stunned. “A-are you sure? You guys have been through enough tonight. I don’t want to be a burden. And for a whole year--”

But Imelda waved her protests away.

Héctor crouched down next to her with a warm, but somehow almost teasing smile. “You didn’t really think we’d leave you to fend for yourself, did you?”

“Well, no, but -- I didn’t want to presume. And it’s a year! At least a year!”

“You saved our Miguel.” Imelda reminded her. “You are family too. And family is never a burden.”

Grateful beyond words, Nell flung her arms around both of them and burst into tears.

Chapter End Notes

So she's alive! Well, sort of. But what are they going to do now? Will she really have to
wait a year to come home? Will she last that long? We'll have to wait to find out.

One quick note: I did mention the Nagual in earlier chapters, as both a reference to spirit-walkers as well as another name for alebrije. For simplicity's sake I will continue to use the word to refer to spirit-walkers within the context of this story.

And as always, thanks for reading!
Chapter 11: Aftermath

Wow everyone, thanks so much for all your great responses to the last chapter! It means so much to me, and I've loved seeing your reactions to Nell and her adventures with the Riveras so far. One of the most common comments I got when I first started posting this was "I'm not always big on oc's but this is pretty good so far", so I hope I've been meeting your expectations with her.

Once again thanks so much to all of my betas, without whom there would definitely be typos and probably a "Potato Hector" or two (accented letters are important, kids!),

And now, on to the next chapter!

The Rivera family home was located in a tower complex maybe twenty minutes away from the Department of Family Reunions building. Exhaustion, both physical and emotional, weighed on the group as they boarded the trolley and took their seats. Héctor sat silently next to his wife, their hands intertwined, his thoughts a thousand miles away. Oscar and Filipe leaned against each other, matching bowler hats drooping as they tried to stay awake. Nell sat backwards in her seat, gazing out at the city that would be her home for the next year. It was beautiful. She hadn't really taken the time to notice that until now. But then, she had been a little distracted. Everywhere she looked was color and light, with each tower like its own small cross-section of history. The streets were mostly empty now, with most people deciding to take at least the morning to recover from their late-night visits across the veil. That was probably for the best. Nell really wasn't up for being stared at right now.

They would have missed their stop if it wasn't for Imelda. She pulled the bell chain, signalling a stop request. Her brothers blinked dozily at the sound and rubbed their eyes as the trolley reached the platform. The five of them disembarked, then slowly made their way down a level to the house. Coco, Julio, Victoria and Rosita were waiting for them at the gate. They had finally caught up to everyone at the Department of Family Reunions building, but with nothing else that they could add to the story of the night's events, it had been advised for them to just go home and rest. That, of course, was easier said than done. They were definitely exhausted but who could sleep after a night like they had? Especially with so many unanswered questions. They answered as best they could. Miguel was home safe. De la Cruz was being hunted by the police. And Nell... Nell would be staying with them for a while.

As Héctor hung back to explain what had happened, Imelda led Nell to a second floor bedroom next to Victoria’s. It was furnished with a double bed with a curving wrought-iron frame. A heavy wooden bureau was set into the corner against the opposite wall. There was also a wooden dressing table set with an oval mirror, with a three-legged stool tucked underneath.
“We were saving it for Elena and Franco when they joined us,” Imelda told her, moving across the room to pull open the pale blue curtains, letting the morning sunlight filter in through the small window. “We hoped not to have to use it for a few years yet, but it is yours while you’re here.”

“Thanks Imelda.” Nell said softly. She hesitated at the door, glancing back down the hall where the others were still gathered. She couldn’t make out what was being said, but she was able to catch a glimpse of Héctor hugging his daughter tightly at the bottom of the stairs. A hard ball of guilt lodged in her throat. “I guess…we should probably talk about what happened.”

Imelda, catching the direction of her gaze, gave a small sigh. “It has been a long night for all of us. For Héctor especially.”

“I’m sorry. God, Imelda, I am so sorry.” Nell leaned back against the door frame, scrubbing her hands over her face. “This whole night -- it’s so fucked up. None of this was supposed to happen. All I wanted was for Miguel to be able to see you again. He’s been so torn up about what happened and not knowing if Héctor was okay, he literally started walking away from his own body at night to try and find a way across the bridge to see you. He was so worried and he hasn’t been able to tell anyone and I just wanted to help…”

“No one could have predicted what happened tonight.” Or at least that was what Imelda kept telling herself.

“And then on the cliffs… God, what was I even doing?” Nell groaned, almost as if she hadn’t heard Imelda at all. Damn it, Nell! What the hell is wrong with you? “I never thought he’d go that far.”

“Then why -- “ The question was out before she could stop herself. But she had to know. For Héctor’s sake, for all their sakes, she had to know. “Why say those things?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be true!” Nell burst out desperately. “He was going to throw Miguel off the ledge and it was too soon and I panicked. It was the first thing that came into my head and I never… It wasn’t supposed to be true. If I’d ever thought for a moment that it was, I’d never have said it. I wouldn’t do that to Héctor, or to you. He… I just wanted to distract him. Get him talking long enough for you to get in place. Or get him so angry he came after me instead. I never thought…” Even now the enormity of that kind of betrayal left her sick and horrified. She couldn’t even imagine how Imelda and Héctor must be feeling. “He was supposed to deny it.”

But he hadn’t. And now they would all have to deal with the fallout.

For a moment Imelda said nothing. There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask, so many things that she wanted an explanation for. But this was not the time for any of them. For now it was best to take a step back, to take some time to themselves to process all that had happened. “Get some rest,” she suggested at last, her voice quiet. “There is a bathing room down the hall if you want to clean up. We’ve decided to close the shop for the day, so if you need anything…”

“Thank you, Imelda. For everything.”

Imelda nodded, stepping out of the room and closing the door behind her. She leaned against the wall with a sigh and could just barely make out the sound of Nell sliding down to sit on the other side. She was tempted to do the same. But for now her family, her husband, needed her. She would fall apart in her own way in her own time.

When she retired to her room at the other end of the house, she found Héctor already there. He
sat at the edge of their bed, elbows braced on his knees, his head in his hands. He didn’t even seem to have heard her come in. In all of the years she had known him, there had only been once that she’d ever seen him look this...broken. Like he could break apart at any minute. That night he had almost gone to dust in her arms.

Imelda crossed the room to sit beside him, laying one hand gently on his shoulder. He turned to her silently, burying his face in the front of her dress as he clung to her, his body shaking with tearless sobs. Her heart ached for him. Even when they were living she had never been Ernesto’s biggest fan. He was pushy, self-centered, and manipulative, and she hated the way that Héctor gave in to him at every turn. But he was her husband’s oldest friend, so she had put up with him for Héctor’s sake. Never in her wildest dreams had she ever imagined he would do something so hideous. She wished she was capable of getting physically ill, just so she could somehow purge the utter revulsion from her system.

For hours they stayed like that, wrapped tightly in each other’s arms, until they finally drifted off in an exhausted sleep.

Miguel stared blindly at the faded linoleum floor, his mind still reeling. She didn’t get back across. She was stuck. She had made sure that he made it back, but had been unable to pass through the gate herself.

They had been at the hospital for hours, had been questioned at length by what felt like every doctor in Mexico, and still they had no answers. And what was worse, it seemed like they were all asking the same questions. Did she take any drugs? Of course not. Miguel knew she didn’t and the paramédicos had searched Nell’s apartment, just in case. Did she have a history of illness or seizures? No, not that they knew of. Was she on any medication? No. Had she had anything to drink the night before? Also no. Had she complained of headaches or any other kind of pain? No.

Nell had fallen into a coma, and nobody could figure out why. Nobody but Miguel. Miguel had the answer, but it was not one that he would be able to share with them. Unfortunately “My friend was astral projecting and got trapped in the Land of the Dead” was not exactly a medically viable answer, so Miguel kept his silence and prayed for a miracle.

Caro and his father sat on either side of him. Enrique had been his first call after the paramedics, and when Miguel said he wanted to ride in the ambulance with his friend, his father offered to drive him instead so they could give the paramedics room to work. He’d stayed at his son’s side through the endless rounds of questioning, and the boy’s frustration when the doctor’s refused to give them anything but the most minimal of updates.

The second call, which had technically been made by Caro, was to Nell’s parents. She had included an emergency contact page when the lease was signed, something that she’d never before needed to access until now. Miguel did not envy her the task of making the call, and didn’t think he’d ever forget the choked sob he heard from the other end of the line just as the call ended. They said they would be on the first flight down, and Miguel did not intend to leave the waiting room until they walked through the door. It was the least he could do for them. After all, if Nell hadn’t come to save him, she wouldn’t be in a coma right now.

What happened to a living spirit that remained after sunrise? He wondered. Would Nell be able to cross back over next Día de los Muertos, or would she be stuck there forever? How long
could a living spirit reside in the Land of the Dead? And -- his blood ran cold at the thought -- how long would her family allow her to stay like this? Would they need to put her on life-support or something? What if they couldn’t afford it? What if they decided to...take her off? Nell could die without ever having the chance to return home.

A hand on his shoulder drew him out of his thoughts. His father pulled him close, allowing his son to lean his head on his shoulder. He’d been more than a little concerned when he learned that his teenager had befriended a strange foreigner. Caro was a long-standing acquaintance of the family, and he knew that she would not rent to anyone who was in any way dangerous, but a father had a right to worry for his son. Miguel was a clever, kind, and loving boy, and so incredibly talented, but he had given his family his fair share to worry about in the last couple of years. Disappearing for an entire night after abuelita Elena smashed his guitar had been the worst of it, but his increasingly odd behavior afterwards had not gone unnoticed by the family. He had become obsessed with finding out what happened to Mamá Coco’s father after he disappeared, spending hours in the library and running down leads. They had helped him of course, because that was what family did, and because the more they found out, the stronger Mamá Coco’s memory seemed to become.

Miguel would never say what had happened to him that night, but ever since then there were moments where he held himself back, where it seemed like he was about to say something but would then crack a joke or immediately change the subject instead. And then the nightmares started. He wouldn’t say what they were about, but Enrique and Luisa knew when the dreams woke him. They had tried to sit him down and get him to open up about what was going on, and he did open up some -- the stress of uncovering the truth about his Papá Héctor and the backlash from the De la Cruz fans, some of which were among his own classmates, was wearing on him. There were whispers in town, and someone had even vandalized his locker at school. Rosa had stuck by him, defending him to her classmates, and many of them had turned against her as well. They had accepted it at the time, but it still felt like there was something their son wasn’t telling them.

To say they were shocked when they finally uncovered the truth was an understatement. To be honest, they hadn’t expected to find much at all, but finding out that not only was the the original composer of all of the De la Cruz songs, but that he had been murdered for them? But Miguel hadn’t seemed surprised. Somehow he seemed to know already what they would find. Things got better since then, but there were moments now and again when they would catch a glimpse of him on his own, moments when he seemed so much older than his fourteen years, and somehow removed from the people around him.

The dreams had started again a few months ago. Not bad ones, the kind that had him waking in the middle of the night to wander the house like a ghost, but they couldn’t say they were good either. Miguel had always been an active sleeper, the kind that rolled over often, flinging off blankets and sprawling in a dozen different positions over the course of the night. But starting that past spring there were nights where he went completely still for hours at a time, waking listless and despondent the next morning. It did not escape the notice of either Enrique or Luisa that something changed once their son met Nell. There were still times in the night when he went absolutely still, but he no longer dragged himself through the day afterwards. In fact, these last few weeks were the happiest they’d seen him in a long time. It was as if whatever weight he had been carrying had finally been lifted away.

“She’ll be okay,” Enrique promised softly. “The doctors are doing all they can for her.”

Miguel nodded silently, and wondered if it would be enough.
The sky was dark when Nell woke again. She drifted for a while, content to remain in her bed a while longer. Until she remembered that it was not her bed that she was lying in. She rolled over onto her back, scrubbing her hands over her face as the events of the previous night came flooding back. De la Cruz, the race across the city, Buttons, the showdown at the cliffs, the bridge… Miguel was safe but she...she was trapped here, and had no way of knowing if she’d ever be able to go home again.

No. She set her mouth stubbornly, giving her head a defiant shake. She would go home. She would see her family again. And damn it, she would not spend the next twelve months sulking about it. No more wallowing in bed like an invalid. She was still alive. She had to act like it.

With that thought in mind she tossed back the covers and pulled open the curtains. The city glowed with thousands of colorful lights, creating a gleaming aurora against the night sky. It really was a beautiful place, something she hadn’t been able to appreciate the night before -- given she’d been a little busy chasing a vengeful, murderous mariachi across the city. But it really was one of the most incredible places she’d ever seen. She thought for a moment that if she had to be stuck in another world for a year, she was glad it was this one.

Nell stared out at the city for a few more minutes before finally turning away. No more hiding. It was time to face the rest of the Riveras. But as she cross the floor a glimpse of her reflection in the vanity mirror stopped her in her tracks. She was an absolute mess. Her hair looked like she had been caught in a windstorm, her clothes streaked with dirt. No way was she going downstairs looking like this.

There was a comb in one of the drawers of the dressing table, which was a blessing. After much fighting and swearing, Nell finally managed to get her hair in some kind of order, braided back and tied with one of the ribbons that she also found in the drawer. With that settled, she moved to the bureau in search of fresh clothing. The top couple of drawers were definitely for Elena, filled with neatly folded floral-print shirt-dresses. The bottom drawers held khaki-colored pants and short-sleeved, button-down shirts. Given the height-difference, Nell went for the khakis first. She was several inches taller than Miguel’s Papá Franco, so they fit more like capris than full-length pants, and she still needed to borrow one of the belts provided to keep them up, but they seemed like a better option than her dingy leggings. The blue button-down shirt she paired with it was a much better fit.

Hesitantly she opened the door, taking a quick peek down the hallway. It was almost a relief to see that nobody was there. She stepped outside, closing the door quietly behind her.

“Oh good, you’re up!”

Nell jolted, flinging her bundle of clothes in the air as she flattened herself against the wall. “GAH! Rosita! God, you almost gave me a heart attack.”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” she said with a sheepish smile. “You’ve been asleep all day so I was going to come check on you, see how you were doing.”

“Oh! I’m sorry,” she said with a sheepish smile. “You’ve been asleep all day so I was going to come check on you, see how you were doing.”

“I’m...okay.” Nell told her, crouching down to pick up the clothing that she’d dropped. “I’m adjusting. It’s...kind of hard to wrap my head around, honestly. Yesterday feels like a really strange dream or something. Then I look around and it just hits me again that it’s real.”
“Ay, pobrecita.” Rosita swept her into a crushing hug, patting her hair in a comforting gesture. “It must be so scary for you, and after all you went through last night…”

“It’s not…” But she couldn’t even finish, the lie sounding obvious even to her. “Okay it was not at all how I had hoped things would go. But it wasn’t all bad. I met you guys, and I got to see Buttons again. And I mean, how many people get to say they flew across the city on the back of a giant crow?”

“Oh, is that her name?” Rosita laughed as she loosened her grip, allowing Nell to straighten again. “She’s flown by a couple of times today. I think she wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“Can you let me know if she comes by again?” Nell asked. “We didn’t exactly get to spend much quality time last night. Also, is there a laundry room or something that I can use? Things got a little...messy last night.” That was a good phrase for being thrown around the courtyard of an ancient pyramid and almost dying, right?

“Por supuesto!” She smiled. “It is just downstairs.”

Rosita led her to a small room just off the kitchen, where a drum-like apparatus was set up. This, Nell assumed, was the washing machine. From the looks of it, it would have been considered top-of-the-line somewhere in the nineteen-fifties.

“We finally broke down and got one a few years ago,” Rosita said brightly. “There isn’t as much need to wash things now, but it is so much faster than doing it all by hand.”

“I...have no idea how to use this thing,” Nell admitted, eyeing the machine dubiously. It didn’t have a hose or anything. Did that mean it had to be filled using a bucket?

“It isn’t hard,” Rosita assured her. “I’ll show you! You’ll get the hang of it in no time.”

Somehow Nell managed to wash and wring out her clothing without destroying anything. She had thought she was a fairly low-maintenance girl, but she had to admit that she was starting to miss modern technology. Not that there wasn’t a certain charm to hanging clothing on a line to dry, she thought as she made her way out into the little courtyard, laundry basket balanced on her hip. And the result would be the same, even if it took a little longer.

Was all technology in the Land of the Dead like this? From her brief glimpses in the Department of Family Reunions the night before, she thought it might be. It wasn’t as though there wouldn’t be spirits here capable of making more modern pieces, but maybe they just wouldn’t work here? Maybe ‘dead’ applied to more than just the residents. Okay, now she missed her laptop. She needed to find herself a notebook or something just so she could write down all of the questions she had.

As Nell draped her damp clothes over the line to dry, she heard a familiar caw. She glanced up, grinning as she saw the massive crow and the winged jaguar circling each other overhead. With the laundry secured with wooden clothespins, she turned and waved at them. Buttons, seeing the gesture, circled again before descending into the courtyard. The moment she touched down, Nell ran
“Hey Buttons.” The alebrije leaned into her caress with a soft caw. Nell smiled. Well, at least one good thing came out of this mess. “Been a crazy couple days, huh? Bet you didn’t expect to find me running around down here for a while yet. Honestly this isn’t where I thought I’d end up either.”

Buttons turned to nibble at the fastenings of her shirt.

“In your honor,” Nell chuckled. “But maybe don’t bite them, eh? I’m just borrowing them. Also, you might choke.”

Buttons gave a questioning squawk.

“I don’t know if alebrije can choke either, but I already lost you once. I’d rather not have to say goodbye again so soon, okay?”

The massive crow squawked again.

“I kept all of the ones you gave me, you know. And Lady’s ribbons, Shell’s shells, Ashes’ candy wrappers. Actually one of my friends taught me how to make a wallet out of them. I don’t suppose they’re here too, are they? I missed them too, so it would be nice to see them again.”

“I don’t know how Pepita would feel about that,” Héctor said, stepping out into the courtyard.

Nell jolted, then turned with a sheepish smile. “Heh...yeah, you’re probably right. They seem to get along pretty well one-on-one, but cats and birds... Is that issue still a thing with alebrije?”

Héctor shrugged. “I think it depends. Pepita and Dante get along reasonably well, but that depends as much on the alebrije’s personality as what kind of animal they are.”

Ah. That made sense. “Well...least I have some time to figure out how all of this spirit-world stuff really works.” She could use it in her book when she got back. That was some kind of upside.

For a moment Héctor hesitated, rubbing one hand absently over his forearm. “How are you doing with all this?”

“How are you doing with all this?”

“Fine,” she answered automatically. The look he gave her in response said that he did not believe her for a moment. “Mostly fine. I mean...I’m scared. I don’t know what’s going to happen, or how long I can be here. But there isn’t really anything I can do about that right now, so as much as there’s a part of me that is seriously freaking out right now, I can’t let that take over, you know?” If it did she’d just spend the next year as a massive Nell-sized puddle of depression and anxiety. The guilt she felt over the events of the night before already pulled at her, making her wish she could simply shrink away and disappear, but she owed it to Héctor to at least try to explain.

“Look, um... About last night.” Nell sighed, twisting the end of her braid between her fingers. “I’m sorry. What I said...you weren’t supposed to hear that. I didn’t even mean to say it. I panicked and...I only wanted to distract him. Villain Tropes 101, you know? Get them talking and they will give you everything, including time to figure out an escape plan.”

If only it had actually worked out that way.

For a moment Héctor hesitated, scuffing one booted foot absently against the worn cobblestones. “How...how did you know? What he used...”

“I did a lot of research,” she admitted. “I...I mentioned last night that I write graphic novels.
My original plan for my newest one... was going to be based on you.” Seeing the look of surprise on his face, she rushed on. “I decided to go in a different direction, scrapped the plot entirely before I even came to Santa Cecilia. But I kept the research.”

“And that’s how you found—” He couldn’t even bring himself to say it. He had known the truth of Ernesto’s betrayal for two years, but it was different somehow, knowing now exactly what it was that had killed him.

Nell nodded. “You know they found you. Your body. Your family made sure they brought you home. But they also had an autopsy done. Forensics wasn’t much of a thing back in your day, but it’s amazing what they can find out with modern equipment. Metallic compounds like arsenic can stay in the body for decades.” Or at least, that was what her research told her. She spared a moment to hope absently that nobody intended to go through her browser history any time before she got back. Her research took her down some weird paths sometimes. “They used arsenic for a lot back then, and I started to wonder what he might have used. I figured it was the medication because... well, it was De la Cruz. Someone like him -- musician, arguably decent-looking -- probably wasn’t exactly lacking if he was looking for some company.”

“Well...you’re not wrong,” Héctor said with a bitter smile. Ernesto had never seemed to have trouble finding companionship, and had very often suggested that Héctor find himself a friend for the night -- something that he had vehemently refused every time. “Wait...arguably?” That was a new one.

“Sure,” Nell shrugged. “I mean, he’s not my type at all. I prefer a smaller build and a more genuine, quirky personality. And not murder-y. That cannot be overstated. Give me the sweet and sensitive any day. Anyway, guy like him, I figured he got around, so it wouldn’t have been suspicious for him to have a bottle of some kind of topical medication in his suitcase.” And it hadn’t been uncommon at the time. Rates of arsenic poisoning were shockingly high in the 1920’s, to the point where the compound had become known as ‘inheritance powder’. “And the rest... I’m so sorry, Héctor. I never thought he’d actually... I thought I made it up.” She sighed, leaning back against Buttons and sinking down until she sat on the dusty cobblestones, wrapping her arms around her knees. “He was supposed to get angry, defensive. Deny it.”

“But he didn’t.” The words were spoken so softly they were barely audible.

Her heart broke for him. It was bad enough to know his best friend poisoned him, worse to find out that it had happened more than once, and she’d have given anything to take it all back. “I don’t know if it helps but...I think he was telling the truth when he said that the first time was an accident. It does not excuse at all what he did to you, and to your family. It was completely monstrous and absolutely unforgivable, and I am so, so sorry that you found out this way. You’re a good man and you deserve so much better.”

Caught off guard, he blinked at her, then shook his head with a rueful smile. “I don’t know about that.” Maybe he had been once. He certainly tried to be. Did he deserve to be murdered by his best friend and rejected by his family for ninety years? Of course not. But good men did not steal, or lie, or break promises to the people who cared about them. The rules that most people lived by -- so to speak -- could become a little fuzzy when you are desperate, and he’d been plenty desperate the last couple of decades.

“I do,” Nell said certainly.

“You barely know me.”

“But I know Miguel. He told me everything that happened that night. You spent ninety-five
years trying everything in the book to get home to your family. You were about to be forgotten but you still made it your priority to get him home, went on side-quest after side-quest even when you knew you were running out of time. The kid worships you. You’re like an awesome combination of best friend, big brother, and father-figure. He’s spent hours talking to me about his Amazing Papá Héctor.” Nell smiled fondly, thinking back on the stories Miguel had told her. “He lights up like a sky full of fireworks any time he hears your name.”

If skeletons could blush, Héctor would have been red to the roots of his hair.

“Well, anyway,” Nell continued, looking away sheepishly. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry, for everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Well it’s been an intense night. Everyone has had a lot to deal with, and it’s not just the dead Riveras who have had to deal with it.

The adventure is fall from over. Join us next week for more A Year in the Life, and join me on my tumblr for more fanart, headcanons, and other Coco goodness!
Chapter 12: Friends on the Other Side

Chapter Summary

Nell's parents arrive at the hospital, and Miguel sees more than anyone else.

Chapter Notes

It's been a slow week for writing, so I'm glad I'm still a couple chapters ahead. Don't worry, everyone. Releases will continue on schedule.

Thanks again to Sarah for helping me with my Spanish, and to Meg for her great suggestions for that scene that was fighting me, and for helping me get to know Nell in a way I never would have otherwise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 12: Friends on the Other Side

It was late when Nell’s parents arrived at the hospital. They were both dragging their suitcases behind them, having come directly from the airport. Oliver Rey was tall and fair, sharing his daughter’s freckles and grey eyes. Nell’s mother Marta was almost a full head shorter than her husband, with dark brown hair in a stylish pixie cut, and dark eyes framed with silver-rimmed glasses. Both showed signs of a particularly trying day, with wrinkled clothes and dark bags under their eyes. Miguel would have known them from that alone, even if they hadn’t been the only people in the waiting room speaking English.

They practically ran to the nurse’s desk, Marta taking the lead in halting Spanish. “Disculpe, my daughter Nell -- Penelope Rey -- I was told she was here? She -- they said she was in a coma.”

Miguel pushed himself out of his chair to approach them.”You are Nell’s parents?”

“Si -- yes -- sorry, who are you?”

“Lo siento. My name is Miguel. Nell is my friend,” he explained. “We were supposed to meet today, but -- Señora Montero and I found her.” Keep it simple, he reminded himself. Nell’s parents didn’t know about her abilities any more than his parents knew about his. He couldn’t risk letting something slip, even if he felt like he had told the same story a hundred times today. Doing it in English definitely helped, as he now had the excuse not to elaborate too much.

Caro, once introduced, filled in where she could, and after a quick exchange with the reception nurse, the doctor who was to be supervising Nell was summoned.

Maria Alevaria had been a doctor in the ICU for over twenty years, having started her career at
the hospital fresh out of university. She had done her residency there, and over the past two decades
she was reasonably certain that she had seen almost all there was to see. Until today. Nell Rey was a
fascinating, frightening puzzle. How did a young woman in good health suddenly fall into a coma?
So far there had been no evidence of head injuries or drug overdose, and she had no history of
seizures or anything else of the sort, so why? How? Now that Nell’s parents were finally present to
consent to more testing, she intended to find out.

Her first duty was to attempt to calm them, and to explain what she knew. Her English,
thankfully, was much better than their Spanish. They had run basic clinical toxicology tests but each
one had come back negative.

“Of course they did,” Marta Rey insisted. “My daughter would never do drugs. She barely
even drinks!”

Doctor Alevaria chose not to respond to that. She’d heard similar things from a number of
parents, and knew from experience that unfortunately many parents did not know their children as
well as they thought they did. In this case, however, she was correct. “There is nothing in our test
results that suggests any history of drug use or alcohol poisoning. There is a possibility that what
happened to her was caused by a chemical imbalance or an infection of some kind. With your
permission, we would like to do further testing to isolate the cause.”

“Of course,” Nell’s father said with a nod. “Whatever you need. Can… can we see her?”

The doctor nodded.

“Wait! Can we come too?” Miguel asked. “Por favor?”

Marta and Oliver exchanged looks. Nell had mentioned the boy briefly in her letters, or at least
they assumed this was the one she had mentioned who played guitar in the plaza. And if he had not
insisted on Caro opening Nell’s apartment, who knew how long it would have taken someone to find
her. “Ah…sure. Are you sure you want to --”

Miguel nodded stubbornly. She saved his life. He owed her this much at least.

Doctor Alevaria led them down the hall to a room at the far end of the ICU. It was small,
cluttered with monitors, wires, and beeping machines that were visible through the viewing window
set into the wall. In the center of it all was Nell, looking small and fragile in her white hospital gown.
If not for the monitors and wires that surrounded her, it would have appeared that she was merely
sleeping. If Nell could have seen herself like this, Miguel was certain she’d have made some
comment about being a cyborg. He wished she was here to say it.

“She’s in stable condition,” Doctor Alevaria explained, tucking a strand of greying hair behind
her ear. “Her breathing and heartbeat are both strong and regular, but we are keeping her isolated for
now in case her condition was caused by some kind of contagion.”

“Do you think…” Oliver started softly. “Will she ever wake up?”

For a moment Maria remained silent, then she sighed. As comforting as a lie would have been,
she did not want to give them false hope. “I’m afraid it’s too early to say. We still don’t know what
caused this, so we won’t be able to say anything until we run some more tests.”

“Right,” Oliver sighed, running one hand distractedly through his messy brown curls. “Right.
Is…is there some sort of -- of paperwork or something you need us to sign? And the insurance… We
should probably deal with that.”
“You don’t have to do it now,” Doctor Alevaria told him gently. “You can --”

“We want to,” Marta cut her off. “If we sign...you can start sooner, right? We just...we want to know what happened to our little girl.”

Miguel shifted guiltily behind them, glancing back through the window at his friend. Sudden movement within the room had him doing a double-take. For a moment he could have sworn he saw someone else in the room, a woman with pinned-up dark hair, wearing an old-fashioned nurse’s dress.

“¿Estás bien, hijo?” Enrique asked, startling his son when he lay a hand gently on his shoulder.

“Ah...yeah,” Miguel answered, shaking his head. “I just...thought I saw something. A woman.”

“Maybe it was la planchada,” his dad suggested in an attempt at levity. “Mira… I know it’s hard to see her like this, but the doctors are going to do everything they can.”

“Yeah,” Miguel said softly, glancing back at his friend before they followed the doctor back down the hallway. Please be okay, Nell...

Now that Nell’s parents had arrived, Enrique was finally able to convince his son to return home. Miguel retreated almost immediately to his room as his family looked on with concern. He closed the door behind him before dropping back onto his bed and draping one arm over his face. Even spending the day in a hospital waiting room had not been enough time to wrap his mind around all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. Seeing his deceased family members again, being kidnapped by De la Cruz, rolled in a rug and tossed off the edge of the world… All of that would have been more than enough. And then Nell… He curled up on his side as a thick knot of guilt formed in his throat. She would have made it through safely if she’d only let him go. Now she was in a coma and who even knew if -- when, Miguel. When. -- she would wake up.

And then, in the room… He knew he hadn’t been seeing things. There had been someone else in the room with Nell, he was sure of it. But even with the brief glimpse that he had, he knew that something was strange. Nobody wore uniforms like that anymore. She looked like she’d been brought to life from an old ofrenda picture.

Miguel sat up abruptly. ¡Un fantasma! Of course! La planchada, just like his father had said. And he had seen her, plain as day.

La planchada was an old story, one that varied depending on the hospital in which the ghost appeared. There were dozens of theories of who these women had been in life, but most of them appeared to be nurses that served some time between 1930 and 1960. Abel had first told him of the hospital ghosts years ago, but he hadn’t paid much attention then. He had preferred scarier stories, and there was nothing scary about ghostly nurses who cared for and healed the sick.

Healed… Miguel clenched his fists as a desperate hope fired through him. Would she be able to save Nell and bring her spirit home? There was only one way to find out. He kicked off his boots, almost tripping over them in his hurry to hit the light switch. He was back in bed in seconds, pulling
the covers up to his chin and closing his eyes.

There were some places that were not meant to be empty. Hospitals, Miguel felt, were one of them. There were still people present, the occasional night nurse working the desk or taking an occasional tour through the halls, but it was a skeleton crew at best. He wasn’t sure what he would find here tonight, or if he would find anything at all. It wasn’t like he expected the place to be crawling with ghosts, but people did die in hospitals on occasion so it wouldn’t have been that far-fetched to see one or two hanging around. He searched the ICU but found nothing but sleeping patients and a single nurse on the night-shift. The rest of the floor was equally empty. This was getting him nowhere.

He returned to the ICU with his mouth set in a scowl of annoyance. So much for that idea. What did hospital ghosts even do when they weren’t checking on patients? It wasn’t like they needed to take coffee breaks. He sighed, jamming his hands in his pockets as he passed through the wall into Nell’s room. It wasn’t right for her to be so still. The Nell he knew was always moving, sketching in her book or talking animatedly with her hands. She was always laughing, or humming, or sharing some wild bit of obscure information that she’d found while researching. This silence was wrong, unnatural. In this state he could almost feel the lack of what should be there.

What was worse, so much worse, was that it was his fault. If he hadn’t insisted on waiting so far from the gate, if he hadn’t been so slow, they both would have made it home.

“I’m so sorry, Nell.”

“She can’t hear you.”

The sudden voice had him whirling, his defensive instincts yanking him back to his body for a moment before he forced himself back. It was no longer Dia de los Muertos, he reminded himself firmly. He was safe here, and he had to find a way to help Nell. The nurse was still standing in the room when he returned, looking every bit as startled as he felt. Had she still had a physical body, he was sure she would have gone white as, well, a ghost.

“Lo siento,” he said, rubbing his forearm nervously. “Reflex. It’s...it’s been a long couple of days.”

The ghostly woman eyed him curiously. “I saw you this afternoon. What are you doing here? How are you here?” She reached out towards him, then paused. “May I?”

Miguel hesitated. Years of scary ghost stories and his own experience with unfriendly spirits had made him more than a little leary. But she was a nice ghost, he rationalized. Her thing was healing people. She wouldn’t hurt him. He nodded, lifting his own hand in response. They both watched in silence as their fingers met between them.

“How strange,” she said softly. “You are not dead, but you are still a spirit?”

He nodded again. “It’s a long story. Are you... la planchada?”

The nurse’s face screwed up in a vaguely disgruntled expression. “Is that what they are calling me?”

“Ah...yes? Well, kind of,” Miguel amended. “You’re sort of an urban legend here, but I don’t
“Think they know your name.”

“Candela.”

“Qué?”

“My name. It’s Candela.”

“Miguel,” he said with a smile. “Encantadao de conocerte.”

“Likewise.”

“So...how long have you been here?” Miguel asked.

Candela frowned. “I...I don’t know. I’m not always here. I am, but I’m not. Time...I don’t think it works the same for me now.”

“And you can’t leave the hospital?”

“I’ve never tried,” she shrugged. “There is nowhere else I want to go. I was useful here. Just because I’m dead doesn’t mean that I am no longer needed.”

“Do you really heal them? The patients?”

“Sometimes,” Candela answered. “I can’t heal all of them. I wish I could. Not all of them can be healed. But I care for them as best I can, if someone forgets their medication, or if they just need someone to sit with them. There are so many lonely people here.”

Miguel frowned, glancing out towards the empty hallway. “They get forgotten.”

She nodded. She had seen young people brought in barely alive and left to the fates, people with wasting illnesses with families in far-away cities, children whose parents worked every day to pay for their care but who were unable to see them. She gave them what she could, even if it was only a few moments, and hoped that in some small way she had helped.

“Is there... Can you heal her?”

Candela approached the bed, bending over to get a closer look at its occupant. Then she shook her head. “What has happened to her I can’t heal. There is something...missing, something important.”

Miguel sighed, running one hand through his hair. He’d figured as much, but he had to ask.

“How did she come to be like this?” This was not the first person she had seen in a coma, but there was something very different happening here. The spirit was gone, but still attached somehow, enough to keep the body functioning normally.

“Remember that ‘long story’ I mentioned?” Miguel asked with a rueful smile.

He summarized it as best he could, from his discovery of astral projection up to the events of that morning. Candela hung on every word, fascinated. The news she got of the outside world was spotty at best, but this, this was beyond anything she had imagined.

“-- and then I woke up in my own bed,” Miguel finished, slouching back against the door frame. “But when I went to check on Nell...”
“She didn’t make it through.”

He shook his head, turning to glance guiltily at his friend. “I wouldn’t have gotten back at all if it wasn’t for her, and now she’s trapped there because of me.” There were worse places to be, certainly. The Land of the Dead was a beautiful place, and he knew that his family would not abandon Nell while she was there, but fear still gnawed at him. How long would she be able to remain separated from her body? Would she ever be able to come home again? Would she need a photo on an ofrenda in order to cross the bridge again? He made a mental note to put up a photo next year, just in case.

“I...I don’t know if she can come back.” He confessed, his voice a bare whisper in the dark room. Héctor had been twenty-one when he died, with his whole life ahead of him. Nell was only a few years older. “Twenty-five is too young to die.”

“I believe your friend thought the same thing about fourteen.”

Nell’s first real day in the Land of the Dead was an education to say the least. The most important thing that she learned, in her mind, was that Rosita made the best horchata on either side of the marigold bridge. It was something she’d only tried once or twice before, but Nell was sure that after having it here, nothing would ever measure up back home.

“So...how does it work, anyway?” Nell asked as she pulled a wicker basket from under the counter. Wanting to contribute to the household in some way, she had declared herself Rosita’s sous-chef for the day. It was a plan better in theory than in practice, as what food there was could fit in a single cupboard. “Getting food here. Or any of your shoe-making supplies.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing grows here.” She recalled that much from her race through the city. “There’s no grass, no flowers, and the trees are made of metal. So how do we have horchata? Or leather for that matter. I didn’t see any livestock here, but I would assume they would be skeletons too. I know some comes from offerings on the ofrenda, but people don’t generally leave an entire year’s worth of food for their families, do they?”

Rosita laughed. “Oh, no. Who would have the space? Food is more like a special treat here, since we don’t really need to eat. What we have comes only from offerings left on the ofrenda. In terms of the other supplies, this whole world is sustained by memories; those of the living, and ours as well. That’s why our time here continues in much the same way it did when we were alive. Much of what we have here is things that have met the end of their time in the living world, usually things that are flawed or outdated.”

“Does that apply to technology as well?” Nell wondered as she arranged a small handful of pastries in the basket. “Like those ancient computers and the steampunk-y walkie-talkies they use in the Department of Family Reunions?”

“They’re not that out-of-date, are they?”

Nell snickered. “Rosita, my mobile phone has the computing power of every computer in that office combined.”
“Do not tell the twins that,” Rosita cautioned with a small smile. “Because they will try to get their hands on some of the spare parts and who even knows what they will do with them.”

“Make shoe phones like that old tv series? Oh, what was the name… Get Smart?” Her parents had shown her an old episode of that years ago. It was campy as hell, but a lot of fun.

“Oh, they tried that a few years ago.” Rosita shook her head. “It didn’t go particularly well. Mamá Imelda had to ban electronics from their designs for a decade after their last attempt blew the windows out of the workshop.”

“Aw, so no light-up shoes or attempts at hover-boots?”

“Oh, the light-up ones they did. And they worked very well too. The problem was there was no way to turn them off once they were lit, so they glowed like a neon sign all the time. They have an entire closet full of experimental designs.”

Now that Nell was going to have to see at some point. “Does the dead-trend apply to clothing as well?”

“You mean like fashion trends?” Rosita pursed her mouth in thought. “I suppose it does. I never really thought about it that way. Most of us continue dressing as we always did. Styles didn’t change as quickly back in our day.”

“At that time, silhouettes changed almost by the decade rather than by the season, right?” Nell asked, thinking back on the research she’d done for a paper back in university.

Rosita nodded. “The changing styles, those would be followed more by the younger residents, ones who would have arrived in the last few years.”

That would make sense, Nell thought, given the massive shift in material culture in Western society over the last thirty years. She’d always been fascinated by the clothing of different time periods, something that came in particularly handy whenever she did a historical piece. One thing that she had noticed is that for most of the last two hundred years, you could look at a portrait and tell with ease exactly what decade it was from. In that time, people went from having maybe two or three outfits to wear from day-to-day, to having dozens of options. This was especially true once mass-produced clothing became a thing. People no longer had to spend dozens of hours hand-making all of their clothing, or paying to have a tailor custom-make everything. Clothing became less individualized, but more affordable, allowing the average person more opportunities to mix and match pieces to suit their own individual style on any given day. It would make sense that as more of the modern population passed on, that those attitudes towards clothing and material culture would find their way into the Land of the Dead as well.

They fell into companionable silence. Or Nell did, at least. Rosita, she had learned, was a chatterer. It was educational certainly, made up of funny stories about the family, the neighbors, and the city as a whole. So for a time Nell was content to stay quiet and listen. But after a few moments her thoughts drifted back to her own family. Where were her parents now? They would have flown down as soon as they got the news. She wished she had some way to contact them, to tell them that she was alright.

Well, as alright as she could be under the circumstances. She was alive, and she wasn’t alone. That in itself was a blessing. And if things were a little awkward at the breakfast table, well, she was trying. She was the newcomer here, a stranger; one who had joined them under particularly difficult circumstances. It would take time for all of them to adjust. So she buried her fear, her worry, behind a bright smile whenever she was around them. For the most part they seemed to buy it, and as long
as they acted like things were normal, Nell thought that she could too.

Her goal, for now, was to disrupt their routine as little as possible, and if she could be of some help along the way, well so much the better.

“So, do all of the trams lead to Marigold Grand Central Station, or are there, like, different transportation hubs?” She asked casually as the Riveras started filtering towards the workshop.

“Most of them,” Victoria answered with a shrug. “They do call it ‘Grand Central’ for a reason.”

Okay, then. Clearly the Rivera Sass did not skip over Victoria.

“Right. I just...thought I’d maybe drop by the Department of Family Reunions, see if I could help out in the archives.” The idea of just sitting back and waiting for an answer was already driving her up the wall. At least if she was digging in the archives too she could feel like she had some semblance of control.

“Great!” Héctor piped up. “I’ll go with you.”

“What? No, you don’t have to --” Nell protested. “It’s fine, really. I can find my way on my own.”

“Or you could get lost and fall off the end of the world again,” he pointed out.

“Hey, that only happened once. The first time I jumped off on my own.”

“And since we don’t want that happening again, I’m going with you.” Héctor concluded. “We have some orders to deliver down that way anyway.” He glanced towards Julio for confirmation. His son-in-law nodded. “See? Not even going out of my way.”

And now she had no excuses at all. It was both better and worse that it was Héctor who had offered to go along with her. He was such an easy guy to get along with, but after what happened on the cliff, Nell could barely look at him without her stomach knotting with guilt. Apologies couldn’t really fix accidentally revealing that your best friend had not only murdered you, but had been secretly poisoning you for months. “Ah...okay. Great! Thank you.”

“De nada!”

The orders were collected quickly, packed for transport in canvas bags. Héctor took them easily, slinging the strap of his guitar over one shoulder as he went. He paused at the gate, exchanging soft words with Imelda, kissing her gently before stepping away.

“I’ll be back tonight,” he promised with a soft smile. “I promised I would stop by the studio to consult on a new piece. It shouldn’t take too long.”

“I will send Coco if you are late again,” his wife warned, only half-teasing.

“Ay, so little trust!”

“The last time you were asked to ‘consult on a new piece’, you did not come home until morning.” Imelda reminded him, giving his tie a brief tug. “I know how you are, músico.”

“And yet you married me anyway.”

‘Bah! Off with you.” She turned him sharply around, giving him a light push towards the gate.
“And don’t forget to collect the order details from Cici for the next show.”

“Si, si. I won’t forget.”

“I will write it on your arm next time if you don’t.”

It would not have been the first time. Héctor didn’t particularly mind, even if the ink did take forever to scrub off.

Nell snickered as she followed him out into the street. “You guys are so damn cute.”

“Eh?”

“The constant flirting. The banter and the absent little touches. It’s sweet.”

“You act like you’ve never seen two married people flirt before.”

“Not like that,” she answered. “I mean, I’ve caught my grandparents dancing together in the kitchen once or twice, but… I dunno. I wasn’t sure couples like you even existed in real life.” She could see the questions on his face, see him struggling to hold them back. “My parents aren’t super affectionate people. Like, they love each other, and their relationship works for them, but like…they’re not the kind of people to sit together on the couch and cuddle at the end of the day, you know? Mom’s a criminal lawyer and she brings her work home a lot. She either ends up spread out over the kitchen table, or the big chair in the living room. We all just kind of ended up in our own corners. So seeing you guys be all flirty and touchy like that… It’s nice.”

It was nice, especially after the heartache that they had been put through this last century. In a way, they almost had to fall in love with each other all over again. None of them were who they had been when he had left, and decades of habit were hard to break. He had been so hesitant around her those first few months, convinced that one wrong move would cause her to banish him from her life again. Compared to that, the Final Death would have been a mercy. And Imelda’s own guilt over what had happened between them had caused her to be even pricklier than usual. They had both been too afraid to make the first move, to open up and really talk about how they were feeling, and when they finally did it was in a shouting match that had shocked the whole family.

It was like an exorcism of sorts, something painful but necessary. Héctor had finally been able to express the hurt he felt that his wife had ever thought that he could abandon her and Coco, his fear of being abandoned again. What it was like to spend decades losing the people he loved over and over again. He already knew much of Imelda’s side of the story, the hardship of raising a child alone, having to carve out a life for them both so they would not starve. But now she shared her built, her own self-hatred for almost destroying for something that was not his fault. Her own fear that they had changed too much, and that after what she had done to him, she did not deserve to have him back.

They still had their stumbles, their struggles, as all married couples do. But they made a promise to each other that if they were ever feeling anxious or insecure, or had any doubts, that they would not hide or evade. They would talk to each other. Trust each other.

Hearing Nell speak about her parents’ interactions had Héctor frowning. “Wait so your parents don’t talk…?”

“They do, but usually Mom can’t even be seen behind several briefcases, court bundles and case files -- which aren’t even really files. They’re more like giant boxes full of paper. Then when she’s done she is usually too tired, or too crabby, from dealing with others people’s problems all day
to have a sit-down chat,” Nell said, staring ahead and avoiding Hector’s concerned gaze.

“It sounds lonely.”

Nell shrugged, almost too-casual. “You get used to it.”

“Sometimes when she is drowning in orders, I drag Imelda away from the shop, because I haven’t seen her in a day. Isolating yourself like that when you’re in any type of relationship, it’s not good. Before… the Día des Muertos with Miguel, I used to be glad that I had such an open and honest relationship with Imelda. It allowed us to communicate and make time, so I had so many moments with her to think back on when I was alone. It’s important you communicate in a relationship Nell, to make time for those moments, or you’ll find that time is up, and like that,” Héctor snapped his fingers. “They’ll be gone.”

Chapter End Notes

It looks like Miguel's abilities have grown in yet another interesting direction, but at least now he has someone to talk to about it.
Nell is going to take a little longer to get used to her situation, but at least she's trying.

Thanks again for reading!
Chapter 13: Due Process

Marigold Grand Central Station was, to put it lightly, a complete zoo. The entire complex was overflowing with skeletons, dressed in everything from jeans and tee-shirts, to Victorian dresses and suits with massive hats. Somehow seeing all of this in daylight felt so much more incongruent, both more and less real at the same time. Skeletons at night on Día de los Muertos made perfect sense. Seeing skeletons in the middle of the day felt just a little weird, even after a morning with the Riveras. Apparently they felt much the same way about Nell. For the most part everyone was too wrapped up in what they were doing to realize that there was a living spirit among them, but those who did notice could cause quite the disturbance. One skeleton who accidentally bumped into her on the trolley was so startled when he saw her face that he almost flung himself backwards through the open door.

“Ugh, this is going to be the next year, isn’t it,” Nell sighed as they disembarked onto the station platform. “I feel like the elephant man. It’s a good thing dead people can’t technically have heart attacks.” Maybe she should invest in a hooded cloak or something.

“It’s not that bad,” Héctor said reassuringly.

The look she sent him in response was as dry as the autumn leaves back home. “Were you not on the same trolley I was? That one guy literally went to pieces and you had to save a guy from falling out completely. Even if you can’t technically die again, that would still be a hell of a fall.”

Okay, so maybe it was that bad. But that was not what she needed to hear right now. “Hey, it’s okay. Some of these guys, they’ve been here too long. They don’t handle surprises that well. They’ll get used to it. And hey, maybe the archivists found something already. You could be going home before you know it.”

Nell smiled, shaking her head. “Thanks Héctor. And hey, if all else fails, we could always get our hands on a giant stash of shoe polish and paint me up like you did with Miguel.”

“That’s the spirit! Come on. Let’s see what they found.”

They were half-way up the central staircase when Nell paused, then started snickering.

“¿Qué? What’s so funny?”
“You’re the dad friend.” Nell giggled, jogging up the stairs past him.

“The what?”

“The dad friend,” she repeated with a grin. “The one who takes care of everyone. Making sure they don’t get lost, looks after them when they’re drunk and tucks them in with an aspirin and a glass of water so they don’t get hungover, or encouraging them when they’re nervous or upset even when you are as rattled as they are. The caretaker friend.”

“I -- Isn’t that a normal friend thing to do?” He didn’t even think about it, not really. He just...did what was needed. And he was a dad, obviously. Being dead for almost a hundred years would not change that.

“To a point, but you take it to dad-levels.” Nell shrugged. “It’s sweet. And also a little funny because you are technically younger than I am.”

“What? No I’m not,” Héctor protested. “I am way older than you.”

“Technically you are 119 years old,” Nell agreed. “But you are also technically twenty-one. Maybe I should start calling you ‘hermanito’.”

Héctor gaped in mock-outrage, giving her a brotherly shove. “Bah! I don’t think so, niñita. You’ve got a while to go yet.”

They bickered over his supposed age until they get to the front desk. Luckily the receptionist was the same woman who had seen them the day before, so while she did jump a bit when they appeared in front of her, she was not nearly as unsettled as she had been that first morning.

“Ah… hola. Were you looking for Señor Bolivar?” She asked tentatively.

Nell shook her head. “Actually, could you point me towards the archives? Señora Chavez is doing some research for me and I thought I’d try to help.”

The receptionist hesitated. Señora Chavez was notorious for not wanting outsiders in her space, but if she was looking into something for the Living Girl, it had to be important. “They’re down the stairs on the left. Bottom level.”

“Thanks!”

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” Héctor asked her, shifting his grip on the shoe bags. “You don’t have to do this today, you know.”

“I’ll be fine,” she reassured him. “Least this way I can feel like I made some progress. And if we find something, I won’t be sitting at the house waiting for a call.” And it would keep her out of the public view so she could get away from people freaking out at the sight of her face for a while. “Go, deliver the shoes. Make some music. And don’t forget Cici’s order. We don’t want your wife to have to come after you with her sharpie because you forgot again.”

He eyed her measuringly for a moment, then shook his head with a low chuckle. “Si, si. Entiendo. Take it easy today, huh? One of us will come get you tonight.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tonight.”

Now, time to dig through some centuries-old records! She had to admit she was actually a little excited at the prospect. She would be handling documents that had never been seen by living eyes.
Actual primary sources about the history of the Land of the Dead! And she wouldn’t have to worry about wrecking them with finger oils or anything, like she would in the living world. Nell skipped down the stairs, following the papel picado-like directional signs to the lower levels of the building. About three floors down the white-washed walls were replaced with smooth, cut stone, with large glyphs carved in every few feet.

_I must be down to the pyramid level_, Nell mused as she reached the bottom of the stairs. It wasn’t just that everything around her looked old, but it felt old as well. There was a weight here, and a settled kind of quiet. This wasn’t a place that people came to much anymore. Except for Señora Chavez and the other archivists. There was only one office on that level that Nell could see, marked with a single square glyph, and another papel picado sign marked “Archives.”

Nell took a steadying breath and knocked on the door.

There was a muffled sigh from inside. “Ugh… ¿Qué deseas? I swear to Mictēcacihuātl, if one of you boneheads misplaced another of my eighteenth century journals, I will speed you on your way to your Final Death myself.”

Ah. That might be another reason why people didn’t come down here too much.

“Ah… lo siento. Señora Chavez? It’s Nell.”


Hesitantly she opened the door. “Ah...hi. Sorry. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“If you talked to anyone upstairs, they’d probably tell you I’ve been disturbed for centuries.” Lina snorted, not looking up from the heavy, hand-bound book she was paging through. “What do you want?”

“I thought I’d see if you wanted any help going through the records.”

Lina glanced up at her, setting the book down on her already-messy desk. “Why?”

“Because sitting around waiting for an answer might actually kill me, and placing myself equivalently under house arrest for the next year is about the only thing worse than people screaming when they see my face when I go outside,” Nell replied, leaning back against the door-frame with a huff and running one hand agitatedly through her hair.

The archivist sighed. “Fine, but if you break anything or screw up my filing system –”

“You have my permission to chuck me off a pyramid. _Claro._”

Lina snorted. “_Bueno._ So, how’s your Nahuatl?”

“My...what?”

“Well, that answers that question.” She shoved herself away from the desk, tucking the book she’d been reading under one arm and heading out into the hallway. “No Aztec texts for you. Come on, I’ll give you a tour.”

The archive itself was massive and seemed to go on forever. There were entire chambers dedicated to different periods of history. The Aztec and Mayan records each got their own separate rooms on opposite ends of the hall, and each room after that seemed to correspond with the different levels of the towers that made up the city. After that….well, Nell did not understand the system at all.
Apparently the Dewey Decimal system had not yet made its way down to the Land of the Dead. She quickly resolved to bring a stash of hair ribbons or scrap paper so she could mark the places of the volumes that she took.

“Now best guess, the last nagual to cross over the bridge would have been...fifteenth or sixteenth century?” Lina said, heading to one of the heavy built-in shelves on the right side of the room. “Probably?”

So it hadn’t been a fluke the last time. Well, that answered one question, and raised a few hundred more. “Were nagual more common back then? And how does that work? Like, is it some sort of recessive gene or is it a luck-of-the-draw kind of power manifestation?”

“Couldn’t tell you,” she answered with a shrug. “Never met any when I was alive. Or not any real ones. I don’t think. Oh there were plenty who claimed they had these special abilities and demanded special treatment, but I always thought that the most vocal were the ones with the least ability. And nagual was more of a blanket term, really. It could refer to the spirit form of the person, or to their guide, and later on it became synonymous with a kind of brujo. It was said that they could travel in spirit form, leaving their physical bodies behind -- something that you have most certainly confirmed. But whether it is a hereditary trait, I couldn’t say.”

“Scared the crap out of me, first time I did it,” Nell said with a wry smirk. “Gave Miguel a pretty big shock too.”

“The Rivera kid. What a nightmare of paperwork that was. People stealing offerings is one thing, but actually getting cursed? That one is pretty rare.” Lina pulled a selection of books from the shelf, stuffing them into Nell’s hands. “Okay. Start with these. Thank Tezcatlipoca that at least some of these guys were bilingual. There aren’t many down here who can read the old languages anymore, and having to go through the whole thing myself would be a bitch.”

“How many languages do you speak?” Nell wondered. “And what about the other archivists?”

“Bah! Like I would trust these records in their hands. Anything post-seventeenth-century sure, but they’re useless when it comes to filing the earlier records. They’re taking care of the everyday stuff while I deal with this mess.” Lina grabbed another selection for herself, several covered in some kind of glyphs. “And I speak 9 languages fluently. I’m a little rusty on some of the Mayan dialects so I didn’t count those.”

Nell goggled. Nine?! There were at least a couple dozen Mayan dialects, according to the research she’d done a few weeks before. How many did she consider herself ‘rusty’ in? Nell herself only spoke two languages, three if you counted high school French -- which she didn’t. “Did you learn all of those when you were down here?”

The archivist shook her head. “I re-learned them. Some of them. I was… a translator, once. A long time ago. Pull up some ground, niñita. This could take a while.”

The other girl shook her head, sitting down and leaning back against the bookcase opposite. “Is that going to be my official nickname now? I’m not that young, you know.”

Lina smirked, gently opening the cover of the delicate manuscript she carried. What Nell had first taken to be a regular book was in fact a single long piece of parchment, accordion-folded and bound into a leather cover like restaurant menu, with long loops of leather cording. “Almost everyone here is young compared to me. Twenty-odd years is nothing.”
Nell bit her lip, her gaze running analytically over her companion. She dearly wanted to ask how old Lina really was, but got the distinct impression that it was not something she would get the answer to. But that didn’t mean that she couldn’t try to figure it out for herself. After they figured out how to get her home.

Héctor was later than he’d hoped to be. Imelda had to send Coco to get him again -- a wise plan, as his daughter stood by far the best chance of pulling him away from whatever song he was working on. But hey, at least he had remembered to get all of the details for the performers’ shoe commissions this time. The sharpie could stay safely holstered in his wife’s apron.

Coco’s appearance had been met with cheers all around. She was always a favorite when she visited (Of course she was. Who wouldn’t love his Coco?), which in itself brought a bit of a delay. Everyone wanted to say hello, catch up. Even after promising to return later in the week, it took some time for them to get out the door.

The night was warm, with just a hint of a breeze cooling the crowded streets. Marigold Grand Central was as crowded as always, but the Department of Family Reunions building was fairly quiet by comparison. There was the usual number of people here to greet newly-arrived family members, but it was nowhere near as packed as it had been on Día de los Muertos. They took the stairway down to the archives, pausing at the last landing when they heard some very angry-sounding English coming from down the hall.

“-- fucking -- ugh. How was anyone supposed to read this? Frick. Colonial Spanish is even harder to read than Tudor English, and that was fucking brutal. Why did nobody think to write a damn dictionary for this crap?”

“The first Spanish dictionary was printed in 1611.”

“That’s not exactly helpful when the book I’m reading predates it by a century.”

“Oh, stop your whining. At least they had an actual alphabet. Try reading Zapoteco and see how far you get.” Another voice retorted. “And when did you ever have to read Tudor English? You’re, like, twelve.”

“ Took a class on material culture when I was in university. Spent a class looking at the kind of things people would will down to their descendants. One person left their son’s family a set of bedsheets, only they spelled it as ‘shits.’” Nell snickered.

“The other voice let out a bark of laughter. “Ha! Classic.”

Coco and Héctor followed the voices to a room almost halfway down the hall. Nell sprawled in the floor beside a massive stone bookshelf, a thin, leather-bound volume held gently in her hands. Lina the archivist was somewhere behind her, just barely visible in the dim lantern light, shelving an armful of books. Coco knocked lightly on the carved stone door frame. Nell looked up, blinked at them, then grinned. “Oh, hey! What are you guys doing here?”

“You’ve been here for almost eight hours, mija,” Coco said, laughing when she saw Nell’s eyes bug out.
“What? Seriously? That can’t be --” But when she tried to push herself up she dropped back to the floor with a groan. “Okay. Yeah. I can believe that.” Stiffly she pushed herself upright, dusting off her clothes. “Hey Lina, where do you want me to put this?”

“Just give it here,” she said, returning from the front of the shelf to take the book. “You’ll never put it back right.”

“You know, people might actually be able to put things back where they belonged if your filing system was not determined by a dart board, a roulette wheel, and a blood sacrifice.”

“Bah! Get on with you,” Lina scoffed, giving Nell a shove towards the door. “Go bother someone else for a while.”

“Yeah, yeah. You know you love me.” Nell laughed, sticking her tongue out teasingly. “If you didn’t, you’d have dropped me off a pyramid hours ago.”

“I still might.”

“Well, there’s always tomorrow.” Still chuckling, Nell joined the others in the hall. “Sorry, guys. Kind of lost track of time there.”

“Did you find anything?” Coco asked as they made their was back up the stairs.

She shook her head, letting out a soft sigh. “Not yet. We’ve narrowed down an approximate time-frame to look in, but nothing we’ve read so far references any living spirits crossing the bridge.” And with easily another couple century’s worth of records to go through, it could be ages before they found anything at all.

“Hey, it will be okay,” Héctor said, laying one hand reassuringly on her shoulder. “You’ll find something.”

She hoped so. And that it wouldn’t be too late when they did.

Nell tried to keep her head up that night, really she did. And for the most part it worked. She chatted with Coco and Héctor about the things she had found in the old records, learned about the show that Héctor was helping out with, and the designs that Coco and the other Riveras would be doing for the dancers’ shoes. But as the trolley approached their stop, she found her enthusiasm flagging. You can only act like everything was normal for so long before the knowledge that nothing was normal snuck up and clobbered you over the head again. What made it worse was how hard the Riveras were working to make it look like it wasn’t an issue, which just seemed to underline how big an issue it actually was.

The whole family gathered in the living room, spreading out over every available surface. Coco and Julio shared the loveseat, content to snuggle and just be in each other’s company. Oscar and Filipe hunched over a notebook on the coffee table. Imelda sat on the couch, reviewing the account book as Héctor perched on the arm of the couch next to her, picking out an absent tune on his guitar. Victoria and Rosita each had their own chairs and a book in their hands. Rosita was a big fan of romance novels and, surprisingly, true crime accounts. Victoria’s collection was mostly history-based, though tonight she had gone for a more contemporary thriller. It took less than five minutes for Nell to figure out that spending the whole evening in close quarters like this was an
aberration. Most of the family spent the whole day together in the workshop, so of course the evening would be their personal time.

Nell appreciated the company, even if she felt guilty for robbing them of their evening. She had begged some scrap paper and pencils from the shop, and spent the next couple of hours doing studies of the family. Watching the constant shift of the facial bones was fascinating. Their faces, despite being made of solid bone, were somehow elastic, and moved as if the muscles and tissue that allowed such movement in life were still a part of it. The brow bone should not furrow when they frowned, and how bone lips were a thing she would never understand. It also made her question the mechanics of other actions that she had to very quickly force her mind away from.

Yeah… Do not go there. Keep your mind well away from thoughts of skeleton boning.

It was almost a relief when they heard the distinctive jingle of the doorbell at the gate. The Riveras exchanged looks. Who could possibly be calling this late? The shop had been closed for hours.

The twins pushed themselves to their feet and left the room, returning a few minutes later with a pair of uniformed police officers in tow. One was stocky for a skeleton, with rose-colored dots framing his eyes and green fern-like branches along his cheekbones. The other wasn’t much taller, and had a golden band of laurel leaves across her brow like an ancient crown. Though they stood with a determined kind of posture, they both looked like they’d had a long couple of days.

“Ah… Everyone, this is Officer Vega --”

“-- and Officer Flores,” Oscar finished. “They want to ask about --”

“-- what happened on Día de los Muertos.”

Héctor, who had stiffened noticeably the moment the cops stepped into the room, flexed his fingers over the fretboard of his guitar, willing himself to relax. With his many less-than-legal attempts at crossing the bridge over the last century, his relationship with local law enforcement had been strained at best. He’d had very few interactions with them that did not involve him being in some kind of trouble, and every one of them had been in the last two years. Cálmese, he told himself firmly. They aren’t here for you. Not to arrest him, anyway. No, they were here to ask about what happened with Ernesto, which was both better and so much worse.

“We’d like to collect a statement from each of you,” Officer Flores explained, her gaze travelling over the assembled Riveras, doing a barely-noticeable double-take when she saw Nell seated behind the coffee table. “There is a warrant out for the arrest of Ernesto De la Cruz, and we want to be sure that we have a complete account of what happened by the time he is brought in.”

“There has been a warrant out for his arrest for two years,” Imelda pointed out sharply. “Ever since one of your officers let him escape.”

“The officer responsible for that has been relieved from duty,” Officer Vega informed them. “After that grievous lapse in judgement, we want to make absolutely sure that there is no room for error this time around. We want De la Cruz to pay for his crimes every bit as much as you do.”

Doubtful, but the sentiment was appreciated.

“We’d like to speak with you one at a time, if that’s possible,” Officer Flores continued. “Is there a space where we can do that?”

The Riveras exchanged looks.
“The kitchen would probably be best,” Victoria said after a moment.

There was a moment of silence, then Officer Flores cleared her throat. “Right. So… Whenever you’re ready,” she said.

Nell pushed herself to her feet. “I guess...maybe I should go first. I’ll show you to the kitchen.”

She could feel their eyes burning into the back of her head as she led them across the courtyard to the family kitchen. Neither of them had said a word, but they didn’t have to. Each unasked question was a deafening shout in the evening air. When they reached the kitchen, Nell closed the door behind them.

“So, um...take a seat, I guess?” She suggested, gesturing towards the solid wooden table at the center of the room. From what she had seen, the kitchen itself was rarely used given the lack of food in the Land of the Dead, but served more as a place of family discussion. “Sorry. This is weird. I feel like I’m taking the lead here but it’s not even my house.”

“The Riveras are letting you live with them while you’re here?” Officer Vega confirmed as he and his partner arranged themselves across the table from Nell.

“Yeah. They’ve kind of unofficially adopted me after what happened.” She knew that the blame for this whole mess rested on De la Cruz’s shoulders, but she couldn’t help but still feel somewhat responsible. And now, after all they’ve already been through, the Riveras had a relative stranger staying with them for the next year. She still felt guilty about that. “They didn’t have to. But...I’m really grateful that they did.”

Officer Vega pulled a tattered-looking notebook from his pocket. He and Officer Flores had already listened to the recording taken in the Family Grievances offices the morning after the incident. Now they wanted to get their own impressions, and clarify some of the details. “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Nell’s mouth curved in a wry sort of smile. “How far back do you want me to go?”

“Let’s start with the evening of Día de los Muertos, and go from there.”

Nell sighed, dropping into one of the old wooden chairs. “Okay. I planned to meet Miguel a little after midnight…” She told them everything, the plan to astral project in hopes of reuniting Miguel with his deceased family, her own introduction to them, to the moment they realized Miguel had been taken.

“Did you know it was De la Cruz at the time?” Officer Flores asked.

Nell shook her head. “Not then. I just saw him slung over the shoulder of a big guy in a dark jacket, and ran after them.”

“Across the bridge?”

She nodded before describing the chase across the bridge, and the moment she realized it was De la Cruz who had her friend. How scared she was because she knew the history between them. The search across the city and her reunion with Buttons, and the pyramid at the end of the world. At this the officers exchanged looks. They had visited the site themselves in search of evidence, combed every inch of it in search of De la Cruz. There had been nothing left behind but footprints in the dust and a few scraps of black cloth.

“And what happened then?”
Nell sighed, rolling the hem of her dress nervously between her fingertips. She had been dreading this part. “Ernesto would have tossed Miguel off the cliff the moment he saw Héctor or Imelda, so we decided I should distract him. I went through the pyramid while the others went around the side…”

This was what they had been waiting for, the part of the story that had been skimmed over in the initial recording. Now, hearing it at last, they could understand why. They had known Ernesto De la Cruz was a thief and a murderer, but the repeated poisoning of a person just to keep them with you was something none of them had expected. Nell fought to keep her voice steady, hands clenched in white-knuckled fists under the table as she recounted Ernesto’s admission, and when she told them how he had flung Miguel off the edge, both officers jolted.

“Pepita caught him, then circled back for us.”

The rest they knew. That De la Cruz had pulled her back, and that she had been rescued by her own alebrije, who took her back to the bridge. And her final decision to throw Miguel through the barrier as the bridge collapsed beneath her.

“And then...yeah. Here we are,” Nell finished lamely. “Don’t know how long I’m here for, what’s happening to my physical body, or how long I can be separated from it... Lina -- she’s the head archivist at the Department of Family Reunions -- she said I should be able to cross back over next year but…” There was no way to know for sure if she’d even last that long.

By unspoken agreement, Héctor and Imelda chose to speak to the officers together. They entered the kitchen with their hands entwined. They had faced this separately for too long. Whatever came next, they would face it together. Héctor was grateful for the support. He tried to step back, to separate himself from the pain and the betrayal, but every word was like tearing off a bandage from a wound that had only barely begun to scab over.

“And when you saw him on the cliffs,” Officer Vera asked. “How did he look?”

“How did he look? What kind of question is that?” Imelda frowned.


“He was...impatient,” Héctor answered softly. He could see it now, if he let himself. “Nervous.”

Imelda shot him a questioning look. Standing at the edge of the world, she hadn’t seen a hint of nerves. She had never trusted Ernesto. There was something about him that has always rubbed her the wrong way. But Héctor had known Ernesto almost his whole life. If there was anyone who knew those small gestures, it was him.

“His fingers twitched,” Héctor recalled. “Left hand. They always did that when he was nervous. I don’t know if he ever realized.” There was something surreal about seeing those old familiar gestures after all that had passed between them. For a moment he could almost believe that the Ernesto he knew was still in there. But he knew better. This was what had lived inside of him all along.

“Anything else?” Officer Flores asked.
They took the officers through every word, every absent gesture. Hollow-voiced, Héctor recounted Nell’s attempts at a distraction. His stomach churned at the memory, non-existent but somehow every bit as painful as they day he died.

“And how did he react when he saw you?”

The same as he always had when caught in a lie. He had excused and justified and tried to turn it around on him, just as he always had. It’s not my fault. They made me. This would not have happened if... How many time had Héctor heard variations of that same tune? And as Ernesto did every time he was denied, he became angry. Héctor could see it in his face when Imelda stepped out to join him. His wife had always been able to see through Ernesto’s excuses, Héctor remembered. It was why they had never gotten along. Héctor had blamed it on a clashing of strong personalities, the filter of a life-long friendship blurring what his wife had seen all too clearly. But none of them could ever have suspected how deep Ernesto’s selfishness had run.

The rest of the interview passed in a blur. They took the officers through the flight back to the bridge, and Miguel and Nell’s desperate race to the other side. When at last they were satisfied, Héctor and Imelda returned to the living room, dropping onto the couch as Oscar and Filipe headed out for their turn. Coco moved from the love seat to sit next to her parents, leaning into her father’s side. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close and holding her tightly. Ernesto’s words from the cliffside echoed in his thoughts.

I should have just let you go, maybe even gone back with you for a time... And then killed your bitch and the squalling brat myself.

Just the memory of it had him holding her closer. Far better for Ernesto to have murdered him that night than for him to return to Santa Cecilia to harm his family. Héctor would gladly live the past century a hundred times over if it meant keeping them safe. Imelda, sensing the direction his thoughts have turned, rubbed her thumb comfortingly over the finger of the hand that she still held. That seemed to soothe him somewhat, that tangible reminder that they were safe, and they were together. De la Cruz would not separate them again.

Chapter End Notes

And there is chapter thirteen!

Join us next week when we check in with Miguel on the living side of the bridge!

As always, thanks for reading!
Chapter 14: A Step in the Right Direction

Chapter Summary

Nell makes an unsettling discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14: A Step in the Right Direction

“No change since yesterday.”

Miguel sighed, running one hand distractedly through his hair as he leaned back against the wall. “I know. Gracias Candela.”

The nurse ruffled his hair fondly, sliding down the wall to sit beside him. “Her parents visit every day. They have been talking with the doctors about transferring her to a different hospital.”

“Back in Canada,” Miguel said with a small nod. “Something about better physiotherapy.”

They’d talked about it extensively during past visits. Candela may have been dead for decades, but haunting a hospital had kept her pretty up-to-date on modern medical knowledge. Assuming that Nell could return to her body next year, it would take months of physical therapy for her to even walk again. Physical therapy during treatment would make a huge difference, but there was only so much that could be done if the body was inactive for so long. And the fact was that Nell’s parents could not stay in Santa Cecilia forever. They had been living in Nell’s apartment since their arrival, but taking a full year’s leave off of work would not be feasible for either of them. Moving Nell back home would probably be for the best, but Miguel still worried. What if something happened while they were moving her? Would he be able to visit her there, or if he could only project to places that he had been before. And the chances of there being another hospital ghost in the hospital they moved her to was infinitesimally small, so he would have no way of knowing if anything changed.

“Thank you,” Miguel said after a minute. “For watching over her for me.”

“De nada,” Candela replied. “You are a good friend, Miguel. She is lucky to have you looking out for her.”

He ducked his head shyly. “We look out for each other.” She had gone after him when he had been taken into the Land of the Dead, had made sure that he was able to come home even though it meant that she might not be able to. He owed her this much. And even if she hadn’t risked everything to save him, that was what friends did, wasn’t it?
Working with Lina in the archives had to be the most interesting and most frustrating experience of Nell’s life. There was a weird sense of pride in the idea that she was reading text that no living human had ever touched, but with each day that passed without finding anything relevant to her problem, her enthusiasm began to wane. She had figured that nagual were pretty rare, but in the records they seemed almost non-existent, with only one passing reference to them after days of research. And even then it was in reference to a nagual that the writer had known in life. Nothing at all about a living spirit crossing the bridge.

And then there was the archivist herself. Lina was prickly, with walls up higher than the gates of Troy. It made Nell question how old she really was. It was known within the Department that Lina was one of the oldest spirits in the Land of the Dead, but that could mean a great many things. It was something Nell pondered whenever she took a break from reading. There was a look in her eyes sometimes when she read, the kind of sorrow of a soul that had seen far too much. And then there was her clothing. Most of the spirits here dressed in the same manner that they did when they were alive, but Lina seemed to do the exact opposite. Except, perhaps, for the doublet that she wore as a jacket, and the soft black velvet cap. Those Nell recognized as being approximately fifteenth-century in origin. In that way they complimented the bright blue, red, and green calavera markings on the archivist’s face, which bore some resemblance to the carvings Nell had seen on the pyramids of the lower levels.

Could she really be over five hundred years old? Who had she been in life that she was still remembered even centuries later?

“...is Lina your real name?” Nell asked suddenly.

Lina froze, her fingers flexing against the cover of the book she was holding, pointedly keeping her gaze locked on its’ pages. “Close enough to it.”

Interesting. She hadn’t even been sure Lina would answer her. “What--”

“I found something.”

“Wait, what?” Nell scrambled to her knees, crossing the aisle to get a better look.

Lina laid the book flat across her lap, pointing at a series of pictograms on the page. “These ones here, they’re a reference to nagual. That one is Mictēcacihuātl, and the mictlan -- the Land of the Dead.”

“So another living spirit really did cross over here,” Nell breathed. She had been starting to wonder if she had been the only one.

“Like you, they didn’t make it back before sunrise. It doesn’t look like they knew about the deadline. They didn’t even try. And when they did…”

“They couldn’t cross back. What happened? Did they make it home?”

Lina shook her head, turning the page. “He was here for barely a week before he changed.” She held up her own bony hand in illustration.

Nell sat back against the bookshelf, scrubbing her hands over her face. A week. It had already been six days. Would she really die tomorrow? “Did they say why?”

Lina shook her head. “Doesn’t say. And the chances of them still being Remembered are
small. And if I don’t know them…”

“They’re probably gone,” Nell finished with a sigh. “How many fifteenth-century spirits are still hanging around?”

“Not a lot,” Lina admitted. “The ones that are...well, we don’t get along that well.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Lina said, waving her off. “Didn’t know those blowhards when I was alive, and now that I’m dead I see I haven’t missed much. Bunch of stuck-up *pendejos*.”

“They’re just jealous because they aren’t as cool as you are.”

The archivist let out a snort of laughter. “Yeah, sure. Let’s go with that.” It was certainly preferable to the truth. You made your choices, she reminded herself. You survived. No point in questioning it now. She cleared her throat, closing the book in her lap. “So what are you going to tell them?”


Lina looked at her sharply. “You’re not going to tell them anything at all? Don’t you think they deserve to know?”

“I don’t want to worry them,” she said softly. “They’ve been through enough. And if it is my last day, I want it to be normal. And we don’t know for sure. We’ve only found one case so far. Maybe...maybe someone made it back.”

Nell dove into the reading with renewed determination. They had found one record, so surely there had to be more. And indeed she came across what she was sure was another reference a couple of hours later. Another man who had fallen asleep one night and never woke up again. This one lasted only five days. Nell almost threw the book across the room in frustration, restrained only by her own respect for the artifact and the knowledge that Lina would not hesitate to throw her from the top of the nearest tower if she damaged one of the irreplaceable books.

She read until her eyes began to cross and didn’t even notice when Victoria stepped into the room.

Victoria, whose eyes instantly took on a covetous gleam behind her glasses as she gazed over the packed shelves of historical records. She’d had a deep love of history and adventure stories ever since she was a child -- something her packed bookshelves could most certainly attest to. One of the best things about the Land of the Dead was that most of the writers had first-hand experience in the eras that they wrote about. Now, seeing this wealth of knowledge spread out before her, she questioned why she had never set foot in the city archives before today.

She stepped towards the shelves, then stopped herself, shaking her head. No reading, she reminded herself firmly. If she started now then neither of them would get home and Mamá would have to send out a search party.

“Wouldn’t go for that one if I were you. Veracruz is dry as the desert,” said a sudden voice from behind her.
Victoria stepped aside with a small frown. “¿Perdón?"

“The book you were looking at. Fourth shelf, green cover. Trust me, you’d be bored to tears by the end of the first page,” Lina said, moving past her to re-shelve a book that had been put in the wrong place. “Castillo is better if you’re into the sixteenth century, and wasn’t as much of a complete pendejo as some of those other tontos. You’re here for the kid, right?”

She blinked, caught off guard by the sudden change in subject. “Ah...yes. I’m --”

“Victoria, right?” Lina moved around the shelf to where a pair of not-bony legs were just visible on the floor, and nudged them with her boot. “Oi, your escort’s here.”

“Just one more page.”

“I don’t think so, niñita. I’m not falling for that again.”

“Still bigger than you,” Nell reminded her as she sat up.

“Still younger than me,” Lina retorted, taking the book from her hand. “Way younger. You’re little compared to your friend here, too.”

“My -- Oh! Hey, Victoria!” Nell immediately pasted a bright smile on her face. “Didn’t expect to see you down here.”

“I was running errands this afternoon so I was closest, and Mamá had suggested that I might want to take a look at the archives while I was here,” she shrugged.

“I can’t believe you haven’t been down here before. Victoria’s book collection rivals mine back home,” Nell told Lina. “And it’s almost all history.”

Lina raised one bony brow in interest. “Novels or contemporary accounts?”

“Both.” As many as she could get her hands on.

The archivist nodded her approval. “You’ve got good taste. Now get this kid out of here before she falls over.”

“Hey!” Nell laughed as Lina shoved her out the door. “Rude!”

“What can I say, they hired me for my people skills. Now get out of here. Take it easy tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sure thing, Mamá.”

“I am not your mother. Gracias a Dios.”

Laughing, Nell shook her head and started off down the hall.

Victoria hung back. “Did something happen?” She asked when she was sure Nell was out of earshot.

So she’d caught that, did she? Good. “You’ll have to ask her.”

“You found something,” she realized, and if they were keeping so tight-lipped about it, she doubted it was something good.
“She has time,” Lina told her quietly, dark eyes glancing towards the stairs in case Nell had turned back. She had not technically lied. There was still time. But how much of it she had…

Victoria pursed her mouth and gave a short nod of understanding. “Gracias.”

“De nada.”

For a moment they stood silent, their eyes meeting across the threshold, then Lina stepped back, shaking her head. “It was good to meet you, Victoria. Maybe I’ll see you around some time.”

And she disappeared back into the shelves.

Victoria stared after her for a moment, then pushed up her glasses and headed back up the the ground floor where Nell was waiting for her.

“Hey, what took so long?” Nell asked, straightening from where she leaned against the wall.

“Nothing,” Victoria answered. “She wanted to recommend a book.”

“I bow to her expertise. I swear she’s read every single book in the archive. I think you two would get along really well.”

Victoria shrugged noncommittally as they made their way out the front door. “Did you find anything useful today?” She asked, her voice deliberately casual.

There was an almost imperceptible pause, then Nell shook her head. “Nothing. And I’m limited to the colonial and post-colonial records because I can’t read any of the Aztec or Mayan stuff, which is where the answers probably are.”

Victoria did not believe her for a moment. Oh, she was sure that Nell could not read a single word of nahuatl, but she was absolutely convinced now that the girl had found something, and her unwillingness to share it just underscored how serious it must be. “Not a single reference at all to living spirits crossing the bridge?”

“Not one.” Technically that was not a lie. Two references was not one.

Victoria watched the girl out of the corner of her eye the entire way back to the house. Every far-away look, every fallen expression when another spirit jerked away from her, every too-bright smile she absorbed in silence. She watched Nell continue this way even after reaching the house, full of bright chatter, never staying in one place for longer than a few minutes. This, at least, seemed to break the rest of the family of the stiffness that had fallen over them the last few nights.

There was music tonight, more than the absent tinkering that had been done lately. The rebuilding of Héctor and Imelda’s relationship had been slow, a re-learning of each other and who they had grown to be over the last century. Decades worth of habits die hard. They were hesitant at first, but there were moments of such sweetness that broke up the sorrow and regret and painful awkwardness, that made it that much better when they finally came together again. Héctor, to nobody’s surprise, was a hopeless romantic, and was known to improvise silly little songs to flirt with his wife, or just to tease the family when he was happy. And Imelda -- Well, after that fateful Día de los Muertos two years ago, it was as if she had finally unlocked a door inside of herself that had been closed for far too long. She no longer cringed at the sound of a neighbor’s radio, but sang along in a ringing harmony that brought passers-by to a standstill.

It had become a much happier neighborhood now that nobody had to worry about getting smacked with a boot for humming.
Coco remembered a time when she would sneak away from the house under the guise of doing errands to watch the dancers at Mariachi Plaza. Oh, how she had envied them that freedom. It had taken her months to work up the courage to try some of the steps herself. And every time she had to be on the lookout in case her Mamá came looking for her. Now her Mamá danced with her, something she hadn’t done since Coco was a child.

When her Papá had left on that fateful tour, it was as if he had taken the heart of their family with them. Coco didn’t think she saw her mother really smile again since. Not until their reunion in the Land of the Dead. Learning the truth of what had happened to her father had been heartbreaking, and that it was her Tío Nesto that had taken him away from her… Well, it was probably better for him that the police hadn’t yet found him at that time. It still struck her, now and again, how very young her father had been when he died, and how much time he was robbed of. That they were robbed of. Because of one man’s selfishness, her father never got to see her grow up. He never got to play at her wedding, never got to be the wonderful abuelito to her girls that she knew he would have been. He never got to be part of the thousand beautiful little moments that made up a lifetime.

Her family was together again now, a blessing she had never been sure that she would have. Her Tía Rosita talking books with her sweet daughter Victoria, her Tios Oscar and Filipe off conspiring in the doorway of the workshop. Her Mamá and Papá, together again at last, their voices raised in song. And there was her Julio, her best friend and the love of her very long life. Losing him had been devastating, and even though she told herself they would meet again, there was a part of her that doubted. He was the first of her family to greet her in the Land of the Dead, and when she was finally in his arms again, it felt at last like coming home.

As she and her mother spun around each other, she caught a glimpse of him out of the corner of her eye, talking with their daughter, not far from their latest addition at the edge of the courtyard.

A living spirit. She didn’t think that was possible. But then, she hadn’t thought that curses were possible either, but her great-grandson had certainly proved her wrong there. And hadn’t that been a shock, learning what he had been through that night. He had brought her father back to her, brought music back to their family. There were no words to express her pride in him, or her gratitude. And though she was able to see him again on Día de los Muertos, she thought she’d have to wait until his own passing before she would be able to thank him. But her Miguelito proved to be more full of surprises than any of them had ever guessed. She wasn’t sure which of them was more surprised to see him this year. It was another kind of miracle, to allow her to hold her great-grandson again.

They had almost lost him again that night. Would have for certain had it not been for that girl. Saving Miguel had come at a price, one that Nell was still paying. How long could a living spirit last in the Land of the Dead? How long could they all pretend that everything was okay before something snapped?

She linked eyes with Julio, who gave her his calm knowing smile, as though he could tell what she was thinking. He nodded, and crossed over to Nell who was leaning against the wall, observing them. There was that distant sadness in her eyes, which had been omnipresent since she had been viciously pulled away from her living life. She tried to play it off, but it was not difficult to see. As Mamá whisked her around, Coco lost sight of her husband and their friend, but she didn’t need to see to know what Julio was going to do. She hoped that whatever her amor was going to say to the lost artist, that maybe it might help her feel a bit less lost.
Julio stood next to Nell, thumbs tucked casually into the pockets of his trousers. “The first time I ever saw my Coco, she was dancing in Mariachi Plaza,” Julio confided, watching his wife fondly as she and her mother spun lightly through the courtyard. “She danced with such joy… I’d never seen anything so beautiful. I was so nervous, it took me days to get up the courage to finally ask her to dance with me.”

“Love at first sight,” Nell commented with a small smile. It wasn’t something she believed in anymore -- attraction at first sight, certainly, but not love. But in their case, she could definitely believe it.

“Close enough to it.” She’d never danced with a partner before, he remembered. But the trodden-on toes and awkward tripping had been nothing when compared to the light that dancing put in her eyes, and he knew in an instant that he would do whatever he could to keep it there. Setting aside his trade skills to become an apprentice shoemaker had been easy. Giving up music… Well, that had been much harder, especially as his Coco loved it so. And he swore he would spend every day of his life trying to give her back the light that the music ban had robbed her of.

“You suit each other,” Nell said after a moment. “Like, you seem really...together. Like you were made for each other. I don’t know how else to say it.”

Julio tugged the brim of his hat shyly down over his eyes, beaming with pleasure. “Gracias.”

Nell smiled. What an absolute sweetheart. Coco was a lucky woman. “Oh, she’s looking this way,” she teased, nudging him with her elbow. “She’s coming over!”

Coco danced over to them, taking her husband by the hand and pulling him in to join her. They spun around the courtyard, giggling like teenagers. Rosita cheered, clapping her hands as her brother and his wife skipped over the cobblestones.

Nell grinned, leaning back against the wall as she watched them. She had to admit, Coco and Julio had the moves. Every step seemed as simple and natural as breathing. She was small enough to envy that. Not that she wasn’t happy for them, of course. She was. But it made her a little wistful. She’d been out of the dating pool for a couple of years, by her own choice, and most of the time she was completely okay with that. She didn’t need a partner to complete her. She has -- had? -- work she loves, friends she loves. Romance had fallen aside into the “someday” category, but now… Would she even get a “someday” anymore?

Lowkey jealousy clicked up a notch as Imelda’s voice joined her husband’s. Where do you even find someone like that?

“You know, I’ve always wanted that,” she confessed as Victoria and Rosita moved to stand beside her. She shook her head, smiling ruefully as she watched Héctor and Imelda play off each other. “It’s silly, and I blame it entirely on too many Disney movies as a kid. But I always wanted to meet someone who would sing with me like that.”

Rosita frowned. “Don’t you have somebody back home?”

She shook her head. “No, and all things considered, that’s probably for the best right now. Been a while. But none of them could sing worth a damn. Seriously, the last one, my ears would bleed every time their favorite song came on the radio.”

Victoria snorted. “Bah. You have time. And men are overrated.”
Nell snickered, her mouth curving in a small smile. “Sometimes.” Not that she had a choice either way now. Not if this might be her last night. Her hands flexed tensely at her sides, absently rolling and unrolling the hem of her dress. Suddenly the warm night seemed almost oppressive, the bright lights in the sky almost blinding. She needed to go, to find someplace where she could break down in peace. And if she was going to die tonight, she’d rather not do it in full view of the Riveras. But just as she was stepping away, they were approached by the twins.

“Where are you --”

“-- off to so early?”

“I’m just...a bit tired,” Nell answered. “Thought I might turn in.”

“But the party’s --”

“-- just getting started!”

“I know, and it’s great. It’s just… it’s been a long day. I read through so many records, I think my eyes might be permanently crossed.” She told them, slowly edging towards the door. “And I’m going to do it all again tomorrow, so…”

Oscar sighed, turning towards his brother. “If you say so. Probably for the best, anyway.”

“Si,” Filipe agreed. “It was just as you were saying, hermano. She probably can’t dance anyway.”

Nell froze mid-step, turning slowly back to them as Rosita and Victoria started at the brothers’ rudeness. “I beg your pardon?”


“Oh, no. Continue. Please. Who said I couldn’t dance?” She said mildly.

“Ah, well, mi hermano was saying earlier --”

“-- there is often music playing, but we never --”

“-- see you dance to it, so he said --”

“-- maybe you couldn’t.” Oscar finished.

“I can dance.”

Rosita shot a sharp look at the boys, then laid a consoling hand on Nell’s shoulder. “It’s okay if you can’t, mija. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But I can dance!” She protested, stepping out of Rosita’s hold.

The music and dancing stuttered to an awkward stop as the other Riveras turned their way.

“What is going on?” Imelda asked, crossing the courtyard towards them.

“Nothing!” The twins said quickly.

“Your boys here think I can’t dance,” Nell said, shifting so she stood hip-shot, leveling a look at them that was less than impressed.
“Is that so?” Imelda leveled a similar look at her brothers, wondering what mischief they had planned. Troublemakers they could be, but they were rarely so rude before a guest.

“And I was about to make them eat their words,” Nell continued. She could almost feel the hollowness that had swamped her these last few hours burn away in the flames of her own competitiveness. “How about you boys put your money where your mouths are?”

The twins exchanged looks. “So you want --”

“ -- to bet?”

“Unless you’re too scared.”

Identical smiles spread over their faces. They nodded and answered together. “Name your terms.”

Ah, now was the question. She might be dead by morning, but already being in the Land of the Dead meant that wouldn’t change too much. So what would she need? “One song. I win, you find me art supplies. Sketchbook, pencils, pens.”

“Deal.”

“And if we win,” Filipe added. “Bragging rights.”

“And a favor --”

“ -- to be determined later.”

“Deal.” Nell glanced over to where Héctor was watching them, curiosity and apprehension clear on his face. “Héctor, is that okay?”

“Ah...sure?”

“Okay.” She glanced around, weighing her options. She could definitely hold her own with a partner, but the two best dancers present were Héctor and Julio. Héctor, of course, was needed to play, and Julio was miles shorter than she was, so that wouldn’t work either. Fine. She had more options with a solo anyway. Mouth set in a stubborn line, forcing down nerves, she strode into the middle of the courtyard. Now she had something to prove.

Nell took a steadying breath, then turned back to Héctor. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Héctor glanced between her, the twins, and his wife, then shrugged. Whatever his brothers-in-law had planned, he was sure they knew what they were doing. He started slow, picking out a delicate melody on the strings.

Nell took a few seconds to accustomize herself to the tempo, then with an absent nod she took her first steps. Choreography and improvisation had never been her strong suit, but she remembered enough pieces of old routines to put on a credible showing. She matched her pace with his, slow and soft, as if moving through water. As he picked up speed, she did the same, her feet flying over the cobblestones, throwing everything she had into the movement. *Fuck it.* She thought, kicking off the ground in an off-balance split jump. So she might be dead by morning. -- Another spin, *arabesque, fouettes, an illusion turn* -- So she might never get home. *Fuck all of it.* -- Turn, *jete,* axle, *brisé volé*--She almost flubbed the landing but kept on moving, building with the music and launching into a final series of *fouette* turns, landing on one bent leg, the other extended to touch the ground behind her as the final notes faded from the air.
She stood slowly, her breath burning in her throat, feeling somehow lighter than she had in days. Somewhere in the middle she had kicked off one of her shoes. Who even knew where that had gone. She gave a sheepish smile, dipping into a curtsy and laughing as her audience applauded. Then she turned to applaud their resident músico. “Heh… Thanks for going along with this, Héctor.”

“Hey, *de nada*,” he replied, slinging his guitar over his back. “You did good.”

“Thanks.” Nell cast a guilty look over her shoulder as Oscar and Filipe crossed the courtyard towards them. “I probably should have mentioned… I’ve taken lessons since I was a kid. I won’t hold you to the bet. It wasn’t fair.”

“A bet is a bet,” Filipe told her.

His brother nodded in agreement behind him.

“Well, now that that’s settled,” Coco smiled. “Papá, will you play another song for us?”

Héctor chuckled, pulling his guitar back around and picking out an airy tune. “I think these old bones have a few songs left in them.”

Coco took Nell’s hand, gently but insistently pulling her into another dance.

The others watched in silence for a moment, then Imelda struck, quick as a snake, and cuffed her brothers on the back of the head.

“Ay!” They cried out in protest, ducking away from her.

“What was -- “

“-- that for?”

“What was that about? You knew she was a dancer.” Imelda accused.

“Of course we knew -- “

“-- she was a dancer,” they scoffed. “Have you seen -- “

“-- that walk?”

“Then why?”

“Look at her,” Oscar said softly, nodding towards where Nell and Coco spun at the center of the courtyard.

“This is the happiest she’s been since *Día de los Muertos*,” Filipe explained. “I think something happened today.”

“Victoria said she wouldn’t talk about it.”

“But we thought, maybe we could get her mind off it for a while.”

“And you thought insulting her was the way to do it?”

“We did no such thing!” Filipe scoffed.

“We just shared a simple theory.” Oscar continued with a mischievous smile. “It’s not our fault
“-- she can’t resist a challenge.”

Imelda shook her head. Her brothers could be idiots sometimes, but their hearts were in the right place. She too had noticed the strain in the girl’s behavior, and had been debating herself what to do about it. Now, it seemed, her brothers had done it for her. “Of course you should still get her that sketchbook. After all, you started it.”

“Sí, sí.”

“We will pick it up tomorrow.”

Chapter End Notes

So Nell's finally found something, though it wasn't what she wanted. At least she has friends to keep her from spinning off the rails.

I know there wasn't a lot of Miguel in this chapter but I promise he is going to get a full chapter of his very own soon. He's definitely got some stories to tell.

As always, thanks for reading! I'll see you all next week! (Same bat time, same bat channel!)
Chapter 15: Get Rekt

Chapter Summary

Nell and Victoria have a talk and Hector introduces Nell to some of his friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 14: Get Rekt

To say Nell slept poorly would be an understatement. For hours she lay in bed, staring up at the ceiling, afraid to even close her eyes for fear of what she might see when she opened them again. Would it hurt to die? Would she feel her body shutting down, or would she just blink and find herself suddenly bony? She sighed, throwing herself into a sitting position and running one hand through her hair. She’d never be able to sleep now. Instead she opened the curtains, letting the outside light filter in as she pulled her stash of scrap paper and a pencil from the bedside table.

It was a different city at night, glowing lights in a thousand colors casting out the 3 AM shadows. On the outside anyway. Those shadows that shifted and lived on the inside were not so easily banished, but they could be pushed away, forgotten for a time. Like tonight, Nell thought as she drew her stubby pencil over the yellowed parchment. She’d needed that. A few moments’ respite from the fear and the hopelessness that had been circling the borders of her thoughts since she fell. Hope had kept it at bay with a stubborn kind of determination. But after what she had found today, Hope’s only ally seemed to be Denial.

Maybe she had more time. She’d passed five days. Maybe she could last more than seven. It had been centuries since the last living nagual had trapped themselves in the Land of the Dead. Maybe the rules had changed. Or maybe, as they had been theorizing, it was all about medical advancement. Coma care hadn’t been a thing in the sixteenth century, when the last nagual had crossed over. Someone in that state would have expired from starvation or dehydration after only a few days. Now with the proper medical care, someone could survive in that state for years.

Man, Denial was sure determined tonight.

She pushed the thought away, focusing on capturing the shift of light and shadow of the city, filling page after page until at last, exhausted, she fell against the blankets and drifted off to sleep.

Nell woke, groggy and disoriented, to the sound of knocking on her door. She groaned, rolling onto her back, barely registering the crackle of the paper beneath her, keeping her eyes determinedly shut. “Ngh...yeah?”
The door swung open and she heard the sound of boots on hardwood as Victoria stepped into the room. “Mamá sent me to check up on you. You’re usually up by now. She was worried you might be sick.”

“I’m fine. Just...didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Tonterías.”

Nell was still iffy on slang, but she was pretty sure that meant ‘bullshit’. “Es neta.”

Technically. She’d barely slept at all.

“Ton- te- rí - as.” Victoria repeated, tapping her toe impatiently. “I’m dead, not blind. You found something yesterday.”

There wasn’t much point in denying it now. “Yeah…”

“And you decided not to tell us.”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Nell admitted softly. But it looked like she had done that anyway. “Victoria...I’m still alive, right?”

Victoria frowned. “Of course you are.” Why was she asking? Shouldn’t she be able to tell?

Steeling herself, Nell finally opened her eyes, letting out a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

Fingers, check. Toes, check. And -- she crossed her eyes to look -- yup, still have a nose. She sat up, dragging one hand over her face. “I’m still here.”

“You didn’t think you would be?”

Ah, well. She might as well admit it now. Nell shook her head. “When I said I didn’t find a reference to living spirits in the records yesterday… I lied. There were two. Neither of them lived longer than a week.”

“And you thought not sharing any of this with us would be better,” Victoria said with an exasperated sigh.

“...maybe,” Nell said, then continued quickly. “I mean it was only two references and who knew how accurate they were. Coma care has advanced a lot in the last four hundred years so it might not even be an issue anymore but I wasn't sure and I didn’t want to drag you down with me on this and -- hey!!” She jerked back as Victoria flicked her head with one bony finger. “What was that for?”

“Idiota.” Victoria snapped, flicking her again. “You think we didn’t see what you were doing? You were so wrapped up in trying to keep us out of it that you forgot that what happens to you affects us too. How do you think we’d have felt if you came downstairs this morning missing a hundred and fifteen pounds of soft tissue?”

Nell flinched, ducked her head, shamefaced. “I’m sorry. I should have said something. I just -- and don’t flick me for this again -- You guys have dealt with enough, especially the last couple years, and you shouldn’t have to deal with me on top of it. You’ve already let me stay here with you and I’m so grateful and -- ow! Hey! You weren’t going to flick me anymore.”

“I never agreed to that. Now stop being an idiot.” Victoria said firmly. “You tell us when you find these things. You are not alone in this. But you have to give us a chance to stand with you.”

“Now, is there anything else that you’ve been holding back?”

“Nothing that you probably haven’t already figured out,” Nell answered with a half-hearted smile. “I’m just...trying to get through it, you know? And yesterday… it kind of blindsided me. I know it’s what we were looking for but… I thought I’d have more time.”

Victoria hesitated, then moved to sit beside her on the bed. “I understand. I don’t think there is a single soul here who has not had that same thought at one time or another.” Hadn’t she been the same?

Nell hesitated, biting her lip as she glanced at Victoria out of the corner of her eye. She didn’t know how the other woman had died, and was afraid to ask. It had been over thirty years, to her estimation, since it had happened, but a person’s death would be a sensitive topic, even after so many years.

“An aneurysm.” Victoria said after a moment’s silence.

Nell blinked. “What?”

“That’s what they told me when I woke up here,” Victoria told her. “You think so loud I swear I can hear every word in your head.”

“Sorry. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. I know it’s personal.”

It was, but it was also a part of life for everyone down here. Well, afterlife. When everyone around you was also dead, it was bound to come up from time to time. At least hers, while unpleasant, was not nearly as traumatic as others. There had been no catastrophe, no robbery gone wrong, no murder or betrayal. Just a tiny ruptured blood vessel that had ended it all. She shook her head. “I’d been up late. Never did sleep well. We had a commission to finish, a rush order. Berto and Quique were down with the flu.” They’d had to miss school that day, she remembered. Elena had been up late taking care of them, until Victoria had finally convinced her to go to bed so she wouldn’t get overtired and get sick herself. Mamá and Papá had turned in early. “I went down to the shop to try to make up for some of the time we had lost…” She’d been nursing a headache for a couple of hours, but it wouldn’t have been the first time she’s worked through it. Popped a couple of aspirin, and off she went. She hadn’t known then that that was the worst thing she could have done. The workshop lights had seemed almost painfully bright as she worked. Her neck had started to ache, but that was common enough as a craftsperson.

“I was thinking, I’d done what I could for the night. I was going to try to get some sleep, but…” Blinding pain had flared behind her eyes. She clutched the work table as the world around her spun in a thousand sickening colors. She hadn’t even felt herself hit the ground. “The next thing I knew... I was here.”

Scared, alone, and dead.

It felt at first like waking from an intense dream, the kind that left you feeling fuzzy and disoriented even after you opened your eyes. Had she fallen asleep at her work table? It would not have been the first time. But if that was the case, why was she in the hospital? Because the white room she was in could not be anything else. Why couldn’t she remember? She brought one hand to her head and found herself choking back a scream at the sight of bare bones where flesh should have been. No no no no no no --
She hadn’t even noticed the door open until a pair of cool, bony hands grasped hers, pulling them away from her face. *Está bien. Está bien. Cálmese. Está bien.*

But nothing was fine. She was dead, leaving behind her mother and father, her sister, her niece and nephews --

“I hadn’t even gotten to say goodbye.”

“I’m so sorry, Victoria.”

The other woman shook her head. “The point is, there’s never enough time, and you never know when yours is going to be up. So you appreciate it while you can. We’ll find a way to get you home. And if, *Dios no lo quiera*, there is no way for you to cross back over the bridge, you will always have a home with us.”

“Thank you, Victoria,” Nell said with a soft sniffle, rubbing her stinging eyes.

“Do you think you’re up to coming downstairs?” Victoria asked her.

She nodded. “Yeah, I should probably let them know I’m okay. Apologize for worrying them.”

**Camino lento**

*Lo que soy se va descosiendo*

*Las raíces quedan al centro*

*Lejos de aquí*

*Estrenaré*

*Nunca supe qué estaba bien o mal*

*Pero siempre es fácil dejar atrás*

*Si lo que me llama es un lugar*

¿Cuánto faltará?*

**Camino lento**

*Lo que soy se va descosiendo*

*Las raíces quedan al centro*
A radio, maybe playing from the level above? But no, the sound would not be so clear. And, he realized, there was no backing music. Héctor stuck his head out the window as the voice trailed off, and he could just hear them humming the last few bars. The voice was coming from the roof. Curious, he took off his head, rearranging his bones so he could get a better look. It wasn’t as easy to rearrange himself as it had once been. Things tended to stick in place better when you were remembered, but he still maintained enough of that looseness to stack himself high enough to see over the edge of the roof just as the voice started again.

“I always heard about how cruel the world could be
Guess I had to see it for myself
Got too swept up in false ideas of destiny
Time to put this dream back on the shelf”

The words were in English this time, but his years in the Land of the Dead had taught him enough to understand.

To his surprise, he found Nell sitting on the rooftop, sketchbook balanced on crossed legs, surrounded by what could only be described as a flock of alebrijes. Buttons he recognized immediately, but there were three smaller birds -- and by ‘smaller’ he meant that each was the size of a peacock, rather than being large enough to ride -- as well. Her children? One was violet with red-tipped wings, speckled with flecks of pure white and lavender. Another was brindled in aqua and green, with streaks of dark blue and purple. Another, who seemed to be peering over Nell’s shoulder, was royal blue, marked with pink and spring green, with a long tail that trailed behind her like colored ribbons.

“But how do you reconcile
What you feel with what you know?
How do you force the heart
To simply let it go?

You take a step back
You take a breath in
Silently make your peace with
Having to start again
Capture this moment in your mind
Do your best not to cry
As you say goodbye
And you close the door --”

Her voice faltered at the last note, catching as she gripped her pencil in white-knuckled fingers.
The blue alebrije nudged its feathered head against her cheek and she let out a watery chuckle. “Thanks, Lady. I’m okay, really.”

“You know, I was going to ask if you wanted to come with me to the studio, maybe meet some of the artists there, but now I’m thinking maybe I should introduce you to the musicians instead.”

Nell jolted, fumbling the pen and nearly tossing it and her new sketchbook off the roof in surprise. “H-Héctor! Um… hey. Sorry. I didn’t think anyone could hear me. How are you doing that?”

His response was to literally toss his head up onto the roof beside her, then use one bony arm to pull the rest of his body up, He reassembled himself with a flourish, then gave a playful bow. “Ta-da!”

To her credit, Nell managed to school her expression into something that appeared only mildly disconcerted. She’d seen him do this once before, she recalled, but it was still really weird to watch. “Well, that’s handy. I had to climb up here the old-fashioned way.” With mild panic and a lot of cursing. “I was careful,” she told him, seeing the warning on his face even before the words came out.

“It is a long way down,” Héctor pointed out, nodding at the easily seven-story drop as he sat down next to her. The purple alebrije shifted over to him, nudging him inquisitively with its beak. He crouched down to give the bird a friendly pat. It cawed softly, nuzzling into his hand. “Even I would have a hard time pulling myself together after that drop.”

“I’ll be careful,” she promised with a reassuring smile, trailing her fingers over the blue bird’s feathers, earning a pleased coo. “They won’t let me fall. I just needed to get some air.”

She had returned to the archive that morning to reassure Lina that she had survived the night, only for the archivist to kick her right back out again. Her exact words had been, “Good. You’re not dead. Now get out of here and act like it for a couple of days.”

Rosita had already left by the time Nell made her way back to the station. By some miracle she managed to get back to the house without getting lost, and nobody was more surprised than she was when she walked through the gates before Rosita did. So she’d smiled, made her excuses, and retreated to her room to draw for a while. Even if she had been booted from the archives for her own good, she couldn’t help but fear that it was because she had been in the way. She didn’t want to be a nuisance to the Riveras too.

“What, there’s not enough air in the courtyard?” Héctor asked, snapping her out of her thoughts.

“It gets a little crowded with four alebrijes,” Nell pointed out. “And the cobblestones hurt their feet sometimes. They’re more comfortable up here. And you can’t fault the view.”

She had a point there. The entire city spread out before them like a tapestry of a thousand colors, the irregular towers growing ever upwards like coral from the depths of the sea.

“I could fill a dozen sketchbooks with nothing but the view from this rooftop.”

“You might run out of paper at some point. I have some connections for that.”

“Really?”
“Come on,” he laughed, nudging her with his elbow. “You know by now I know everybody. Come on, I’ll give you a tour of the studio, show you around. We can jam with some of the other musicians.”

“As long as nobody gives me a microphone,” Nell laughed, taking the hand Héctor offered and allowing him to pull her to her feet.

“Why not?”

“Wicked stage fright,” she confessed with a shrug. “No clue why. I love performing, but put a microphone in my hand -- even if it’s just for karaoke -- and it feels like my chest is in a vice. The whole song turns into three minutes of unintentional vibrato.”

“Ay, stage fright is not so bad,” Héctor told her. “We all get it. Even I do, sometimes. It helps to pick one person to sing to. One person that you care about. They don’t even have to be there. Sing to them, and the crowd doesn’t matter.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind for next time,” Nell said with a smile. If there ever was one.

“Now, let’s get down from here, eh? You going to be okay?”

“I think so. I climbed up on the courtyard side so I should be able to get down the same way. But maybe… can we fly there?”

Héctor blinked at the unexpected suggestion. “Fly?”

“Yeah. I mean, if Buttons is okay with it?” She glanced towards her alebrije, who gave a squawk of approval. “I didn’t really have the chance to appreciate it last time, all considered, and I thought it might be fun. I mean, if you want to. Crap, you’re not afraid of flying, are you? Sorry, we can just take the trolley -- “

“Hey, hey. Calm down. Esta bien,” he assured her with a laugh. “Sure, we can fly. I’ve ridden with Pepita loads of times.” It had taken a while for his wife’s winged jaguar to warm up to him, but they were on good terms now. Sometimes when he and Imelda just needed to get out of the house for a while, they’d go flying over the city. “Can she carry us both?”

Buttons squawked again, spreading her wings and giving an enthusiastic flap that buffeted them with wind.

“I think that was a ‘yes’,” Nell laughed.

“Ay, okay. Okay. I’ll go tell the familia where we’re going and meet you out front.” And with a jaunty wave, he dropped off of the roof and swung onto the stairway to the courtyard.

Nell shook her head. “I am never going to get used to that.”

Nell could have spent hours just flying over the city. The Land of the Dead really was incredible from above. Feeling playful, Buttons banked, weaving between the towers as her passengers hung on for dear life.
“Oh the left!” Héctor called when Button rose above the city again. “The tall warehouse over there.”

Seven stories high at least, the brick structure looked to have been constructed sometime near the turn of the twentieth century. Héctor considered trying to shoot his arm through one of the windows for old time’s sake, but thought better of it. With his luck he’d probably knock someone’s head off by accident.

The crow landed gently on the roof, bowing forward slightly so they could climb down. Nell slid from her back, then hugged her alebrije tightly. “Thanks, Buttons. That was awesome!”

She gave a soft *caw*, butting her head affectionately against her charge’s shoulder.

“I love you too,” Nell smiled.

Buttons made an inquisitive sound, cocking her head.

“No, you guys go ahead. We’ll take the trolley back.”

The crow gave her a pointed look.

“I promise we’ll call you if we need help getting back,” Nell promised, before adding under her breath. “Or if Asshat De la Cruz shows his stupid face again.”

There hadn’t been a single sighting of the man since *Día de los Muertos*. The police were searching from the tops of the tallest skyscrapers to the bottom of the oldest pyramids, and still had found nothing. The problem was that the Land of the Dead was a massive place, with a thousand little nooks and crannies that he could disappear into. He’d already been in hiding for over two years. Apparently one of the most recognizable faces in Mexico had learned a thing or two about going unnoticed. Damn it.

As Buttons flew off, Héctor dropped from the roof onto the fire escape below. Nell took it a little more carefully. She sat on the ledge, taking in the ten foot drop with no little trepidation.

Come on, Nell. You jumped off the edge of the world. This is nothing. It didn’t feel like nothing. What if she missed the fire escape and dropped off the tower? What if the fire escape collapsed beneath her? What if she landed on Héctor and crushed him?

“You coming, *perezoso*?” Héctor called from below.

“Yeah, just...waiting for you to get inside,” she answered. “I don’t want to land on you by accident.”

“Bah, it’s fine. Come on down!” He would risk being landed on if it mitigated the risk of her falling off the fire escape.

It took a little more coaxing and a couple of silent, desperate prayers, but Nell finally pushed herself off the ledge. She landed in a crouch, holding her breath as the fire escape clanged and shook beneath her. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes. “Success! It didn’t break and nobody got crushed!”

Héctor snorted. “You thought you were going to break the fire escape?”

“Do you not remember the ladder?” She retorted, rising from her crouch and dusting off her dress. “That drop was bad enough.”
“The fire escape is made of metal.”

“Rust is a thing. Also does not mean this was built to hold living people. Pretty sure fire escapes were not a thing when the last living spirits were running around here.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It was the sixteenth century. I am a hundred percent sure there were no fire escapes.” Nell pointed out. “Especially because aside from the pyramids, Aztec and Mayan houses were generally not taller than one story.”


The door to the fire escape was locked, but Héctor had no problem slipping through the adjacent open window to open the door from the inside. The space was open and airy, with half arranged in separate work spaces for varying artists and craftsmen, and the other as a giant rehearsal space, complete with stage, orchestra pit, and dance studio.

Nell was in heaven. “That’s it. I live here now. Just leave me here forever.”

Héctor smiled, then leaned over the railing to wave at someone a couple of floors below. “Hey, Cici! ¿Qué hay?”

“Héctor? ¿Qué estás haciendo aquí?” The woman called back, shifting the bundle of cloth in her hands to get a better grip. She was tall, with curly copper hair and a printed blue swing dress, like a 1950’s movie star. “Rehearsal’s not for another couple of hours.”

“Got a friend staying with us for a while,” he replied, skipping down the stairs with Nell close behind. “Thought I’d show her around. See if we can find her some studio space. Nell, this is Cici, the best seamstresses in the Land of the Dead. Cici, Nell.”

Nell put a smile in her face as Cici did a double-take. “Encantada de conocerte, Cici. Héctor and Miguel have told me so much about you.” She moved to offer her hand to shake, but then thought better of it, returning her hand to her side. No need to freak the poor woman out more than she already was.

“Ah...**igualmente,**” the designer replied, shooting a curious look towards Héctor.

“There might have been another incident on *Día de los Muertos,***” Héctor told her with a deliberately casual shrug, and a look that said he would explain more later.

Nell wondered how much he would tell her, and how much she already knew.

At Héctor’s urging, Cici took them on a tour of her workshop. Four dress-forms, their outfits in varying stages of progress, stood lined against one wall. On the other stood a sturdy shelf filled with stacked bolts of cloth, rolls of ribbon and thread. There was also a set of desks that housed a pair of pedal-powered sewing machines, and an empty table for patterning and cutting. The dancers, Cici told them, would be having a rehearsal in a few hours. Fittings would start some time next week. The shoe orders, which Héctor had taken a few days before, were proceeding steadily, and would be ready before they had their dress rehearsals.

Nell admired the intricacy of the embroidery, how the colors played on each other and caught the light. Sewing was definitely not a skill of hers. She knew the basics, had taken Home Ec. in school, and could be reasonably relied upon to reattach a button or do minor repairs, but something like this was miles beyond her ability. It too, she thought, was a kind of art. The wearable kind,
which made it in many ways much more practical.

They left Cici to her work. Héctor led Nell to the main studio space. The floor was blocked off with dividers, giving each artist their own space to work without feeling too closed off. Two whole walls were lined entirely with tall windows, designed to let in as much natural light as possible. The perfect place for an artist. Nell saw a sculptor shaping the horns on what looked to be some kind of goat-like *alebrije*, and a solid-looking skeleton painting a figure study of a model with a drape of white cloth pooling at their waist.

Héctor was just showing her to the orchestra space when a voice called up to them.

“Hey, Rivera!” A stockily-built skeleton with a chin-strap beard and a pencil-thin mustache, called out to them from a nearby stairwell.

Héctor stopped, gave a short wave.

“Man, you’re even earlier than I am,” the other man commented with a laugh. “Rehearsal’s not for another hour.”

“I don’t just come here for rehearsal,” Héctor pointed out. Though he made a point of never missing one. That was a matter of professional pride, especially seeing how Ernesto -- his heart gave a twinge at the name -- had never bothered to show up to his.

Nell’s immediate impression was of a man who dressed for style rather than for comfort, wearing a charcoal-colored vest over a white button-down shirt, and topping the ensemble with a skinny Burberry plaid scarf. The kind that seemed to follow trends more in an effort to seem cool than because he actually liked them. It just felt like he was trying way too hard. She chided herself for the thought. She had no right to judge someone she just met. And he was a friend of Héctor’s so he was probably a pretty nice guy, even if he did come off as kind of pretentious.

“Sometimes you come to gossip with the artists,” the other man said with a smirk. “Hey, I don’t blame you, man. Artists have the best gossip. That’s why I get here early. Gotta know what’s what.”

“It’s not -- “ Héctor cut himself off with a shake of his head. “Whatever. I’m not here to gossip. I’m showing a friend around.”

Whoever this guy was, it was probably better that he was a musician -- as indicated by the violin case in his hand -- rather than an actor, because he could not lie to save his life. The exaggerated look of surprise on his face when he finally acknowledged Nell was proof enough of that. “Hey now, nobody told me we got angels down here.”

“*Túmbate el rollo*, Gustavo,” Héctor said, a hint of warning in his voice despite his mild tone. “You’re embarrassing yourself. This is Nell. She’s staying with us for a while.”

“Eh, whatever you say, *Chorizo*. I’m just saying hello.”

Nell’s smile froze on her face when she finally realized who she was talking to, and when he uttered the infamous nickname it was all she could do not to pull an Imelda and deck the cretin with her shoe, as she’d longed to do ever since Miguel had shared his story. Thankfully the implication of Gustavo’s taunting had sailed harmlessly over the boy’s head. Truth be told, it had taken Nell a couple of days to realize herself. It had been two years since the truth about Héctor’s fate had been revealed to the entire Land of the Dead. Gustavo had been part of the band that night, so he’d had a front-row seat to the whole debacle. And surely he’d met Imelda many times by now. So there was
no reason at all to dig out that old nickname, except just to be an ass.

“So tell me, encanto, how did you end up down here?” Gustavo asked her with a charming smile.

Nell’s answering smile was more a baring of teeth than it was an actual expression of joy. She looked him dead in the eye, and answered, “I choked on a Papáya.”

Héctor in turn choked back a laugh as Gustavo blinked in surprise. His eyes narrowed in speculation as he considered if she was messing with him or not. “A...papáya?”

Nell blinked innocently. “Is there a problem?”

“Ah -- no. Nope. That’s… really interesting. I’ve gotta...um...gotta go warm up.”

“Oh. Well it was nice to meet you, Gustavo.”

“Ah...likewise.”

Gustavo bid a hasty retreat towards the orchestra pit, unaware of the rude gesture that a very satisfied Nell aimed at his back as Héctor finally gave in and howled with laughter.

“That --- Dios mio, that was beautiful,” he gasped, breathless with laughter. “Lo siento -- It’s not --- do you know what you just --”

“Oh I know,” Nell confirmed with a smirk.

“Then why did you -- “

“Because I know exactly what he was implying when he called you ’chorizo’, and I wasn’t going to let him do that.”

Héctor frowned, puzzled. “I’m surprised that bothered you so much.”

“What bothered me is that he intended it as a malicious joke and a slur,” Nell said, shooting a dark look towards the orchestra pit. “I don’t care what kind of outdated bullshit ideas he’s clinging to. He has to be taught that that is unacceptable.”

“Well, it’s about time someone put that pendejo in his place.” Said a voice from behind them. They turned to see a woman dressed in an orange and yellow blouse and a long pink skirt. A wreath of pink flowers crowned her hair, highlighting the marigold blossoms that crossed her forehead, just above her particularly prominent unibrow. A bright green monkey perched cheerfully on her shoulder.

“Ah, hey Frida!” Héctor grinned. “I didn’t think you were here yet.”

“I am always here. I was struck suddenly this morning with a burst of inspiration!” She fanned her hands out in an enthusiastic sunburst motion, then gestured towards her nearby work space. At the center stood a canvas that showed an infinite loop of Frida reflections, like the inside of a mirrored box.

Nell was fascinated. “Oh, that’s incredible! It’s almost like a kaleidoscope. Infinite reflections of the same subject, but none of them are the same.” Like a metaphor for public perception, where everyone can see something, but no two people see it in the same way, and never the whole image. Or, conversely, the many-faceted nature of Frida herself, and her exploration of her own identity.
“You have the eye of an artist,” Frida said with approval.

“Oh, wow! Um. Thank you!” Nell stammered, blushing at the praise.

“Nell is an artist herself, you know,” Héctor told her casually.


“Ok my god, stop talking! Stop. Talking. Stop it. Stop it now.”

At least Héctor was merciful. He draped one arm over her shoulder, standing hip-shot as Nell tried to maintain what was left of her dignity. “So what do you think? We got any open studio space she could use?”

Through some kind of artist magic, Frida seemed to know exactly the kind of work space Nell was looking for. Bordered on two sides instead of three, it gave her access to the central studio, and a perfect view out the windows into the city. She would have her privacy to work, but would not feel closed in -- something that the mildly claustrophobic Nell appreciated. In the shelves towards Cici’s studio there was a sort of general art supply storage area. There she would be able to find at least the basics of what she might need, in good quality if a little worn, until she put together a stock of her own.

With that done, Frida left them to peruse the shelves, and returned to her own space to work.

Héctor poked through the selection, shifting through stocks of canvases and cans of discarded paintbrushes. He wasn’t entirely sure what kind of things Nell would prefer, but this would be a good place to start. “Well that was handy, eh? Told you I knew people.”

But Nell barely heard him. “That...that was Frida Kahlo…”

“Yep!”

“The Frida Kahlo.”

“You knew we were friends, right?” Héctor asked, pausing in the act of rummaging through a box of paint tubes. “She helped us with the Sunrise Spectacular. I thought Miguel told you about that.”

“Holy shit. Hoooooooly shit. I just met Frida Kahlo.” She grabbed him by the lapels of his vest, shaking him so hard that his head nearly flew off his shoulders. “Héctor, I just met Frida Kahlo. My entire brain is screaming. I can’t feel my face. Why can’t I feel my face?”

“Woah, woah! Cálñese,” he laughed, stumbling back to steady himself. “Come on, deep breaths. You still need to do that here.”

Her answering giggle was a little hysterical. “I’m pretty sure ‘calm’ left the station a long time ago.” She stepped back, dragging one hand through her hair. “That was crazy. This is what going mad must feel like.”

“You’ve been astral projecting for six years, chased someone across a bridge of marigold petals to the Land of the Dead, jumped off the edge of the world, and have gone flying on a giant crow that was your childhood friend, and this is the craziest thing that has happened to you?”

“Um, yeah! I’m totally prepared for ghostly shenanigans and crazy adventures. This does not in any way prepare me to meet cultural icons!”
Héctor shook his head with a soft chuckle. “Come on, let’s get you set up. Time to break in your new work space.”

Chapter End Notes

Well this was an eventful chapter. I know things have been quite serious for a while, so it was time to lighten things up a bit.

The songs Nell was singing were "Cambio de Piel" by Ximena Sariñana (https://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1259482) and "Close the Door" by Beth Crowley (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJsymis7nns).

And I know there was no Miguel this chapter, but what I had planned for him didn't really fit well within this chapter, and splicing the two chapters together would have come off discordant and choppy, and I didn't want to do that to you guys. I promise that next chapter will focus solely on him, and it's going to be a long one. I may actually have to split it into two chapters.

As always, thanks for reading, and I'll see you next week!
Chapter 16: I See You

Chapter Summary

Miguel and Soccoro make a new friend.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Thanks so much for all of your great comments. I'm glad you enjoyed that last chapter as much as I did.

I know we've been a little light on the Miguel front the last couple chapters, so here's a chapter just for him!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 16: I See You

Miguel was in crisis. It was bad enough that his friend was in a coma, and having to pretend to everyone that he didn’t know what had caused it wasn’t exactly easy. Abuelita inviting Nell’s parents over for dinner? Okay. He could swallow his guilt, play along. But how was he supposed to pretend he didn’t see anything when his little sister was chattering away to a ghost at the dinner table?

He almost dropped the dishes when he saw him standing by Soccoro’s high chair, making goofy faces that had the little girl shrieking with laughter. The boy was young, maybe ten years old, dressed in grubby pants and a yellowed button-down shirt. And not a single person at the table could see him. They continued on with their conversations, carrying trays around the table, sometimes even walking right through the apparition without even noticing he was there.

“You’re going to let flies in,” Rosa teased, nudging him with her elbow as she moved to sit down.

“¿Qué? Oh...right.” He took his seat, glancing over towards his sister again. This time the spirit saw him staring, and with a startled expression, vanished before his eyes.

Soccoro’s face fell “Nooo! ¡Ido!"

“Who’s gone, mijita?” Luisa asked, settling in next to her.

“¡Ido!” She protested again, banging her fist on the tray.

“She has a new imaginary friend,” Luisa explained, shooting an apologetic smile across the table at the Reys. “She gets very upset when she thinks they’ve left.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Marta replied, glancing fondly towards Soccoro. Her own child had
been that small once. At the same time it felt like it was only yesterday, and in another lifetime. “Penny -- Nell -- had one too.”

Oliver chuckled. “Do you remember when she was young, she insisted her best friend was a crow?”

“She called it ‘Buttons’, right?” Miguel asked, unable to hide his smile.

“Yes! How did you know?”

He shrugged. “She has a bracelet of different colored buttons she wears sometimes. I wanted to know the story behind it.” It was technically true. She did sometimes wear a bracelet made of buttons and colored ribbon, but she’d already told him about Buttons by the first time he saw her wear it. They didn’t have to know that the little crow was now an *alebrije* that was big enough to ride.

“She still has that?” Marta looked startled. They knew Nell had kept the other button ribbons as they hung from the curtain rod that framed the apartment window, but she’d made that bracelet when she was ten. Why would she still wear it fifteen years later?

“I only saw her wear it once,” Miguel said quickly, cursing himself. Were they not supposed to know?

“I swear she wore that thing every day until her second year of junior high,” Marta chuckled. “She insisted it was a gift, and she wanted to show Buttons how much she appreciated it.” As if the crow would notice. But even telling her that hadn’t stopped her. “Didn’t matter how often we told her that crows weren’t pets. She kept sneaking out at lunch to feed it.”

“Sounds like Miguel and Dante,” Abel snickered. “How many times did *abuelita* tell you not to feed street dogs?”

“You say that like I didn’t catch you feeding him under the table last week,” Miguel retorted, sticking out his tongue.

“Sh!” Abel hissed as *abuelita* Elena’s eyes narrowed in his direction. “I -- I dropped something. It fell off my fork.”

“*Embustero* -- *ay!*” Miguel jolted as his cousin kicked him under the table.

“*Cállate*, Miguel,” his cousin said between gritted teeth.

The Reys exchanged looks at the playful bickering, smiling fondly. Yes, they could see how their daughter had befriended this family. They were as animated as she was, everyone talking over and around each other, and there was a warmth and a kind of familiarity that she would have been instantly drawn to. The kind that said if you were a friend, you were family, simple as that. A big family had never been in the cards for them, though given their lifestyle that was probably for the best. Their first attempt at having a child had ended in heartbreak four months in. They hadn’t had the heart to try for another until almost five years later, and even then Marta had spent weeks in the hospital. Their Nell had been a gift, and they knew that they would not get another.

Their own families had been small as well. Oliver’s brother and his family had moved to Vancouver a couple of years ago. Marta and Oliver were supposed to visit over Christmas this year. But that would have to wait until their daughter was well again.

Dinner was an education, at least to Miguel. He could see Nell in her parents. Marta Rey was
more reserved than her daughter, but Nell had her smile and her taste in terrible puns. Oliver was a
hand-talker who seemed always to be in motion, either gesturing with his hands when he spoke, or
tapping his foot absently as he ate. He was much more open than his wife, but then being an
audiologist carried far fewer risks than being a criminal lawyer. Nell had confided in him once that
she’d been instructed not to talk about what her mother did for work for just this reason. There had
been a case, just when Marta had been starting out, of a prosecutor’s young son being kidnapped by
an escaped criminal with a grudge. The child had been returned safely, but the image had stuck with
Marta even over thirty years later.

Given Miguel’s own personal experience, he could definitely understand the sentiment.

For the rest of the evening Miguel was on the lookout for the ghost boy, but there was no sign
of him. Even after the Reys left for the night and Miguel returned to his room to finish some
homework, he found himself listening for a sign of the spirit’s return. He was still waiting as he
drifted off to sleep.

The next morning he was woken by a creaking door and the sound of soft laughter. His sister,
he realized dimly. It wouldn’t be the first time Soccoro had snuck out of her room to jump on him
first thing in the morning.

“Sssh!” She said in what was definitely not a whisper. “Sleep.”

The answering snicker was unfamiliar.

So Soccoro’s invisible friend thought it was funny that she planned to scare the crap out of
him? Fine. Let’s see how he liked it.

Miguel projected himself just behind the other boy, standing with his arms crossed. “You
know, it’s not nice to prank people while they’re sleeping.”

The boy let out a yelp, spinning around in shock. His eyes widened as he gazed back and forth
between the ‘sleeping’ Miguel and his projected image. “What---how--?”

“Sorpresa, chico.”

“Iguel!!” Soccoro gasped, running for his projected self, turning around in confusion when she
ran right through him. “Noooo!”

Wait, she could see him too? That he had not anticipated. Miguel returned to his body and sat
up, tossing off the covers. “It’s okay, hermanita. I’m right here, see?”

“Iguel!” His sister ran to him, allowing him to pull her up on the bed beside him.

“I see you made a new friend, eh?” He asked, poking her side and making her giggle.

“Nio!” She said proudly, pointing towards the ghost boy, who still stood in the middle of the
room.

Miguel glanced towards him. “Nio?”
“Antonio,” the boy corrected. “How come you can see me and nobody else can? Why was there two of you?”

“It’s...kind of a long story,” Miguel admitted. “I can’t really tell you right now cuz Mamá could be up here any minute. What I want to know is how my sister can see you.”

“Kids see more than adults do,” Antonio told him. “Adults don’t see anything.”

“How long have you been -- “ Was there a nice way to say ‘dead’? “-- like this?”

“I...I don’t know,” the boy admitted. “A long time.”

A very long time, by the looks of it. His clothes looked like something Papá Julio might have worn as a boy -- and Miguel had spent enough time staring at old photos in the last two years to be very familiar with the styles of the last century. The real Question was, why was Antonio here? Why didn’t he cross over to the Land of the Dead like he was supposed to when he died?

Miguel was about to ask just that when the shrill beeping of his alarm clock cut him off.

“Ah -- knuckles.” He caught himself before he said a word in front of his sister -- and Antonio-- that would have had abuelita reaching for la chancla. Héctor’s choice of replacement words had served him well for this over the last couple of years. “I gotta get ready for school Um...you can come along, if you want? Can you even do that?”

Antonio shook his head, looking disappointed. “No. I tried but...too many people. I couldn’t get inside.”

“Oh.” Well, that kind of made sense. Nell had once told him that she had a hard time projecting into crowded places because there were too many competing energies. Maybe ghosts worked the same way. Which would explain why you mostly hear stories of one-on-one encounters with spirits instead of Jorge Negrete appearing in a stadium in the middle of a fútbol match. “Well... we can still talk when I get home, right?”

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The boy’s face brightened. He nodded. “Yeah! And you can show me how you do that two-places-at-once-trick.”

“Deal.”

There was a soft knock on the door, and a moment later it swung open and Luisa poked her head inside. “Miguel, it’s time to get up -- oh! You’re already awake. And I see you found your sister.” She smiled fondly as she spotted Soccoro sitting next to her brother. “Did she wake you up again?”

“She tried to,” Miguel admitted with a crooked smile. “Didn’t jump on me this time. I heard her open the door.” It was technically true. His glance flickered over to Antonio, who snickered.

Luisa crossed the room and, obeying her young daughter’s insistent ‘Up! Up!’ hoisted her into the air, settling the girl on her hip. “Now, what did we say about jumping on your hermano, hm?”

“Sí!” Soccoro beamed.

“No jumping.” Luisa instructed, tapping her daughter lightly on the nose, earning a bright giggle. “Come on. Let’s see what your abuelita has made for breakfast.”
Miguel might have been a little distracted during breakfast. And on the way to school. Enough that when he dove into his seat just seconds before the bell rang, even his friends had to comment on it.

“And he’s safe!” Mateo grinned from the seat beside him.

“Gracias a Dios.” Miguel sighed, digging his notebook out of his backpack. Abuelita would definitely have something to say about it if she found out that he was late to class again. Not that it happened often… anymore. Just occasionally. When he was working on a song, or maybe got too caught up playing fútbol with his friends. And that one day when he wanted to get through a few more pages of Nell’s comic.

“What was it this time? Another song?”

“Course it was another song,” Arturo, another of their friends, commented from behind him, reaching across his desk to muss Miguel’s hair. “When is it anything else?”

“When it’s fútbol. Or when he’s arguing with Rosa again.”

“But even then it’s about music half the time.”

“Or remember when that dog tried to follow him to class?”

“And Dante ended up stealing Profe Garcia’s lunch out of his desk.”

“Mira, mira! Profe Ramirez is here,” Miguel cut in, effectively preventing them from re-living any more of his past transgressions.

Miguel managed to keep his focus through his English and physics classes, but towards the end of chemistry he found himself wavering. Soccoro could see spirits. She had a friend who was an actual ghost. And she could see Miguel while he was astral projecting! How was that even possible? He hadn’t been able to see spirits at all until a week ago. How was it that his two-year-old sister could do it on her own? As far as he knew she hadn’t done anything that would have gotten her cursed or anything, so did that mean that this was a natural ability for her?

Antonio had suggested that children could see things that adults couldn’t. Did that mean that most children could see spirits? And if that was the case, what was it that caused them to stop?

Miguel frowned in thought, drumming his pencil absently on his desk. He knew for a fact that his parents did not believe in ghosts and spirits. They thought that Antonio was Soccoro’s imaginary friend. Imaginary… Was it really that simple? Did children lose the ability to see spirits simply because they start to believe it when adults tell them that the things they are seeing aren’t real? If he continued to encourage her, would she continue to be able to see spirits just like him? Did he want her to? On the one hand she was his sister, and he wanted to support and encourage her. On the other… It wouldn’t be an easy road for her. Miguel was learning this the hard way. She would have to learn which of her ‘friends’ could be seen by other people and which ones couldn’t. How exactly
would he go about teaching that to a toddler?

“...iguel. Miguel! Oy, despierta dormilon.”

Miguel jolted at the sharp rap on his head. “Ay, ¿Qué? demonios!”

“Man, where were you?” Art asked as Miguel rubbed his head. “Class is over. Didn’t you hear the bell?”

“Nowhere. Just...thinking.”

“Another song?”

Miguel shook his head as he stowed his notebook and pens in his bag. “It’s not always a song.”

“It’s usually a song,” Matt replied, tossing his backpack over his shoulder.

“Almost always,” Art agreed.

“Like ninety percent of the time.”

“More like ninety-five.”

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Miguel laughed, giving Matt a joking shove as they headed for the door. “Not my fault I get inspired in the middle of class.”

“Tell that to Profe Fuentes. I swear he’s one more pencil-drumming incident away from marching you to the Directora’s office himself.”

“Shows what you know. I fixed his favorite loafers last spring. He owes me one.”

“Pretty sure you used that one up by the end of September, amigo,” Arturo chuckled, clapping Miguel companionably on the shoulder. “But you keep telling yourself that if you need to keep believing it.”

The rest of the school day Miguel managed to stay mostly on top of things. And when he found his focus slipping he pulled back, reminding himself that he still had time to figure out what he should do about Socorro. She was only two. Imaginary friends would still be considered a fairly normal thing for a while longer. He wished he could talk to Nell about it. She’d told him before that seeing ghosts was not something she was usually able to do, but it would have been nice just to talk to someone who understood. Hopefully -- por favor, Dios -- he’d be able to ask her when she was able to come back.

Miguel almost expected to see Antonio waiting outside of the schoolyard when class let out. He wasn’t, but that was probably for the same reason that he couldn’t manifest within the school -- too many conflicting energies this time of day. Miguel found him in the courtyard when he got home, rolling a ball back and forth with Soccoro.

Antonio grinned when he saw him, tossing the ball his way. Miguel caught the ball on his
boot, trapping it on the ground as his sister ran towards him. “Oye, hermanita,” he grinned, catching Soccoro as she ran for him and hoisting her onto his hip. “Did you have a good day with Antonio?”

“Nio!” She cheered, pointing towards her friend.

“Yeah, I see him,” Miguel laughed. “But maybe we’ll not tell Mamá about that, hm? She’s on board with you having an invisible friend, but if I said it she’d think I was loco."

“Only un poco loco,” Antonio teased.

“Un poquitititito loco,” Miguel agreed, unable to resist the reference.

“Loco!” Soccoro cheered along with them.

It was later than they’d hoped for when they finally got a chance to talk. Between homework, dinner with the family, and Tío Berto wanting to go over a surprise shoe design for Rosa’s birthday, it was nearly midnight before Miguel got any time to himself. Staying up late to converse with someone that no one else could see would raise far more question than he wanted to answer, so he made a show of brushing his teeth, putting on his pajamas, and getting ready for bed. Then he turned off the light, tucked himself under the blankets, and projected himself into the hallway.

Antonio was already waiting for him in the courtyard. With Soccoro being so young and going to bed so early, pretty boring for him. At least with Miguel able to see him now, he had someone else to talk to. Or, well, at, most of the time. With the adults around he couldn’t always reply, but after so long with such limited contact, it was enough for tonight to just be heard.

“Hey, sorry I took so long.”

Antonio shrugged. “It’s no big deal.” At least this time he’d been able to ask Miguel some Question while he was doing his homework. He hadn’t gotten the opportunity for much schooling in his day, so it was interesting to him to see what he might have learned if he’d been born in a different time.

They headed for the gate, wandering out onto the main street. “So, Question: how long have you been here? Like, at my house.”

“A couple of months,” Antonio answered with a small frown. “Yeah. I think it was around the end of summer.”

Months? And he’d no idea. Or...had he? “I felt you,” Miguel realized suddenly. “In my sister’s room. Or up in the attic sometimes.”

“I like the attic,” Antonio admitted, scuffing his boots against the cobblestones. “It feels...safe. Happy. How come you can see me now but you couldn’t before?”

Miguel shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Was it because you went to the Land of the Dead again?”

Miguel started, almost tripping over his own feet in surprise. “How did you know about that?”
“I heard you talking to that lady in the Plaza,” Antonio answered. “Did Ernesto De la Cruz really throw you off a tower?”

“Ah...yeah...” He and Nell had theorized that getting cursed and his subsequent adventure in the Land of the Dead had jump-started his powers. It only followed that spending another night there had expanded them. But it was beyond weird to think that Antonio had been so close to him and Nell that night and they hadn’t even known he was there.

“What...what was it like?”

Miguel blinked. “Being thrown off a tower?”

Antonio shook his head. “No... The Land of the Dead.”

Oh. Of course. Because he was a ghost, Antonio would never have seen the other side of the bridge. “Um...it’s huge. And...kind of weird? But also pretty cool. Everything’s built in towers and there’s skeletons and alebrije everywhere.” He kept his answer deliberately vague, not wanting to rub in the fact that, whatever the circumstances, he had been able to cross the bridge and Antonio never had.

“Oh.” Antonio continued in silence for a moment, fidgeting absently with the cuff of his shirt again. “I...I tried to cross over a few times. On Día de los Muertos. I thought... I thought if there was any time that I could do it, it would be then, but... I couldn’t find the bridge. And the other spirits...they couldn’t even see me.”

Now that Miguel hadn’t anticipated. “Not at all?”

Antonio shook his head. “I tried but...they walked right through me.” He stared down at his hands with the kind of numb disbelief that did not belong on the face of a child. “Like I wasn’t even there.” He’d grown used to that happening with living people, but when it happened again with the other spirits... It was like finding out he was dead all over again.

“I’m sorry,” Miguel said softly, laying one hand gently on the boy’s shoulder.

He shrugged, pasting a wan sort of smile on his face. “It’s fine. I’m used to it now.” Or at least that’s what he tried to tell himself. “Maybe I’m not meant to cross over. Who needs the Land of the Dead anyway.”

Miguel wasn’t fooled for a moment. “We’ll figure it out. I promise, I’ll find a way to get you across that bridge, even I have to carry you across it myself next year.”

The boy gave a watery chuckle, dragging the back of his hand over his stinging eyes. “I think your family might have a problem with that.”

“Nah, it’s fine. They’ll know it’s for a good cause,” Miguel said with a small smile.

Antonio returned the smile, the smallest bit of hope returning to his eyes. “La esperanza es lo último que muere, no?”

“Hey, if we didn’t have that, what’s even the point?” It was hope that had kept him going the last two years. Hope that would keep him going until his friend returned. “We’ll find a way to get you home. I promise.”
What happened to Antonio? Is there a way for him to cross the bridge, or will he be stuck on the mortal side? Join us next time on A Year in the Life to learn more!

One brief note: I will be on vacation for the next week and a half with little to no internet access, so I'm afraid there will not be a chapter next week. Barring any other major delays or intense bouts of writer's block (or familial interference), the regular posting schedule should resume the following week.
Chapter 17: It Takes a Murder to Catch a Murderer

Chapter Summary

De la Cruz is arrested at last and Miguel tries to find a way to help Antonio.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone.

I’m so sorry this chapter is so late. I didn’t get as much written as I had planned. This section has been fighting me a bit, and I’ve a lot to plan for the next few chapters, so it may be slow coming as I fine-tune what happens next. There’s some pretty big stuff coming and I want to make sure that I do it properly.

This means unfortunately I will not be able to resume my weekly posing schedule. I will try to have a new chapter up every 2 weeks.

Thanks so much for your patience.

And with that, on with the chapter!

Chapter 17: It Takes a Murder to Catch a Murderer

Julio was visiting an old friend in town when he heard the news: after two years of evading the law, Ernesto De la Cruz was finally back in police custody.

The moment he heard he made his excuses and headed immediately for home.

He hardly dared to believe it. De la Cruz seemed to vanish like smoke after Día de los Muertos, with neither hide nor hair being seen of him since. To finally have him in custody again was honestly a little surreal. Julio was not ashamed to admit that he wished he’d taken a crack at that slippery snake in the grass himself during the showdown at the Sunrise Spectacular. Not just for his own personal satisfaction, but for all the heartache that Ernesto’s selfishness had brought to Julio’s beloved Coco.

Over the course of their lives together, Coco spoke to him often of her father. Never within earshot of Mamá Imelda or their daughters, of course, but during those quiet moments of their courtship, those rare times when they actually got to be alone. Coco did not have the luxury of many detailed memories of her father, being only three years old when Héctor left on that fateful tour, but she remembered his voice, his laugh, and the joy that had been the heart of their lives until the day he
left. Although everyone else tried to convince her otherwise, there was a part of her that had always believed that he would come home someday. Julio remembered the hopeful glances towards the chapel doors the day of their wedding, the way her smile dimmed when someone else walked through the door. So when the truth of what happened to Héctor finally came out, Julio swore to do everything in his power to make things right again.

They had almost lost him that night. That Miguel had managed to preserve Coco’s memories of her father had been nothing short of a miracle. And when it came time for Coco to join them in the Land of the Dead, the look of joy on her face when she was finally reunited with her father was one that Julio would treasure for the rest of his days.

She had been devastated and furious to learn of what had befallen him, and Julio was quite certain that more than one of her exploratory ventures into the city over the last couple of years had been in search of the man she had once called her Tío Neto. His Coco was warm and bright as the sun, but many who looked at her forgot that sunlight could burn as well as soothe. With De la Cruz now behind bars, well, Julio was looking forward to the moment when Coco finally got her shot at him.

Julio picked up speed as the house came into view, clinging to his broad-brimmed hat so it wouldn’t get lost behind him. He burst through the gate, skidding to a halt on the worn cobblestones, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with his sister.

Rosita caught him before he could fall, steadying him with careful hands. “Ay! Julio! What is it? What happened?”

“D-De la Cruz--” He panted, bracing his hands on his knees as he struggled to catch his breath.

“Qué?”

“De la Cruz,” Julio repeated. “He’s been arrested.”

“QUÉ?!?”

Rosita’s exclamation brought the rest of the family running, the twins colliding in the doorway of the workshop as they raced outside.

“What is it?”

“What happened?”

“Ernesto De la Cruz has been arrested,” Rosita answered, hardly daring to believe it herself.

“En serio?” Victoria asked

Julio nodded. “It’s all over town. Hernando and I heard it from Señora Marquez, whose Tía María works at the police station. She said they put him through booking a couple hours ago.”

“Where did they find him?” Coco asked.

“Well, that’s the crazy part -- “
Gustavo was late. This in itself was unusual enough to be remarked upon by the other band members. Gustavo was always early, mostly for the purposes of gossiping and ragging on any unfortunate band member who arrived after he did. It was agreed that he might be a bit pompous, a bit pretentious, but he had never in his entire afterlife missed a rehearsal. But with no word of his whereabouts either way, they were forced to begin without him.

No sooner had the opening bars left their instruments than a door swung open, striking the wall with a clang, and Gustavo burst into the warehouse. He didn’t even stop to close the door behind him, making a bee-line for the band. “De la Cruz has been arrested!”

The song ground to a squawking halt as the words sank in. As a one the musicians scrambled from their seats to hear the news, conveniently forgetting in wake of the celebrity arrest whose murder De la Cruz was guilty of. They didn’t notice how Héctor remained frozen in his seat, hands resting numbly on his guitar. They didn’t notice the look of panic, of pain in his dark eyes as he tried to keep himself together.

But Nell did. Instead of gathering around Gustavo with the rest, Nell went straight to her friend’s side, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. “You okay?” She asked softly.

Héctor nodded, grateful for the support.

“They brought him in about an hour ago,” Gustavo continued, reveling in the attention as even the artists abandoned their projects in favor of the news. “They’re saying he was dropped on the steps of the police station by a flock of alebrijes.”

“Wait, a flock?” The cellist asked with a small frown.

Gustavo nodded. “A bunch of giant birds! I didn’t believe it when he told me, but it’s all over the city. Dropped him in a heap right on the steps, and kept him pinned until the policía came out to investigate.”

Héctor and Nell exchanged looks of silent communication. You don’t think --

Maybe? Who else could it be?

With the others distracted, Héctor and Nell gathered their things and raced immediately for home.

They were most of the way to the house when they ran into Coco and Julio. All it took was a single look at each other’s faces to see what they knew. Coco hugged her father tightly, fists clenching at his back as she struggled to keep it together. It was a good couple of minutes before either of them could find the words to speak.

“They found him, Papá,” Coco told him when she pulled back. There was a tense look in her
eyes, part worry for her father, and what could only be described as a kind of eagerness.

“I know,” Héctor said, with an attempt at a smile. “Gustavo… he told us.”

Coco made a face of mild disgust. Like the rest of the Riveras, she couldn’t stand the violinist. She could only imagine the ham-handed method by which this news had been delivered. “What did he say?”

“Not much,” her father answered. “Just that he’d been found and brought to the police station by a bunch of alebrije. We thought he might have been making that up, but…”

“It’s true,” Julio confirmed. “I was in town with a friend when I heard, and came straight home. Mamá Imelda and the others have already left for the police station. She asked us to come and get you and meet her there.”

Héctor flexed his fingers unconsciously on the strap of his guitar case, then nodded. “Come on, then. Let’s not keep her waiting.”

They arrived at the police station to find it under siege. The entire street was packed with reporters armed with recorders, microphones, and cameras of every conceivable age and size. They watched the station doors like hawks eyeing a rabbit warren, waiting for even the slightest sign of movement. Pushing their way through the crush of reporters to reach the door was a battle in itself, and serious consideration was given to summoning Pepita or Buttons to disperse the crowd so they could get through.

A pair of stone-faced officers guarded the doors, preventing even the more determined of the reporters from simply pushing their way inside. Coco and Julio were first to gain the steps and were about to be turned away when Héctor and Nell finally broke through the crowd behind them. Thankfully one of the officers recognized Héctor from the Sunrise Spectacular incident two years before and after a brief argument with his partner, he allowed the group inside.

The inside of the police station was only marginally less hectic than the outside. Just because Ernesto De la Cruz had been arrested didn’t mean that all crime in the Land of the Dead had come to a halt -- though admittedly the crime rate in the Land of the Dead was significantly lower than it was in the Land of the Living. The center of the chaos seemed to be on the second floor, where a very angry, very familiar voice could be heard insulting the grooming habits and parentage of one Ernesto De la Cruz.

“Well… I guess we found Imelda”, Nell said, holding back a snicker of amusement. The sheer variety and creativity of Imelda’s curses was impressive, and Nell filed the more unfamiliar ones away in her memory for future use.

they made their way up the wrought-iron staircase, Imelda’s protests became clearer. Ernesto, it seemed, had been placed under solitary confinement, and would be allowed no visitors except his lawyers, and the officers assigned to the case. This was not at all what Imelda wanted to hear, as after that cabron murdered her husband and twice attempted to murder her great-great-grandson, she very much intended to crush his skull to powder with her boot. Which was not, of course, something that she said aloud, but was very much implied by the insistence in her tone.
Coco, absently fingering the fringe of her shawl, did not blame her in the slightest. It was she who knocked on the office door, nudging it open to find her Mamá shouting at officers Flores and Vega. She had to give them credit for standing their ground. Mamá Imelda was fierce when she was in a temper, and denying her took no small amount of courage. “Mamá? We found them.”

Imelda cut off her tirade, immediately running to embrace her daughter and husband. “Ah, mi familia! At last. This man, he says they have De la Cruz in custody, but they will not allow us to see him.” As she spoke she gestured to another skeleton behind the desk who was dressed in a charcoal-colored button-down shirt and black slacks.

“As we were explaining to Señora Rivera,” Officer Flores said with no little exasperation. “This is a very high-profile case. Ernesto De la Cruz is being kept in solitary confinement for his own protection.” They had considered putting him in a regular holding cell with the other inmates but there was such an uproar the moment they brought him in that a private cell was the only option. If the other inmates had simply been fans, that would be bad enough. But between the stolen songs and murder charges… Yeah, definitely better to stick him by himself. “Due to the public nature of this case, visits will be restricted solely to Senor De la Cruz’s lawyer. Officer Vega, myself, and Detective Espinosa, who is the lead investigator on this case.”

It was a reasonable precaution, all considered. Darn it. Imelda was not the only Rivera who had a boot with Ernesto’s name on it. Nell found herself wondering how many other musicians’ works Ernesto had taken credit for over the years.

Espinosa himself looked less than impressed with Imelda’s demands, though privately he thought that the woman deserved a few moments alone with her husband’s murderer. He’d wanted to take a boot to the bastard’s face himself. Unfortunately given his position these were not thoughts he could voice aloud.

“So, what happens now?” Julio asked.

“Much the same as before,” Officer Vega answered. “You are still in contact with Señor Bernal, sí?”

Imelda nodded. Bernal had been assigned to their case early on, and they remained in contact with him in the months since. Less so recently, as until the events of a couple weeks before, it seemed less and less likely that De la Cruz would ever be apprehended. Imelda had sent Victoria and Rosita for him just before they left for the police station. “He should be on his way here.”

They arrived a few moments later with a tall, thin skeleton man dressed in a finely-tailored suit that might have become fashionable some time in the late 1960’s. Victoria and Rosita trailed behind him, a familiar blue crow alebrije with colorful trailing tail feathers perched on Victoria’s shoulder. The bird let out an excited caw and after giving Victoria a companionable nudge with her head, she swooped across the room to land on Nell’s outstretched arm.

“Hey, Lady. Were you keeping Victoria and Rosita company?” Nell asked as the bird sidestepped her way up to her shoulder.

“This is your alebrije?” Detective Espinosa asked her, standing up from behind the desk.

“One of them,” Nell answered as Lady gave a soft chirp. “Lady’s mom and a brother and
sister.”

“Are the others birds as well?”

“Yeah. What is it you are trying to ask me, Detective?”

“Nothing,” he replied. “Just curious. You have some very clever alebrije, Señorita Rey. They managed to do what two years of police involvement couldn’t.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait,” Héctor cut in. “Wait. Are you saying that her alebrije are the one who found Ernesto?”

The detective nodded. “Dropped him right on our doorstep. Your little blue Lady there had her talons hooked in his collar and would peck at his head every time he tried to get up. Her Mamá — I’m assuming she’s the big green one — just sat on him and wouldn’t let him up until a group of officers came to investigate.”

Julio pressed his mouth shut tight, his mustache quivering in his attempt to keep himself from laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of the image.

“I don’t suppose any of you has a dog alebrije?” Espinosa asked, remembering something that he’d seen in the arrest report.

The Rivera’s exchanged looks. “Miguel’s alebrije is a xolo,” Héctor told him.

“Ah. Well, that explains it. There were also reports of a skinny, winged dog gnawing on De la Cruz’s leg.”

Miguel spent his next several lunch hours researching ghosts. There were certainly no shortage of reported hauntings, but none of the stories that he read was able to tell him what he wanted to know. What was it that kept spirits from crossing over? Oh sure, there were plenty of theories, but Miguel was 100% certain that half of the so-called “experts” out there hadn’t encountered a real ghost in their lives.

Based in the different accounts he had read, Miguel had been able to separate the types of hauntings into two separate categories: impressions and actual ghosts. Impressions were snippets of time and intense emotions that imprinted on a place. The apparitions that resulted often repeated the same few moments in time, over and over again, but never acknowledged the living world. And then there were spirits like Antonio and Candela, who were autonomous and did not follow any kind of time-loop restriction. As a whole both kinds of spirits tended to be limited to a certain area of effect, usually a single building or street. He wasn’t sure how it was that Antonio seemed to be able to wander anywhere he wanted in Santa Cecilia, and wondered absently how big his range actually was.

They had established the previous night that Antonio could not leave Santa Cecilia. Miguel had tried to take him to talk with Candela at the hospital to see if she had any answers, but he was unable to appear outside of town. Miguel spent the next hour catching up with Candela and checking on Nell. He knew from speaking to her parents that there had been no change, not that he had
anticipated any, but he always felt better when he could see for himself.

Unfortunately the ghostly nurse didn’t have any answers for him. She didn’t know what kept spirits from crossing over any more than the people on the internet did. And nothing Miguel read gave him any clue as to how he could help Antonio cross over. Except for straight-up exorcizing him, which was not at all something that Miguel wanted to do. Firstly, because that would mean telling people that he could see ghosts, and he’d rather keep that to himself if he could. And also, who knew where Antonio would be sent afterwards? He could end up in the Land of the Dead like he was supposed to, or he could end up somewhere terrible, or just completely disappear. No way would Miguel risk doing that to the poor kid.

He told him so one night while they were strolling through town. “It’s, like, the only thing that everyone can agree works but we’re not going to do that, I promise. We’ll find another way.”

Antonio nodded, keeping his eyes carefully ahead as they walked. “Thanks, Miguel.” What else could he say? He’d been resigned to being trapped in the world for so long, it was strange to have hope again. He didn’t want to trust it, and there was a part of him that was tempted to tell Miguel to just stop looking. It was impossible… wasn’t it?

“Hey.” Miguel reached out, catching his sleeve. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” the boy said softly. “I just...I don’t know why you’re putting in all this work for me. What do you care if I’m stuck here or not?”

Miguel did a double take. “¿Esperar, qué? You’re kidding, right?”

Antonio ducked his head, refusing to meet his gaze, and said nothing.

“Hey, look at me.” He gave the boy’s sleeve a short jerk. “Do you honestly believe I’d just leave you like this if there was anything I could do to help?”


Miguel was silent for a moment. He had a feeling that Antonio wasn’t looking for an “I’d do it for anyone” kind of answer. “I don’t want to see anyone else left behind.” It seemed so obvious, once he finally said it aloud. “Papá Héctor, all of his friends in Shantytown…. Every one of them was left behind and forgotten. They disappeared because nobody passed their stories down. Kept separate from everyone else, even in the Land of the Dead. Nobody deserves that. Nobody deserves to be left behind. So I want to help you cross over, if I can. And I’m going to find your photo and add it to our ofrenda so you’ll never be forgotten.”

Antonio looked stunned. Never, in life or in death, had anyone ever been willing to do something so kind for him.

Miguel crouched in front of him, gently wiping the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie. “Hey, It’s okay chico. We’re amigos, right? Amigos help each other.”

Antonio just cried harder, throwing his arms around Miguel and hugging him tightly. Miguel returned the hug, rubbing one hand soothingly over the boy’s back as he had seen his Mamá do to Soccoro when she cried. After a few minutes the sobs quieted, but Miguel did not pull away until Antonio was ready to let him go.

“You okay?”
The boy nodded, wiping his eyes with his sleeve and giving a watery sniffle. “G-gracias.”

“De nada.” Miguel said with a small smile. “You ready to head home?”

*Home...* That sounded pretty great. Antonio smiled back. “Yeah, let’s go home.”
Chapter 18: Good Boys

Chapter Notes

Well I finally finished the chapter! Sorry it took so long. There were sections of it that were fighting me so it took a bit to get through, but I've also made some progress on the next two chapters so hopefully they won't take as long.

I want to thank PerlogAnnwyl for the use of her characters Mateo and Arturo, which will be making another appearance in this chapter.

Also I'd like to include an animal abuse warning for this chapter. It is nothing too bad, just Ernesto fighting back because he does not want to go where Dante wants to take him.

And with that said, on to the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Dante was worried about his Boy. He knew that he had gotten home safe, had watched from the alley across the street as he had burst from the house at sunrise. But now he had a job to do. His Boy was safe but the Bad Skeleton with the feral eyes was still out there, and Dante's Boy would not be safe until the man was gone. His was a scent that Dante would never forget. Once he stunk of heavy cologne, but that scent had faded, replaced by the scent of the dark places, of dust and wet and rotted cloth.

It had taken almost a week for Dante to track him, his path taking him all over the Land of the Dead, often crossing through water so the other alebrijes tracking him would not be able to follow his scent. Twice Dante lost his trail entirely, unable to pick up his scent again until almost a day later. It was the little dogs who had given away his location, for any time Dante lost the skeleton man’s scent, he could usually pick up the scent of his pack. He found him in one of the old stone structures in the lowest levels of the Land of the Dead. From the smell of the place, he’d been there for some time.

Dante waited until the little dogs left the house before he made his move. The Bad Skeleton’s back was turned, so he did not see Dante come up behind him, not until Dante’s teeth closed around his femur and he found himself on the floor, being dragged towards the door. Dante liked being an alebrije, liked his little wings and the scents in the air when he flew. Liked knowing he was there to protect His Boy. But just now, he wished that he was a bit bigger. Even as a skeleton, the man was not small, and he was very angry. He scrabbled on the floor, trying to pull away, and when that did not work he kicked out with one booted foot. His first attempt missed, but the second kick had Dante releasing the man’s shin with a yelp as the foot connected with his foreleg.

Dante darted back out of range, but kept himself between the skeleton and the door. Every time the man took a step, Dante would move to block him. The Bad Skeleton did not like being
herded. He broke into a run, barely stumbling when Dante’s teeth clamped once more onto his bony leg. Even when the skeleton tried to fight him, tried to drag him, said words that Dante recognized as ones that had gotten his Boy into trouble with the shoe-lady that now gave him ear-scratches, he did not let go. The Bad Skeleton started to shake his leg so hard that he pulled Dante off his feet. Still he tried to hold on but it was too much. His hold slipped and he was flung into the stone wall with a pained whine.

He pulled himself unsteadily to his feet, but by the time he had done so, the Bad Skeleton was gone.

Dante whined, then let out a growl of frustration. Favoring his right foreleg, he put his nose to the ground and once again began the hunt. This time he was careful, making sure that the Bad Skeleton and his pack did not know he was following them. He wished briefly for a pack of his own. But his pack was human and not very good at tracking. Humans were less patient with tracking than he was. Big Kitty could help, but she was guarding them and if Dante left to go find her, then he would have to start tracking all over again. Even with Big Kitty to help, that left their humans unprotected.

He tracked the Bad Skeleton for a couple more days, wondering what he could do. He couldn’t follow the man around forever, and he was getting hungry. There was not a lot of food in the Land of the Dead, and though he had taken some from tables and unattended baskets, it was getting harder and harder to find. He would have to go home soon.

A loud squawk from overhead caught his attention, and for a moment he glanced away from his target. There were lots of alebrije that made bird noises, but this one he knew. Up overhead he could see the trailing feathers of Big Birdie, his Boy’s Bird-Friend’s alebrije. There were four smaller birdies flying with her. If Dante could not carry the Bad Skeleton on his own, maybe Big Birdie and her Little Birdies could help him.

When he flew up to meet her he learned that the Little Birdies were not actually little. The smallest of them was as big as he was. Big Birdie recognized him when he flew towards them, and after a couple of quick barks to explain what he wanted, Big Birdie and her Little Birdies followed him back to the ground. The Bad Skeleton had not gone far. Dante tracked him on the ground while the Birdies followed above him. He was hiding in another house, but Dante was ready to flush him out. With the Birdies waiting on the rooftops outside, Dante pawed at the old wooden door. He could hear movement inside, the shuffling of feet. He tapped at the door again. More footsteps. One of the Little Dogs was approaching the door. A third tap, and he heard the Little Dog give a sharp bark. Footsteps again. The rest of the pack, and the Bad Skeleton. The Little Dog yipped again. This time Dante growled and barked back, startling the little pack away from the door. Now they all started barking. He joined the din, determined to make as much noise as possible. One thing he knew about humans, they did not like barking. Especially when they were in a place where they were trying not to be found.

The irritated growl that sounded from inside was definitely human. The door swung inwards and a hooded face stuck out, and Dante made his move. He leaped up, latching his teeth around the arm that was braced in the doorway, his weight dragging the Bad Skeleton forward onto the street. The Pretty Birdie with the long tail dove in to help, swooping down from the rooftop to grip the Bad Skeleton’s hood in her claws, dragging him further away from the house. She released the man just in time for Big Birdie to pick him up off the ground and pull him into the sky, leaving his pack behind.

The Bad Skeleton did not want to come with him. He fought against the Big Birdie, kicking
and screaming angry words. But the Big Birdie was bigger than he was, and much stronger. She held on tightly. The Bad Skeleton had hurt Her Girl. She did not want him running away either.

Big Birdie led them over the city, aiming for a big stone building crowded with many skeletons. Dante flapped along behind her, determined to keep up. When she flew over the stone yard in front of the building, she dropped the Bad Skeleton, scattering his bones on the ground. He started to pull himself together but the Little Birdies all landed on him, pecking and scratching so he could not get away. Spots Birdie and Little Birdie picked at one of his hands, and Pretty Birdie landed in his head, squawking angrily when he yelled at her. Big Birdie landed on his body, settling in so even when he came back together, he could not crawl away. Dante, determined to do his part, chewed on one of the Bad Skeleton’s legs.

It did not take long for the skeletons in the building to come running. At first they tried to scare away the Birdies. Dante would not allow that. He gave a warning growl as Big Birdie squawked at them. Pretty Birdie pecked the Bad Skeleton’s head again and he let out more angry words. Then one of the skeletons seemed to recognize the Bad Skeleton, and called some of his friends. One of them started talking to Big Birdie, telling her that she and her flock were very clever -- and that Dante was a Good Boy.

Dante barked happily, accepting the head scratches that were his due after helping to find the Bad Skeleton. He watched as the other skeletons took the Bad Skeleton away into the building before turning around and running back to the Living World to see His Boy.

Miguel dropped onto his bed, draping one arm over his face. What an exhausting day. Between two pop quizzes, an English test he forgot to study for, and almost being late for physics because he was busy trying to find more information to help Antonio, he was more than ready for this day to be over. But there was still supper with the family to get through, and more homework.

Antonio, seeing her friend’s fatigue phased through the wall to play catch with Soccoro for a while, something Miguel greatly appreciated.

The saving grace of the day was Dante. He burst into the courtyard just after dinner and scrambled into the dining room with such enthusiasm he nearly skidded right into the table. Miguel immediately dropped to his knees to hug him as the dog eagerly barked and licked his face.

“What?” He laughed, nearly falling over under the sheer force of the xolo’s affections. “Easy, boy. I missed you too.”

”Miyo, why don’t you take Dante and your sister out to the yard to play a bit?” Luisa suggested, hoisting Soccoro down from her highchair.

“Okay Mamá. Come on, hermanita. You wanna come play outside with Dante?”

“No!” She insisted, pointing to the counter where Antonio was seated, watching them with a grin.

“Yes, Nio can come too,” Miguel laughed, hauling her up into his arms as Dante skipped around them.

Luisa watched them depart with a fond smile. “He’s so good with her,” she said once her son
was out of earshot. “Look at him, he even plays along with her imaginary friend.”

“He is a sweet boy,” Elena agreed, giving her daughter-in-law a companionable one-armed hug. “If only he had remembered to put his dishes away before he ran off.”

As they crossed into the courtyard, Soccoro began to squirm. “Perrito!” She squealed, reaching for Dante. “Down! Perrito!”

“Ay, okay, okay,” Miguel laughed, setting her down again.

Dante pranced eagerly around her before turning to Antonio and giving a soft whuf. There was somebody here who had not given him pets yet. He was a Good Boy and needed more pets and the Ghost Boy had not given him pets yet.

Antonio hesitated, glancing back and forth between Miguel and his dog. “Can he see me?” Dante had come sniffing around him a time or two before but he’d never been sure if the dog could actually see him, or just felt him nearby.

“It looks like it,” Miguel said with a small shrug. “Maybe alebrije see more than other animals do.”

Curious, Antonio crouched down, offering his hand to sniff. Dante immediately trotted over to him and flopped on his back, displaying his skinny belly in a request for scratches, which the boy happily obliged. “Aw, who’s a good boy? Who’s a good alebrije?”

Miguel smiled, watching Dante wiggle and bark under the boy’s attention. It was good to see him let go like this. The weight that seemed to drag on Antonio appeared to lighten, just a little bit, and for a moment he was acting like a regular ten-year-old boy. Yes, Dante was a good dog.

“Where does he go when he’s not here?” Antonio wondered as Soccoro dropped down next to him. “I don’t always see him in town.”

“I don’t really know,” Miguel answered. “Sometime he hangs out here. Sometimes… sometimes I think he hangs out across the bridge.” He trailed off, eyes going wide with the realization. “Santa Maria -- Dante can cross the bridge.”

“You just said that, but -- “ Antonio’s eyes went sharp as he made the connection as well.

Twin pairs of dark eyes returned to the alebrije in question, who responded with a silly doggy grin, tongue lolling.

If Dante could go back and forth, they could send a message to the other side. They could find a way to help Antonio cross over and --

Miguel dropped to his knees next to the dog. “Dante, were you on the other side of the bridge? Were you with the rest of the family? With Papá Hector?”

Dante rolled onto his belly and barked the affirmative.

“Did you see Nell? Is she with them? Is she okay?”
He barked again, paws scrabbling on the ground.

“Gracias a Dios,” Miguel sighed. He slumped over, scrubbing his hands over his face as relief swept over him. His guilt over what had happened to Nell had been weighing him down like iron chains. Some days his guilt and his fear were so thick he felt like he was choking on them. Now, at last, he felt like he could breathe again.

“If he can go back and forth, do you think he could take something with him? Like a letter?” Antonio asked curiously.

“Maybe?” Honestly Miguel had no idea, but it was worth a shot. “If he doesn’t eat it.”

Which, unfortunately, was exactly what had happened.

Miguel spent less time than he should have on his homework that night, rushing through it as quickly as he could as he contemplated what to write to his family on the other side of the bridge. It took three drafts before he decided that it was better to confirm that Dante actually could carry messages across before he started any multi-page letters. Trying to get Dante to carry the folded up piece of notebook paper in his mouth was not Miguel’s wisest idea as the dog promptly decided to eat it. Antonio’s suggestion of tying it to his leg went little better, as after a few minutes of trying to shake it off, he started gnawing at it until there was nothing left but a few soggy scraps of paper.

After that, Miguel decided it would be best all around to give it a rest for the night. At this rate Dante might get sick from eating so much paper.

The little xolo followed him everywhere he went for the next several days. From the moment he woke up in the morning to the moment he went to sleep. He even hung around in the schoolyard during lunch breaks while Miguel played fútbol with his friends. Having learned by now not to get between the boys and their ball, Dante ran back and forth across the field, keeping pace with them the whole time. And when Miguel and Antonio took the occasional night-time stroll, Dante trotted proudly at their side.

He even followed Miguel and his friends to Arturo’s house when they went over to study for their physics exam. But as they crossed the threshold into the house, Dante hung back, giving a nervous whine.

Miguel looked back curiously. “What is it, boy? You can come in. Arturo’s Mamá loves dogs. She might even have some treats for you.”

Dante pawed the ground uncertainly, glancing around the yard, then followed Miguel inside, walking so close that the boy almost tripped over him when he walked.

“What’s up with Dante?” Arturo wondered, giving the dog a weird look. “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“What’s up with Dante?” Arturo wondered, giving the dog a weird look. “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

“Except the ghost,” Mateo pointed out casually.

“¿Quée?”

“Oh come on. Miguel at least should know this one,” Mateo said. “Your family didn’t ban everything fun.” At his friends’ blank look, the boy sighed. “The black shadow? Come on, everyone’s at least heard of it.”

Arturo looked distinctly uncomfortable, the shifting grip on the strap of his book bag, drawing his friend’s eye.
“You’ve seen it.”

The other boy shook his head. “No. It’s nothing. It was late and I was probably just imagining --”

“What did you see?” Miguel asked, unable to contain his curiosity. Was it possible that one of his friends was like him? Could Arturo see spirits as well?

“No fue nada.” But the other boys had drawn in close, listening eagerly. Arturo sighed. “A couple weeks ago I woke up in the middle of the night to get some water. I was heading for the kitchen when I thought I saw something move by the old shed. I went to check it out but I couldn’t -- there was nothing there, but I just…. I swear I felt something. Which is dumb, right? Ghosts aren’t real. That stuff is just made up.”

“Says who?”

“Science!” Arturo insisted vehemently. “There is absolutely zero reliable proof of paranormal activity. Machine results can be faked and witness testimony is highly unreliable. Delusions brought on by fear and stress and -- and -- and overactive imagination. There is no such thing as ghosts!”

Okay… note to self: do not ever tell Arturo about the ghosts… Miguel thought to himself, shifting uncomfortably. Beside him, Dante glanced towards the old shed and gave a soft growl.

“Man, you are no fun,” Mateo sighed with a shake of his head. “I’m just messing with you. Of course ghosts aren’t real. You’ve got to chill out. Come on, you said your Mamá was making empanadas and they’re calling my name.” Not willing to take ‘no’ for an answer, the boy wrapped his arm companionably around his friend’s disgruntled shoulders and shepherded him into the house.

Miguel paused outside the kitchen door and glanced back at the shed. Even from across the yard he could feel a faint presence emanating from it. He frowned in thought, glancing down at where Dante waited beside him. There was something there, he was sure of it. And he intended to find out what it was.

“Where are we going?” Antonio asked that night when Miguel met him in the courtyard.

“Just a friend’s house.”

The boy goggled. “You told one of your friends? I thought you weren’t going to tell anyone.”

“I’m not. I didn’t. I just…” Miguel hesitated, rubbing one hand absently over his other forearm. “He said something today and I wanted to check it out.”

“You said you don’t go into people’s houses,” Antonio accused as he followed Miguel out of the courtyard. He knew Miguel could just appear wherever he needed to be, but Antonio couldn’t always follow him when he did that, so most of the time they just walked. “You said it’s rude.”

“I don’t. And it is. But… I’m worried about him.” It was a relief to say it aloud. It had been in the back of his head all night but he couldn’t bring it up without upsetting Arturo and possibly outing himself as a … what was he, anyway? A medium? Something like that. Another thing to ask Nell
when I get the chance. “There’s...I think there’s something there. In the house. I couldn’t really get close enough while I was there to get an idea of what it was, but Dante didn’t like it.”

That in itself told him exactly how serious it was. Dante liked everyone and everything. Well, except for Ernesto De la Cruz, and Miguel couldn’t fault him in the slightest for that.

Sensing his urgency, Antonio picked up speed and they both broke into a run, not stopping until they reached the street where Arturo’s house was located.

The crawling feeling that Miguel had felt was stronger now. So strong that he could pick it up from outside the hacienda. There was definitely something here. Something angry. No wonder Arturo was scared.

“Man, what is this thing?” Miguel muttered under his breath. “Antonio, do you know anything about -- what? What is it?”

The boy was standing several feel away, face ashen, gazing at the house with undisguised terror. “Your friend… he lives here?”

“Yeah, moved here last year. What, do you know something?”

“I -- lo -- lo siento. I can’t -- “ Antonio backed away unsteadily, shaking his head. “We can’t be here. He’ll see. We -- we have to go. He’ll know -- “

“Who?” Miguel asked, approaching cautiously, not wanting to spook the boy further. “Who will know? Antonio, who is haunting the house?”

“Lo siento -- “ His image flickered briefly, and he disappeared from sight.

For the first time Miguel felt he could appreciate how his family felt when he disappeared during Día de los Muertos. The first place he checked was his house. The courtyard was empty, as was his and Soccoro’s bedrooms. There was no trace of Antonio in Mariachi Plaza, the church, the cemetery, or any of the other places that he and Antonio liked to go walking.

He was just returning to check the house again when he remembered something Antonio had said a few days before.

“I like the attic. It feels...safe. Happy.”

Of course. The attic had been Miguel’s safe place growing up, and Mamá Coco’s before that. It only made sense that it would be one for Antonio too.

Sure enough, when Miguel flashed himself up to the attic hideaway, he found Antonio curled up in the corner of what had once been his De la Cruz shrine, his face hidden. Currently the worn wooden surfaces were covered with scraps of sheet music and family photos -- a marked improvement, in his opinion.

Miguel moved silently across the floor to sit next to his friend, close enough to comfort, but far enough away that, he hoped, Antonio wouldn’t feel crowded. Staying silent, not pulling him close or offering some other kind of comfort was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. But this was not the time. Antonio didn’t need that from him now.
It was some time before his friend could bring himself to speak, and when he did it was barely audible. “Lo siento…”

“Hey, you have nothing to apologize for, chico,” Miguel reassured him. “You don’t ever have to be ashamed of being afraid.”

Antonio said nothing, wrapping his arms tighter around his knees and sinking down farther into their protection.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” Miguel continued after a moment. “Whatever happened. You don’t have to say a word until you’re ready. And if you don’t ever want to talk about it, that’s okay too.”

“But -- what about your friend?” Antonio sniffled.

“I’ll figure it out. Whatever’s there, I’ll take care of it. You don’t ever have to go back there if you don’t want to.” It might be a little harder to work out what it was he was up against but that wouldn’t deter him. He wasn’t afraid of hard work.

“But you’re going to go back.”

“My friend lives there. If there’s something there, if he’s in danger, I can’t leave him.”

Antonio did not reply, hardly moving a muscle until Miguel started to wonder if ghosts could fall asleep. He was starting to feel the late hour himself, but when he stood to leave, Antonio reached out and caught his sleeve.

“That house… the spirit there… I know what it is.”

Miguel didn’t speak, waiting with bated breath for the boy to finish.

“It’s my father.”

Chapter End Notes

And there ends chapter 18!

As always, thanks for reading. If you want more content, fun theories and character art, going me on tumblr at CalliopesQuill!

Callie out!
Chapter 19: Discovery

Chapter Summary

The trial of Rivera and Rey vs De la Cruz begins

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry this one took so long. It's been fighting me something fierce and I had to get a lot of help with it.

Thanks so much to PerlogAnnwyl for all the help with the legal stuff and all the dialogue in the courtroom scene. She wrote majority of the dialogue, and I could not have done this chapter without her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 19: Discovery

“Señor ... Lo siento, but.... I am not sure I heard you correctly. You are saying.... You wish to plead ‘innocent’?”

“Oh no, you have heard me correctly, Señor,” Ernesto said smoothly, leaning back in his uncomfortable metal chair. The furnishings in the conference rooms of the police station left much to be desired. The ugly side of industrial with lumpy vinyl cushions in truly unfortunate shades of green and orange. The star sneered in distaste.

Aldo Moreno had been a lawyer for many years, for decades in life and in death. He had been a legacy, hired on with his father and uncle’s law firm before the ink on his certificate had even dried. Ernesto De la Cruz was not the first client in his history to demand such a thing, however difficult it would be to achieve. “You do realize, Señor De la Cruz, that there is video evidence of you tossing a living child from the stadium tower.”

“There is also video of me supposedly flying, and playing a guitar while standing on the back of a galloping horse,” Ernesto pointed out. “And while I have prided myself on performing all of my own stunts in those films, you know that there was some assistance behind the scenes.”

There was, in Moreno’s opinion, a big difference between the harness and wires required to make De la Cruz fly, and what it would take to convincingly fake throwing a child off a tower. Not for the first time, he wondered why he had accepted this man as a client. He had been summoned when De la Cruz had first been arrested, two years earlier. Moreno had represented his share of narcissists in the past, and this man certainly fit the bill. His escape the first time had brought Moreno no end of trouble, even putting him under investigation under suspicion of aiding his client. He hadn’t, of course. But De la Cruz had certainly tried.

He’d been charming at first, under the dust, with splattered food staining the once-pristine
white suit. But then, he always had been. If there was anything Ernesto De la Cruz knew how to do, it was put on a show. It took a great deal to ruffle his composure. Moreno had been De la Cruz’s lawyer in life as well as in death, and the only time he had ever truly seen his client less than fully in control was on the big screen at the Sunrise Spectacular.

That moment had caused him to re-evaluate everything he knew about his most lucrative client. He had handled cases of intellectual property theft for the man before. It wasn’t uncommon when one was that famous. People came crawling out of the woodwork, looking for their fifteen minutes of fame. Most of them had been easy enough to scare off, their stories more full of holes than a beggar’s shoes. Everyone knew that Ernesto De la Cruz wrote his own songs. Kept them in a little leather-bound notebook that he kept on his person until the day he died.

There were a few brave souls, however, who refused to be scared off by the big name and the fancy law firm, but even they went silent after a time. El Señor De la Cruz had been particularly generous with them, far more than Moreno had wanted to be. Some he even met with personally to discuss their claims. The meetings, to Moreno’s knowledge, had seemed to work. One or two of them relocated to the United States soon after. Another was killed in a tragic car accident a couple of weeks later.

He hadn’t thought much of it at the time. Just an unfortunate accident. But after the Sunrise Spectacular, with De la Cruz asking him what it would take to make the charges against him disappear…. Maybe it wasn’t so much of an accident after all. His client was less than pleased when Moreno told him that the events of that night could not be so easily swept away. Señor De la Cruz did not like to be told “no”. But what else could he have said? There were thousands of people in the stadium that night who saw him throw a living child from the tower. Such an event would not disappear from the collective consciousness so easily.

“The Riveras have ruined my reputation with their lies,” De la Cruz continued. “Attacked me in my own home, hunted me through the stadium before the Sunrise Spectacular. They sent their alebrije to attack me. Dropped me in front of the police station like so much worthless kindling!”

And, if the charges against him were accurate, it was nothing compared to what he put the Riveras and their living friend through. But it was not Moreno’s job to believe in his client’s innocence. Simply to convince others that he was, and that they should do the same. It might have been easier if De la Cruz had not escaped police custody two years before. In Moreno’s experience, men only disappeared for that long when they had something to hide.

Nell had been to court a few times in her life. Her mother was a criminal lawyer, after all. She’d gone more than once to see her mother in action -- for cases of theft only, as her mother was afraid she might see something traumatizing in a more serious criminal case -- but never for something this big. It was a surreal experience, walking into the courthouse to be part of an actual trial. Especially as she was the only living human in a building full of skeletons.

She was feeling more than a little conspicuous since De la Cruz was arrested. Prior to that she had at least some degree of anonymity. Of course, she had felt a bit self-conscious, when people realized she was alive, but nobody had harassed her over it. Now with her publicized involvement with the De la Cruz case, people started actively looking for her. Having people gasp and gape when they saw her face was bad enough. Now when they saw her they hounded her with questions about her involvement with De la Cruz and the Riveras. It had gotten to the point that she flew with
Buttons to the studio whenever she could. But Buttons wasn’t always around -- she may be Nell’s alebrije but she had her own life, after all -- and there were times when Nell had to go on foot. On those occasions, Rosita offered the use of one of her shawls for Nell to cover her hair and shade her face.

She wore it now, as she and the Riveras and Señor Bernal made their way up the stone steps to the courthouse. The building was packed with reporters and fans. Some shouted questions when they saw the Riveras approach. Some shouted encouragement. Others jeered and hissed. A row of officers had formed a barricade, holding back the crowd.

On their way inside Nell heard one officer tell a woman, “Unfortunately Señora this case involves a minor, so all proceedings will be kept private.”

Nell walked alongside the assembled Riveras as they followed Imelda’s determined, commanding stride. Nell admired her for that ability, to have such presence even when she was so tiny. Like Hector, she found it much easier to simply detour around people or slip between them. He wasn’t doing that today. Instead he kept pace with is wife, their fingers twined in what Nell thought was an instinctive gesture of comfort for both of them. This process would not be an easy one for any of them, but for him most of all. Every day they were in court he would have to spend in the presence of the man who betrayed him. And in the end the fate of his murderer wouldn’t even be up to him, which Nell thought both a blessing and a curse.

As with the Department of Family Reunions -- and most other places in the Land of the Dead - Nell noticed an abundance of calaveras in the decor. In the panes of the windows, the wrought-iron of the clerks’ desks, and the inlays of the wooden floors. It was funny how it had become so familiar to her after only a couple of weeks. It would be weird, after a year of living here, to go home and not see the stylized skulls everywhere she went.

Imelda led their party to the desk of one of the clerks, who seemed to know them on sight.

“Ah, Riveras?” The young-looking skeleton at the desk inquired. “Case number?”

Imelda nodded. “Sí. 201995N39272”

“Ah! Rey and Rivera vs De la Cruz. Preliminary hearing, correct?” The young skeleton read off a clipboard.

Imelda nodded again.

“Council chamber K, down the hall to your left. You will be heard in Court Room 3, at 10:30. As you are aware Señor Bernal, you will be sitting in front of the Honorable Judge Medina de Salinas. When it is time for the hearing to begin, the family goes through the door that says Viewing Gallery, plaintiffs go through the main door,” The skeleton explained.

“Gracias.” Señor Bernal said.

They set off together towards the courtroom.

Before they entered the main council chamber, Señor Bernal led the family into one of the small meeting rooms at the back for some last-minute council. Their case would not be an easy one,
so they would all have to restrain any protests they might have to what was said. There had been some concern that the judge would be biased in De la Cruz’s favor, but the lawyer assured them that if she showed any kind of partiality that there were channels through which a protest could be issued and a new judge requested. The biggest weakness in their case would be the lack of witnesses to the majority of the crimes. They could be reasonably sure that Ernesto would claim that the Riveras simply made up the story in order to discredit him. Given the victim of many of his crimes was quite literally a world away, there was a very real possibility that the charges issued on Miguel’s behalf would be dismissed because Miguel would be unable to testify. This had not sat particularly well with the Riveras or with Nell when Señor Bernal had cautioned them about this during a previous meeting, but there was little they could do if that was the decision the judge made.

The other difficulty with their case was Nell herself. The court would question what would cause a living spirit to cross willingly into the Land of the Dead. Attempting to stop a kidnapping would be a reasonable answer, but once again they had no other witnesses to the event. The customs guards that she had fought with when she first crossed over would be called as witnesses should the trial progress, but as they had not seen De la Cruz’s face themselves, they would probably not be particularly helpful in this matter.

With their meeting concluded they stepped into the hall. They were about to head through the doors together when Señor Bernal called them back.

“Family goes through the door that says Viewing Gallery, plaintiffs go through the main door,” The skeleton explained.

The Riveras exchanged looks.

“It will be ok, Mamá,” Coco said to Imelda. She then glanced at Héctor. “We will be ok.” Whatever happened today, they would handle it together.

When they got to the door that said Court Room 3 Viewing Gallery, they split, but not before Coco hugged both of her parents.

Nell gave the family their space, wrapping her arms around herself as she glanced towards the heavy wooden door. And wished her family could be here to support her too.

It was kind of surreal, Hector thought, to think that this was really happening. Two years of waiting and worrying, of trying to rebuild the life that had been taken from him, had finally led to this. It was not what he expected. Señor Bernal had explained the process to them in detail, and Nell had shared her own knowledge of the proceedings as well, but he wasn’t sure he’d ever really be ready for what was coming. He would have to take the stand, to testify against the man who had been a brother to him. They said time heals all wounds, but Hector did not believe that. Ernesto’s betrayal had left a scar that he didn’t think would ever truly fade, and each time he recounted the night of his murder was like drawing a blade over the surface just when it had finally closed over again.

All he wanted was to put this behind him. To live his afterlife with his wife and his family without old grudges and decades-old heartbreak rearing its ugly head every other day. He wanted
their lives to go back to normal, so his daughter and his family could leave the house without being swarmed by reporters. He wanted to say it didn’t matter, to just let it go so they could all move on. But Ernesto needed to answer for what he had done, not just to Hector, but to Imelda and Coco and Miguel too. What he had done to Hector was bad enough, but in Hector’s eyes what Ernesto had put his family through was unforgivable.

The council chamber, when they entered, felt cavernous to him. Underneath the high, arched beams of the ceiling, there was very little decoration. The three tall windows on the left side of the room were decorated with calaveras, each face portraying a symbol of justice. The face on the right had a set of stylized scales across its forehead, the one on the right had a sword. The skull in the center was undecorated, but was blindfolded. Behind the judge’s bar was a carved fresco depicting the pyramids of the lower level under a starry sky. At the center was a skeletal Justice herself, blindfolded, and holding the sword and scales.

Besides the one the one they entered through, there were several entrance ways into the room. The one behind a large wooden bar, inlaid with the coat of arms of the Land of the Dead, Hector assumed was for the judge. There was another opposite the one they had come through, which he guessed was where he would enter. Two more were set into the back. One he assumed was for witnesses or other parties, and the other led to a public gallery, where the rest of the Riveras were taking their seats.

On the left side of the room was what looked like a large but simple rectangular theater box, empty today as there were no jurors present for preliminary hearings. Immediately to the right of the judge’s box was a witness stand. Opposite the juror’s box, surrounded in iron bars, was the dock.

Señor Bernal directed Imelda, Hector and Nell to their seats on the left hand side of the courtroom at the plaintiff’s desk.

Nervous, Hector turned around to see Julio, Coco, Victoria, Rosita, and the twins in the spectators’ benches behind them, behind a study wooden fence. Guarded by an officer. Hector fidgeted in his seat, drumming his fingers against his leg and tapping his foot until Imelda took his hand, as much to calm him as herself.

Nell wasn’t much better off. She had pulled the scarf from her hair and was running it absently between her fingers as she shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Court regulations being what they were, she didn’t even have the comfort of being able to wear her own clothes. She’d had to borrow a black skirt and blouse from Victoria, and even with the alterations it was still a little tight in the waist. In some ways it felt more like a costume than regular clothing on her, another part in the massive production that was the trial proceedings. Knowing on some level what to expect didn’t make any of this any easier. It made her that much more aware of what could go wrong for them. They would be going through to a trial court, of that much she was certain. But whether De la Cruz’s lawyer would succeed in laying charges against them as well… That she couldn’t say.

A few moments before the hearing was to begin, the door on the right hand side of the courtroom opened, and Ernesto De la Cruz stepped into the room, followed closely by his lawyer. He looked well, for a man who had been dumped on the steps of the police station by a flock of giant birds and a very good dog, and had spent the last week in prison. But then, being as well-remembered as he still was, any injuries he would have sustained would have healed up relatively quickly. He was dressed in white, a slightly more understated charro suit than he would normally have preferred, but chosen with deliberate care.
I see you, villain, Nell thought, fighting to keep her expression neutral as they approached the defendant’s desk. You with your fucking villain mustache. I see you. She could tell at a glance exactly what he was trying to do with his clothing choices, as she had done it herself with the characters in her books. White for innocence, and the modestly decorated suit would remind them of who he was without shoving it in their faces.

Imelda shifted in her seat and this time it was Hector who laid a restraining hand over hers. As much as she would like to act, she could not do so now. They had laid the case at the feet of the law, and they would have to rely on the law to resolve it.

Señor Bernal, seeing this, nodded his approval at Hector, who nodded back.

De la Cruz ignored them completely. He too had been well-coached in what to expect today. He would play the part for the public to try to salvage what was left of his reputation.

Preliminary hearings were usually public events, but not this time. With a minor involved, it was standard procedure to keep the trial private to protect their privacy. This was something the Riveras were grateful for. There had been a lot of pointing as they made their way through the courthouse, a lot of whispering, and for the Riveras it was not an entirely comfortable situation. Since the moment Ernesto De la Cruz’s crimes came to light, their entire family had been under a magnifying glass. Hector’s murder was something personal and painful, and it had become a kind of public spectacle.

Things had quieted significantly in the last year, and for a time it seemed like the people had forgotten about them and they could go back to their regular lives. But now that De la Cruz had finally been arrested again and they were going to trial, they were once again thrust into a very unwelcome spotlight.

It was almost a relief when the bailiff, a stout fellow in a trim blue uniform, called for order and announced the arrival of the judge. “All rise. Department five of the Superior Court of the Land of the Dead for Court case 20185N39272: Rivera and Rey vs De la Cruz. The Honorable Medina de Salinas, judge presiding. Please be seated, come to order.”

Everyone stood as a short female skeleton in perfectly pressed black robes entered the courtroom through the door next to the judge’s bench and took her seat behind it. Her hair was ashen brown, streaked with grey, covered by a short white horsehair wig. It framed a fine-boned face with a crown of green and violet swirls across her brow.

“Please be seated,” the bailiff said. “Court is now in session.”

The judge took a moment to glance over the packed courtroom and then check over that her documents were in the correct order before she spoke. “This case incredibly complex, partially due to the number of alleged crimes, partially due to the nature of most of the plaintiffs for the prosecution. I would like to ask the defense if they’ve been able to contact the party of plaintiff to Subject MR?”

It took Nell a moment to realize they were talking about Miguel. Her mother had explained to her once that in court, minor’s names could not be spoken because they couldn’t consent to their names being put out publicly.

“No, your honor,” Señor Bernal said. “As he continues to reside in the Land of the Living, we will not be able to contact him until next Día de los Muertos.”

“Then for the time being, his case shall be struck out against the defense, and removed from these proceedings.” The judge declared, taking a moment to make a note in the record book in front
Señor Moreno smirked at the other lawyer, who ignored him. Imelda’s hands clenched into fists against the arm of her chair. Nell’s mouth pressed in a thin line, clenched so tightly she could have sworn she heard her teeth creak. That scum-sucking, egotistical slimeball threw Miguel off a skyscraper and he was just going to get away with it? Oh, hell no!

“Señor Bernal,” the judge said when she looked back up again. “When you are ready, you may proceed with the indictment.”

“Gracias, Your Honor.” Señor Bernal stood to read his prepared statement. “As you are aware, there are several crimes with which my clients would like to charge the defense. Party 1, Señor Hector Rivera presses charges against Señor De la Cruz on accounts of his own murder via the use of the poison arsenic. The time and location of which were the first of December 1921, at roughly 10:30 PM at Sta Maria de la Rivera, Ciudad de México. On this account, I would like to draw your honor’s attention to exhibit 1 through 7 in bundle A of this case file. In order, the statement of Señor Rivera himself, a coroner’s report from the Land of the Living detailing the high amounts of arsenic found in Señor Rivera’s bones when he was exhumed last year by his living family, a doctor’s report dated September 1921 claiming that Señor De la Cruz was suffering from syphilis, and a prescription for 10mg of Salvarsan per day -- “

“Objection your honor, those documents were my client’s, and we would like them struck from the records,” Señor Moreno said, pushing to his feet.

“Overruled. These documents were recovered from the ofrenda of a private De la Cruz collector several years ago. Had your client had any need for them, he would have appealed to reclaim those documents then. As of now I see no reason to strike them from the record. Please continue, Señor Bernal.”

Señor Moreno sat, looking less than pleased.

“Gracias, your honor. Now -- hm, where was I?” He glanced down at his notes. “Ah, yes. Exhibit 5 -- copies of the letters from Señor Rivera to his family back in Santa Cecilia, left on the family ofrenda last Día de los Muertos, stating that he was travelling with ‘Tio Nesto’, an extract of the script to the film El Camino a Casa, where dialogue from the film matches Señor Rivera’s statement to the letter that involves poison, and be-roll recovered from the Sunrise Spectacular incident two years ago.”

Judge Medina looked at the paperwork in front of her. “The court shall allow this charge to go through against De la Cruz.”

“Objection, your honor!” Señor Moreno protested.

“Sustained. Señor Moreno?”

“As far as my client is concerned, he is a cultural icon of Mexico! If he had committed such a heinous crime, don’t you think someone would have discovered this before now? Countless books have been written on my client. There are historians that specialize on his life and career! Don’t you think someone would have noticed?”

“Have you presented any of these books or historians for the court?” The judge asked pointedly.

“Ah -- no. Not yet,” Señor Moreno admitted.
“Then I would recommend you do that, as well as find witnesses to your client’s moral character,” Judge Medina suggested.

“Yes, your honor.”

“Señor Bernal, your client’s other charges?”

“Señor Hector Rivera would also like to press charges for intent to grievous bodily harm, including aggravated assault, and attempted manslaughter – both of which occurred on the night of the second of November, 2017. The prosecution would like to present to the court exhibit 8 through 10, a statement from both Imelda and Hector Rivera, both dated the 10th of November 2017, in interviews with the policia of the Land of the Dead, as well as this flooring plan of De la Cruz tower from the Land of the Dead Land Registry and Development, drawn up with De la Cruz’s approval in May 1951.”

The judge frowned. “I’d like to know, what was the delay between the event and the interview for?”

“Señor Rivera collapsed from the strain of nearly being forgotten that night. It was several days before he was able to regain consciousness, and after that was bed-bound by the family doctor’s healing,” Señor Bernal explained.

“I see,” Judge Medina nodded. “If you could find exhibit to support this statement, the court would like to see it. As of now however, the court sees no reason not to press these charges.”

“Objection, your honor,” Señor Moreno said again.

Nell held back a sound of frustration. The trial had barely begun and she was already getting sick of the defense lawyer’s protestations. He sounded like a broken record, and she knew that this was just the beginning.

“Sustained?” The judge said, a little puzzled.

“Much of this incident relies only on hearsay. Imelda Rivera allegedly only found her, at the time estranged, husband and their great-great-grandson after only one of these incidents,” Señor Moreno argued. “The only witnesses to the other incident were Señor Rivera and MR – one of whom was incredibly unwell at the time. The other was a minor in a state of panic.”

“Sustained,” Medina decided. “You raise a valid point Señor Moreno, as to the lack of witnesses. In this case the prosecution will require more evidence to support the charges. Meanwhile, I would like to overrule your other statement, as many studies have proved that those suffering from being nearly forgotten are every bit as lucid as you or I If you wish to disprove me by bringing exhibit to the contrary to the court, I’d encourage it. The case of MR vs De la Cruz has been struck out, so we move onto the charges of Señorita Penelope Rey. Señor Bernal?”

“Señorita Rey would also like to press charges of kidnapping – “

“Objection!” Señor Moreno protested, standing up again. “My client was only made aware of Señorita Rey when he was viciously attacked by her alebrijes.”

Liar, Nell thought with a frown, refusing to look in the defense’s direction. Damn dirty liar. You were fully damn aware when you were trying to strangle me.
“Overruled,” the judge declared. “If you would please let the prosecution finish?”

“Señorita Rey has a rare power: she is a *nagual*, as identified by her and the Head Archivist, and addressed in this book -- Exhibit 1. It allows her to remove herself from her body, and walk as a spirit in the Land of the Living, and is what allowed her to cross the bridge to the Land of the Dead. It is an ability she realized that MR had as well, after the incident two years ago. She acted as a mentor for him, teaching how to use his powers responsibly. It was this ability she used to cross the bridge in pursuit of her friend MR on the night of the second of November 2019. In her statement, exhibit 2, she states that he was kidnapped by De la Cruz, and as the only living adult aware of his condition she followed in pursuit. Upon recovering MR, she stated that *Señor* De la Cruz grabbed her and held her back. She got free, and both she and MR attempted to cross the bridge together, but it was closing, so she sacrificed herself to allow him to cross. This is supported by exhibits 3, 4, and 5 -- witness testimony from the customs guards on duty at the time. As my client firmly places the blame for this incent with *Señor* De la Cruz, she would also like to present a charge of attempted manslaughter, as we are unaware in what state *Señorita* Rey’s body is currently in the Land of the Living. Exhibit 6, a book found by the Head Archivist, implies that *Señorita* Rey should have died two weeks ago.”

“Objection!”

“Sustained,” Judge Medina allowed.

“My client never intended for her to end up in the Land of the Dead.” *Señor* Moreno said. “As far as he is aware, she crossed the bridge of her own duress. While the Riveras claim they had their descendant, *Señorita* Rey isn’t a Rivera. She isn’t even a trained member of any constabulary, so that raises the question as to why she crossed the bridge at all. My client and I would like the prosecution to address what entitles this woman to think she can teach a minor. Does she have a degree or any kind of certification? Also, who willingly runs into the Land of the Dead? The defense would like to call in a full mental evaluation for *Señorita* Rey. As for the charges of attempted manslaughter, she seems pretty alive today.”

The judge was quiet for a moment before coming to a decision. “While I will let the prosecution press their charges on the grounds of evidence to support their charge, the court also sees and seconds the defense’s queries. Thus I would like the prosecution to gain a witness for *Señorita* Rey’s moral character, and for a psychological evaluation to be conducted.”

“What?!” Nell’s voice sounded, shrill with outrage, as she shot a furious look at the defense. Neither looked back at her, but she could see the smug tilt of Ernesto’s mouth, and wished once again that her alebrije had done a little more damage when they dropped him in front of the police station.

“Nell, now is not the time to argue,” *Señor* Bernal murmured to her.

She closed her eyes, taking a steadying breath, flexing her fingers tensely against the arm of her chair. God damn it…

“Is there an issue, *Señor* Bernal?” Judge Medina asked.

“No, your honor. Just taking instruction from my client. We will comply,” *Señor* Bernal said.

“Good. Does the prosecution have any more charges from the client?” The judge asked.

“One more. *Señorita* would also like to press charges of intent to cause grievous bodily harm on *Señor* De la Cruz for the aforementioned actions too.”
“I will allow it.” Medina glanced down to review her notes before peering over the bar at Ernesto. “Señor Ernesto De la Cruz, faced with these charges under these charges under Sections 9, 12 and 16 of the laws of the Land of the Dead, how do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” Ernesto said emphatically.

“Well then, since no decision has been made, I declare that this proceeding has officially begun.” Judge Medina said decisively, banging the gavel on the desk. “Court dismissed.”

To say that Nell and the Riveras were less than pleased was an understatement. Señor Bernal suggested that it might be best all around if they retreated to one of the conference rooms at the back of the courtroom to vent before rejoining the public. The moment the door closed behind them, every single one of them exploded in exclamations of fury. That all that Ernesto had put Miguel through was to be simply brushed aside was outrageous. And to request that Nell go for a psych evaluation? Completely absurd!

Señor Bernal paused at that. Speaking objectively, if he had been working for the defense he would have requested the same thing. However that was not what his clients needed to hear right now. “Por favor - Señores, Señoras … I know you are angry, but we need to take a breath and look at this rationally. That the charges laid on behalf of Miguel have been dismissed is regrettable, but without his statement, there is not much we can do. What we can do is act on what we have been given. Nell, everyone in this room knows that you are a stable, intelligent woman. The defense has made their accusations as a way to discredit you, but we can turn this to our advantage. I have no doubt that any psychologist that you meet with will find you completely sane, but this is also an opportunity to deliver sort of -- an emotional impact statement, as it were.”

That suggestion, at least, was enough to give Nell pause. The lawyer had a point.

The others seemed to think so too.

“Maybe…talking to someone wouldn’t be such a bad thing.” Victoria said softly, with a concerned look towards Nell. She hadn’t told anyone about Nell’s breakdown two weeks before, and she seemed better now than she was. Still Victoria worried.

She sighed, dragging one hand through her hair. Oh, she did not want to do this. There was no shame in needing to see a therapist for any reason -- of course there wasn’t. But it was definitely a place of vulnerability, and she’d been feeling vulnerable enough since she fell off that bridge. Which, she realized, might be exactly the point. “Well… couldn’t hurt.” And if it helped with their case, she’d do what she had to. “Okay, how do we do this?”

Chapter End Notes

So… that was fun. This is going to be a long road for the Riveras and for Nell. I will not
be covering the whole trial, but I will make reference to the proceedings when they are relevant. Next chapter is back to Miguel! I think I am going to try to keep to this alternating format as much as possible until I get to the point where I can merge the two halves of the story again.

(Also bonus points if you recognized the "I see you, villain" line. It's from a show called Sense8, which I highly recommend.)

Thanks so much for being so patient with me. This took much longer than I thought it would. Life gets in the way of writing sometimes.

I hope to have the next chapter up in a couple weeks. Until then, this is Calliope signing off!
Chapter 20: Hitting the Books

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! Sorry it's been so long. This chapter has been fighting me a lot. Or rather, certain sections didn't want to be concluded.

I want to give a big than you to my betas and to all of you for sticking with me!

Now on with the chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 20: Hitting the Books

Miguel supposed it said something that the town archivist greeted him by name the moment he walked through the door. He’d spent more than enough time there in the last two years, digging up anything he could about Hector and his connection to Ernesto De la Cruz. He waved back to them, pasting a cheerful smile on his face as he approached the desk. Two years of digging had taught him how to research, so at least now he knew what he was looking for. The most accurate records of who lived where were the parish records and the municipal census.

Miguel knew from previous conversations that he was looking for a date sometime in the late 1930’s, but that was all he had. After dropping the bombshell of the identity of the dark presence, Antonio had refused to divulge any more information. He couldn’t even say his father’s name. Something terrible had happened in that house, something that had scarred Antonio so deeply it may have prevented him from being able to cross over properly.

It wasn’t a lot to go on, but it was enough. And Miguel was determined to figure out what happened before someone else got hurt.

Marisol the archivist, an older woman with graying hair and a neat cotton dress, smiled when he requested the records. “Got a new project, Miguel?”

He nodded. “Doing some research for a friend.”

“More family history?”

“No this time,” he answered. “There’s a new kid in our class and his parents wanted to know about the history of their old house, but they didn’t know where to start.”

“Not the old Acosta place? The one that nice family from Argentina moved into?” She asked.

“Yeah,” Miguel nodded. This might be easier than he thought. Maybe Marisol knew who had lived there and he wouldn’t have to spend the afternoon attempting to read the indecipherable handwriting of the parish clerks. “You know them?”
“Oh sì, of course! My nephew, he works with Señor Campana. He is a very nice man.”

“I meant about the house’s previous owners. Before Señora Acosta.”

“There was no one before Señora Acosta,” she told him. “Not for a long time. People did not like the house. They thought it was haunted. Maldito.”

Well, they weren’t wrong, Miguel thought to himself.

“Of course, we all know there isn’t really ghosts,” Marisol continued as she scanned through the archive’s card catalog for the documents he would need. “Probably just the creaking of an old house, or some silly teenagers making mischief.”

“Ah… yeah. Probably.” That was what it was. Totally not the spirit of a very very bad man who may or may not have murdered his son. Nope. Not at all.

With her list complete, Marisol went to search through the archives for the census records, leaving Miguel alone with his thoughts.

He leaned against the desk, fingers tapping absently on the worn wooden surface, picking out what he realized a moment later were the notes to Poco Loco. A sure sign on his own nerves. He always found himself tapping out that song when he was anxious. There was so much riding on his finding out who owned that house. It wasn’t just for Antonio’s sake, but for Arturo’s as well. What if the shadow hurt him? There would be nothing he could do to stop it.

And that was a whole other problem to get through. Finding the name was one thing, but then what? He was not at all equipped to deal with angry spirits, but what other option did he have? As much as he would love to leave this to someone older and more experienced, there didn’t seem to be anyone else for him to turn to.

He stepped back, taking a steadying breath. One step at a time, Miguel. Name first.

Marisol returned a few moments later, a small stack of hand-bound books in her gloved hands. She placed them gently on the counter and pushed them towards Miguel. “Now I know I don’t have to tell you to be careful with these. You know how delicate they can be.”

He nodded. “Sì, Señora. I will be careful.” There was a small box of disposable latex gloves on the desk a couple of feet away. While not strictly necessary to wear with some of the documents, Miguel felt much better about handling them when he had them on. Hands covered and risks of finger-oil-smudging averted, Miguel took the stack of books and went to sit at one of the small library tables in the corner.

This search was a far easier one than his previous one. He started with the oldest of the census records first, dated 1930, figuring that the farther back he went, the more likely he would be to find the name of the family that lived in the house. Census takers at the time had to go door to door to collect the information, so Miguel had to skim over every address on every single page until he found what he was looking for. He found the address about three-quarters of the way through.

In 1930 the house had been owned by one Diego Santana, age 25, and his wife Ignacia. According to the records they had a single child, a seven year old boy named Antonio.

Miguel sat back in his chair, absently tugging the strings of his hood. Antonio Santana. He found him.

With a steadying sigh he set that book aside, marking his page with a bit of scrap paper before
moving onto the next book of records. The census taker appeared to take a similar route through the town the that year, so Miguel was able to find the Santana family much faster than he had before. Diego Santana, age 30. Ignacia de Guzman Santana, age 29. Antonio was no longer listed.

In the 1940 census, neither was his father. After that, the house was not listed at all.

Miguel frowned, tapping his pen absently against his notebook. What could have happened in those ten years that the entire family up and disappeared? They couldn’t all have died. There was one way to find out.

He pushed away from the table, closing and stacking the books to return them to Marisol at the front desk, and made plans to stop by the church tomorrow to take a look at the parish records.

After the silence of the archives it was a relief to step out into the bustle of the town proper. He made a point of sitting in Mariachi Plaza on the way home, just to take in the music and to say hi to whoever happened to be playing. Annetta and Pablo stood on the steps of the gazebo, playing with the rest of their band. They smiled when they saw him, Annetta adding a little flourish with her trumpet when he sat down on a bench nearby.

It was nice to just sit for a while. To not think about ghostly children and evil spirits and friends who might never wake up. To relax and let the music sweep him away.

He stayed until the end of their set, then pushed himself off the bench to say hello.

“Ay, Miguel! Que pasa?” Pablo asked, clapping him companionably on the shoulder. “Haven’t seen you around here in a while.”

“It’s been a little crazy,” Miguel told him with a sheepish shrug. Come to think of it, he hadn’t performed with Pablo or any of the others since before Dia de los Muertos. With everything that had happened, he hadn’t even thought of it.

“Your Abuelita was telling me about the new song you wrote for your family this year,” Annetta told him. “We’ve been dying to hear it.”

“Soon,” Miguel promised her. Maybe he could arrange it as a group number as well? Or at least a duet. Rosa would love that. Maybe not the trumpet, though (Sorry, Annetta). He was still working on transcribing with the key changes.

His thoughts trailed off as he caught sight of a familiar couple moving across the plaza. His mariachi friends followed his gaze as the Reys took a seat at the cafe that Nell used to frequent.

“Has there been any change?” Annetta asked quietly, noting the direction of his gaze.

Miguel shook his head. It had been a couple of days since his last visit to the hospital, and as far as Candela had told him, nothing had changed. “I should go talk to them.”

And bidding goodbye to the other musicians, he made his way across the Plaza.
They looked tired, slouched over the small wooden table, frosty bottles of soda in hand. He could see as he drew nearer that they days that they had spent in wait and worry weighed heavily on them. He wished he could offer them some kind of comfort, or at least tell them the truth so they could at least understand how this had happened. He slowed his pace as doubt swept over him. Should he even approach at all? Maybe they’d rather be left alone. But right as he was considering turning away, Oliver spotted him and waved him over.

“Hey Miguel,” the man said with a tired smile. “How are you doing?”

“Ah -- pretty well,” he answered, tucking his hands uncertainly into the pockets of his hoodie. “Been… kinda’ busy. School… Got a new project I’m working on. How’s…everything?”

“It’s… the same,” Oliver answered, his gaze dropping to the soda bottle in his hand and picking blindly at the corner of the wrapper that had begun to warp from the condensation. “The doctors say… they don’t know what’s wrong with her. They’ve tried everything, run every test… nothing.”

“We’ve decided… it’s time to take her home,” Marta said softly. Her hand moved briefly towards her husband’s, but she held herself back before making contact.

“You’re going back to Canada?”

She nodded. “It’s time. They doctors here, they’ve been wonderful but maybe… maybe being back home will make a difference. And my cases… I’ve taken all the time that I can.”

Miguel nodded his understanding. He’d known it was coming for a while now, but it was still hard to hear. At least with Nell nearby he had the illusion that there was something that he could do, even if it was just to check up on her. With her on the other continent, he wouldn’t even have that.

“You should visit her, before we go,” Oliver suggested. “I think… I think she’d like that.”

“I’d like that too, Señor. I will ask Mamá and Papá.”

Returning to the apartment each day was its own singular kind of heartbreak. In the short months that she had lived here, Nell had made the cozy space her home. When Marta and Oliver had finally made their way here after that awful first night -- exhausted, devastated -- coming into her space like this had almost broken them completely.

There were pens and other drawing implements on almost every surface. Her tablet rested on the coffee table next to one of her many sketchbooks, open to a soft pencil sketch of what they recognized now as the church bell tower. A frayed ribbon strung with multi-colored buttons hung around the window. A frying pan had been left on the kitchen counter, clean but not yet put away. Maybe waiting for her to make breakfast the next morning. The bed was a tumbled mess, the sheets untouched after the paramedics had rushed their daughter to the hospital. This was where their Nell had gone to sleep and never woken up.

They could see what had drawn Nell to Santa Cecilia. The people, the history, the
architecture… It was beautiful. And it felt so wrong to be here without her. They had planned to come down and visit some time over the winter. To be here because of this… it was more than any parent should have to bear.

Oliver sighed, kicking off his shoes and knocking the apartment door behind them. Tia Cara had caught them on the stairs to invite them to dinner, but neither of them felt like socializing tonight.

A heavy silence had fallen over the apartment, quite unlike the companionable one of their own home. They barely spoke as they went through the motions of cooking dinner, acting almost on autopilot. Oliver took over the kitchen while Marta settled on the couch to catch up with what work she could. She’d passed most of her cases on to another partner in her firm, but there were some that she preferred to continue to handle herself. It was hard, almost impossible to focus sometimes, but she owed it to them to at least try.

It was almost a relief when Oliver called her for dinner. Marta closed her laptop, set the files aside and joined him at the kitchen table. Her husband was a great cook. He had taken over early in the relationship, after a few truly disastrous dinner dates where they had ended up getting takeout because she had proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was an awful cook.

But for all his skill, Marta could barely taste what she was eating. Everything had felt sort of surreal and muted ever since that first night. There were moments of daylight, of normality, but they were fleeting at best, and she wondered if she would ever feel all the way normal again until her daughter woke up.

“Are we doing the right thing?”

The words were out before she had even realized she’d spoken them aloud.

Oliver remained silent for a moment then sighed, setting his fork and knife down on his plate. “I don’t know,” he confessed softly. “But… I don’t know what else we can do.”

“I miss her. Oliver, I miss her so much.”

Her husband reached out across the small wooden table, laying one hand comfortingly over hers. “I miss her too. But what else can we do? It’s been weeks and there’s been no change.” They’d been over their options a thousand times, talked them all to death and back again. The care that Nell was getting had been excellent, but the fact of the matter was that she still hadn’t woken up, and Oliver and Marta could not afford to stay in Santa Cecilia forever. “Marta… we have to go home.”

For a moment she was still, silent. Then she turned her hand to twine her fingers in his. “We can talk to Doctor Aleveria in the morning, let her know we’ve made our decision.”

Dante nosed his way through the gate of his Boy’s house, pausing as he entered the courtyard to sniff the air. His family was in the room that smelled like leather and glue, but he had learned long ago that they did not like it when he played in there. That was fine. He didn’t like the smell of the glue anyway. It made his nose itch.

Instead he headed through the house, pausing outside the door where he could hear the Ghost
Boy and the Small Human laughing. They were not working with the rest of the family and so then could give him pets.

Dante tapped at the door with his paw, pushing it forward enough that he could enter the room. The little human let out a squeal of delight the moment she saw him, pushing herself to her feet and toddling over to wrap her arms around him. Dante barked in response, licking her face enthusiastically as the Ghost Boy laughed.

“Get her, Dante! Good boy!”

Dante barked again, then turned to the ghost boy with the intention of giving him the same treatment, but he only ended up leaping right through him when he tried. But Ghost Boy was like that. Dante could feel it when Ghost Boy gave him pets, but if he tried to jump on Ghost Boy, it just didn’t work. The skeletons across the bridge were much easier to play with. And they were all made of bones. Bones were always good.

He should visit the Skeleton Family. And Bird Friend. She was also good for pets. And he could go flying with the Big Birdies!

Enthused by the idea, Dante scampered from the room, past his Boy’s Mom, and through the house. As he ran past His Boy’s room he skidded to a halt, catching a glimpse of the folded bit of paper that had fallen by the desk. Dante trotted into the room, giving the paper a brief sniff. His Boy’s scent was all over it -- as it was on everything in this room -- but the edge was tattered and chewed, marked with Dante’s own scent. His Boy had wanted to take this to the Skeleton Family. His Boy could not go visit them but Dante could. So he picked up the piece of paper with his teeth and ran out of the house.

The Land of the Dead had a lot less smells than the Land of the Living. It was something that Dante became acutely aware of every time he crossed between the two. Here there was no scent of green, growing things, or any tasty food smells. There wasn’t any normal human smells either, because everyone here was a skeleton. Except the other alebrije. But their scent was different too, more an impression of scent than a real one.

But he did not need scents to find where he needed to go. He knew where to find his Skeleton Family, and that Bird Friend would probably be with them. So he took off towards the house, on foot for most of the journey but making use of his little wings when the streets got too crowded. He liked to fly, and had gotten much better at it, but he was much better on his own four legs.

Big Birdie was sitting on the roof of the house when he reached the top of the stairs. He made a muffled sound of greeting around the piece of paper as he passed through the gates, skipping gleefully at Big Birdie’s answering caw as she took off into the air.

There was no sign of the family in the yard, so they must still be in the shoe room. Dante followed the scent of glue to the workshop and pawed at the scarred wooden door, dancing anxiously as he waited for them to open it. When nobody did he pawed at the door again, putting down the letter and letting out an insistent bark. He had something to give them and he couldn’t do it if the door was closed.
One of the tall skeletons answered not long after, looking surprised to see him. Then he turned
and called back into the room, “¡Está bien! It’s just Dante.”

Dante barked again, picking up the piece of paper to show him.

“What have you got there, boy?”

Dante responded with another muffled whuff, prancing proudly about the skeleton’s legs until
he finally wrested the piece of paper away.

When at last he had, he straightened with an amused shake of his head and unfolded the scrap
of paper. “Silly thing. What’s so important about --- “ And his jaw dropped to the floor with a clatter.

Hector was exhausted. It wasn’t just that it had been a long day (though it had) or that
rehearsal had gone poorly (which was also true). Or that the song he was working on was fighting
him. Or that thoughts of the trial were weighing on him. Or that Gustavo was eternally trying to press
him for gossip on said trial, to the point that Hector had had to suggest that if that was all he was
there for, maybe he should just go home for the day. That had shut him up, at least. He seemed to see
that there was something in Hector’s face that was not to be messed with today.

The reporters had been especially pushy today as well. The other artists had made it clear,
back when Hector started working with them more frequently, that no reporters would be permitted
within the building without express permission from whomever they were there to interview, and
after a few had been tossed out for continuing to push their luck, for the most part this rule was
respected. It did not, however, stop some of the more determined Papárazzo from camping
themselves outside every exit to the warehouse.

Thank God for Buttons. Nell’s alebríje was already waiting for them on the roof when he
finally gave up for the day. She’d hopped eagerly towards them the moment they had opened the
doors, apparently as eager as he was to get home. Though he couldn’t imagine why. Perhaps the
reporters were bothering her as well.

They returned home to chaos.

Even from the air they could hear the raised voices, though from excitement or panic Hector
couldn’t tell. He slid from Buttons’ back as soon as she landed, stumbling clumsily over the worn
stone of the courtyard as he raced for the workshop, Nell hot on his heels. His thoughts were racing.
What had happened? Was it the case? Had something happened with their living family? Oh God,
what if Miguel ---

But when he opened the door there were no signs of any new arrivals. His family was
gathered together, hunched over a piece of paper clasped in his wife’s hands.

“Imelda, what -- “

When she glanced away from the page, her face was elated. “Hector! We -- we have a letter.
From Miguel.”
Hector stared, knocked back on his heels in shock. He stumbled forward as Imelda broke away from the crowd to pass the paper into his trembling hands. “From -- but -- how?”

“Dante brought it,” she answered. “He arrived not long before you did. Mira -- “

A Mi Familia,

I don’t know if this will reach you. This is more an experiment than anything. Dante ate my last four attempts, so until I know this has gotten to you, I’ll try to keep this short.

Is Nell with you? I hope she is. And if you are there, Nell... I’m sorry. This was my fault. You came to help me and now... You’re in a coma, Nell. And the doctors don’t know how to pull you out of it. Your parents flew down and have been with you at the hospital every day. They’re planning to take you home next week. They’re hoping that will make a difference. I wish I could tell them the truth.

Things have been kind of crazy here. I see ghosts now, which is just so weird to say. I hope nobody on this side of the bridge reads this. The last thing I need is all of Santa Cecilia thinking I’ve gone loco. But I’ve met two so far, and I’ll tell you more about them once I know you’ve actually gotten this. If Dante doesn’t eat your reply.

I love you all.

Miguel

Hector read the letter three times over as Nell peered over his shoulder, neither quite able to believe what they were seeing. Miguel had found a way to communicate between worlds. He was home. He was safe. And he could see ghosts apparently, which was something Nell was dying to ask him about as soon as possible.

Hector clutched the letter to his chest, taking a moment to savor the words on the page before turning to Imelda with an elated smile. “Who has a pen?”

Chapter End Notes

And it's up! 20 chapters, 90623 words, and still ongoing. Thanks for sticking with me though Nell's adventures! I promise there's more to come. In fact, I already have the next chapter finished, so I should have that up next weekend.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 21: What's in a Name?

Chapter Notes

As promised, another chapter!

I've been waiting SO LONG to be able to post this one. I swear I wrote half of it back in July, but I kept figuring out new plot stuff so I had to push it back.

I hope you like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“Well, isn’t this a surprise,” Lina drawled. “Look what the _alebrije_ dragged in. What are you doing here?”

Nell hesitated at the door. Lina was known for her acerbic personality but that delivery was much sharper than her usual repartee. “I thought I’d come by for a visit, but if you’re busy --”

“Not particularly,” Lina said with a careless shrug, turning another page of the manuscript that she was reading. “Been a few days.”

“It’s been… a little crazy lately.”

“Figured now you know you’re not about to become a permanent resident you’d have better things to do than hang out in a dusty old catacomb.”

“I happen to like dusty old catacombs,” Nell retorted. “And you’re the one who told me to do some ‘living’.”

Yeah, to give her the excuse to leave if she wanted to. She shouldn’t have been surprised that she did. “So that’s what you’ve been doing, is it? Living it up in the Land of the Dead?”

“Jeez, what crawled up your ass today? Yeah, it’s been a real damn party. De la Cruz was arrested last week and it’s been a constant stream of lawyers and preliminary hearing insanity and dodging reporters every-damn-where. Which has been oh, so much fun. Oh, and then Dante shows up yesterday and it turns out _alebrije_ can carry things back and forth across the bridge, and he shows up with a letter from Miguel and the whole family about loses their minds -- “

“Huh. Impressive. I mean I knew that, but how did the kid figure it out?”

“ -- so you can see how it might have -- “ Nell trailed off. “Wait, what do you mean ‘you knew’?”
“Five hundred years old, remember?” Lina said with a small smirk. “Not a lot I haven’t seen or at least heard about.”

“Oh, well, forgive me for stating the obvious, O Great and Knowledgeable One,” Nell said with a sarcastic bow. “So why isn’t this common knowledge?”

Lina sighed, putting down her book and giving up any pretense that she was still reading. “There’s an order to the universe, Nell. The Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead must remain separate. The other afterlives have no way to cross between worlds, so why should ours have that privilege?”

She had a point. “Not to mention, not everyone has their own alebrije.”

“Exactly. And those who do should not treat them like interdimensional mail carriers.”

“Have people actually done that?”

Lina nodded. “One of the reasons we don’t let word get out, if at all possible.”

“We haven’t told anyone,” Nell reassured her quickly, before Lina could ask. “Figured if people didn’t know after this many centuries, there was probably a good reason.”

Well, there was that at least. The archivist retreated back into the shelves to return the manuscript she had been reading to its proper home. After a moment she spoke again, her voice barely audible even in the silence of the stacks. “I wasn’t sure you’d be coming back here again.”

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me too.”

“If i didn’t, you’d know. Trust me.”

“Well you haven’t throw me off a pyramid yet,” Nell shrugged. “Though really. I should point out that I have both jumped and fallen off the edge of the world, so that threat doesn’t really scare me like it probably should. But I wondered if it wasn’t….. Like, some kind of professional obligation.”

Lina looked startled. “You actually thought that?”

“Well… Most of the time, no. But…sometimes…” Nell glanced away, rolling the hem of her dress nervously between her fingers. “Sorry, I know that’s dumb. I was in a not great headspace before, and Victoria called me out on it. So I know it’s dumb. But -- “

“Damn straight, it’s dumb.” Lina said sharply. “You know, for a smart girl, you can be really stupid sometimes.”


“Get this through your head: if I didn’t want you here, you wouldn’t have lasted the first hour. Professional obligation be damned. Claro?”

“Si, claro.”

“Now, catch me up. I’ve been reshelving all of the documents that my assistants have misshelved. Tell me what happened with De la Cruz.”
As Nell filled her in on the events of the hearing, Lina seemed annoyed but not entirely surprised. From what she’d learned from Nell, De la Cruz was a real piece of work. Of course he would attempt something like this. Twist it around so it looked like he was the injured party. And wanting to have Nell submit to a psych evaluation… Well she could understand her friend’s outrage.

“-- and after all that he did to Hector, that slime-licking, coal-hearted toolbag has the gall to try this bullshit!” She growled. “I wish Buttons had tossed him off the cliff instead of just into the pyramid.”

“I think there is a precedent for that,” Lina told her. “I could probably find it in here, somewhere.”

“Seriously? Damn, what did they do?”

“Any number of things,” Lina told her with a shrug. “Mostly it was before I got here. Capital punishment was a pretty common thing back then, but what happens when you commit a serious crime after you’re already dead? You can’t die again, and they can’t force the living to forget you.”

“So they actually did throw people off of the edge of the world.” Nell let out a low whistle. She was half-joking when she said Buttons should have tossed De la Cruz over the edge. Well… maybe a quarter joking. It was shocking to believe that once upon a time that was something people actually did.

“Yeah.” She’d been lucky to avoid that fate herself. “Be interesting to see how they rule here, especially with you involved. Your case sets a precedent.”

“Woo, lucky me.” Nell sighed.

“Be a little complicated for them to rule on too,” Lina continued. “The act of taking the kid across the bridge could be read as attempted murder, never mind tossing him off the edge of the world. You followed of your own volition and ended up stuck here, but that never would have happened if De la Cruz hadn’t snatched the kid to begin with.”

“That’s what the Rivera’s lawyer said,” she agreed. “I swear this is going to be a war fought on a battleground of technicalities. This whole court thing has barely started and I already wish it was over.” She wished her mother was here, not just for the comfort of having someone familiar around, but it would have been truly satisfying to set her loose on De la Cruz in the courtroom.

“I think you’ve just described every celebrity court case ever,” Lina said, shaking her head. “Thank Tezcatlipoca that reality tv hasn’t become a big thing down here yet, or that courtroom would be crawling with cameras.”

“The building is already crawling with reporters. I swear I saw one of them hauling around one of those daguerreotype setups. I’d hope they wouldn’t have the poor taste to actually broadcast a murder trial. Though they could do a pretty sweet version of Dancing With the Stars down here.” Nell was not a big fan of reality tv as a whole, but she was a sucker for a good dance competition show.

“Dancing -- what?”

“Tossing a bunch of celebrities into a ballroom dancing competition,” Nell explained. “Some of them turn out to be surprisingly good. Others are as hilariously bad as you would expect them to be.”

“That sounds… really weird,” Lina laughed. “This is what modern people do for fun? Just
watch each other do dumb things?”

“There’s an entire subcategory of independent media dedicated to it. And like you guys didn’t do weird things for entertainment in your day,” Nell shot back with a laugh. “I realize you’re older than dirt, but entertainment hasn’t changed that much. Half of modern mainstream entertainment still consists of a bunch of men running around, trying to hit a ball into some kind of hoop or hole or net. Personally I’d rather watch a well-written fantasy adventure drama, but sadly those are in short supply.”

“Aren’t you living a fantasy adventure drama?”

“Yes, yes I am,” she grinned. “All I need is a sappy romantic subplot and I’m my own new favourite tv show. Oh wait. Do Hector and Imelda count?”

“Hector and Imelda are the romantic subplot of your fantasy adventure life?”

Nell shrugged. “We agreed I was living in a fantasy adventure drama. We never said I was the main character. Not for this arc, anyway.”

“That’s dumb. I mean of all of the people involved in this mess, it’s your story that most closely mirrors the Hero’s Journey archetype. So if you aren’t the main character, who is?” Lina wondered, giving the girl’s head a flick in warning. “Idiot. Now you have me thinking in narrative structure. I’m never going to get these all filed now.”

“Well if you need some help, I volunteer,” Nell offered. “Even if you just direct me where to go, it will be faster than doing it all yourself.”

The archivist frowned. “Shouldn’t you be working or something?”

“I’ve been at the studio for most of the day. If I paint any more my hand might just fall off.”

Now that she mentioned it, Lina could see a few paint splatters on the girl’s hands and the front of her dress. “You sure?”

“Sure! And after we’re done, maybe we can hang out for a bit. Drop by the house. We can compare book recommendations with Victoria.”

Lina looked at her suspiciously. “Is this your way of trying to start a book club or something?”

“No,” Nell laughed. “But that would be pretty cool. I mean if you already have plans for tonight we could do it another time -- “

“It’s fine,” Lina said cutting her off. “There’s nothing going on tonight.”

“Cool!” Nell grinned. “Alright, then! Let’s get started!”

They finished the filing in record time, righting all of the errors that had been made by the junior archivists, and discovering a few new ones along the way. At Nell’s suggestion, Lina pulled a couple of volumes from the personal collection she kept in her office to show to Victoria.
As they made their way up the stone steps to the lobby they passed one of Lina’s assistants, a woman of approximate middle-age dressed like she’d just walked off the set of Mad Men. “Lina! Glad I caught you. I finished those requisitions and delivered the volumes to the Transportation Department. Is there anything else on the to-do list for tonight? If not, do you mind if I step out early?”

“Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow,” Lina answered. “You go ahead.”

“Great!” The woman smiled. “I’m meeting some friends tonight and I wanted to take a few minutes to get ready. You can, ah… join us, if you’d like?”

“Thanks, but I’m heading out with friends too,” Lina said, unable to help her smirk at the startled expression on her assistant’s face. “See you tomorrow, Tessa.”

“Ah…right. Ahí nos vidrios.”

Nell waited until they had reached the top of the stairway to comment. “Geez, you could almost see the question marks floating above her head. It’s like she thinks you live in your office.”

“I do, sometimes,” Lina admitted. “When it’s busy.” Or when she didn’t want to go home.

“Yeah, but even introverts go out sometimes,” Nell said, shaking her head as they crossed through the lobby and out into the plaza. Unless… there was another reason she didn’t want to go out. “Does the name ‘Malinalli’ mean anything to you?” Nell asked suddenly.

A slight stumble beside her was the only indication that she had caught her friend off-guard.

“I haven’t heard that name in a long time,” Lina answered, her voice deliberately calm as she kept her gaze trained in front of them. “I don’t think there’s a single spirit down here who isn’t familiar with La Malinche.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“They say she was a traitor.”

“People say a lot of things,” Nell replied evenly. “It doesn’t mean they’re true. I’d like to see what they’d have done in her position.”

Malinalli had been born the eldest child of the chieftain of Painala. After her father’s death, her mother remarried and Malinalli was sold, first to a family in Xicalango, and then to another family in Tabasco. When the conquistadors took the city, Malinalli was one of a group of twenty women that were presented in tribute. It was her intelligence and her knowledge of languages that saved her, and when the officer that she had been given to returned to Spain, she found herself under the dominion of Cortés himself. She acted as his interpreter, and was instrumental in Cortés’ dealings with the local tribal leaders, brokering agreements between the Spanish and the indigenous tribes that lead to the eventual conquest of the Aztec Empire.

Her reputation in the modern day was mixed at best. Some saw her as the mother of Mexico. Others still viewed her as the greatest traitor the country had ever known.

Nell had never agreed with that. “I think she was incredibly brave.”

Lina shook her head, hands jammed uncomfortably in her pockets. “It wasn’t bravery.” For a moment she remained silent, then after another soft sigh, she spoke again. “How long have you known?”
“A few days,” Nell shrugged. “I wasn’t totally sure, but I suspected. A female spirit who would still be remembered after five centuries, who speaks multiple languages, worked as a translator, and is on poor terms with her contemporaries. Who else could you be?”

Lina wasn’t sure whether to applaud or cringe. “So...what now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do your friends know?”

“I don’t know why they would,” Nell replied. “Unless they worked it out on their own. They haven’t said anything about it.”

That seemed to surprise her. “You haven’t told them.”

“Why would I? The only reason I brought it up at all was to let you know that I know. And it’s not something we ever have to talk about again if you don’t want to. But if you ever do want to talk... Well, I’m here.”

Lina gave her a strange, measuring look. “Why?”

Nell faltered, rolling the hem of her dress uncertainly between her fingers. “We’re friends, right?” At least...she thought they were. “You were there for me when I needed someone. I just wanted to let you know that if you need someone, I’ll be here for you.”

“...thank you,” Lina said softly. It was a strange feeling, knowing that there was someone who knew who she really was. Somehow freeing and terrifying at the same time. On the one hand she didn’t have to worry about getting too comfortable and letting something incriminating slip because Nell already knew who she was. But the more she told Nell about her past, the more Nell could use to bury her. Not that she thought the girl would betray her, but it had happened before. She had been Lina Chavez for over a century. She didn’t want to have to start over again.

The concourse was much busier at this time of day than it was when Lina usually left. Most of the time she didn’t head out until well after the sun went down, so the foot traffic was at a minimum. Her own home was only about a twenty minute walk away, a cozy Victorian-era apartment in a nearby tower. The Rivera home was somewhat farther away, so they would be taking the trolley. It was not Lina’s preferred mode of transportation. There were too many people, too close together. And there was always some idiot who insisted on trying to bounce the thing at some point during the ride.

But as they made their way over the bridge towards the station, something large swooped down on them from above, colliding with Nell and sending her and Lina crashing into the railing, snatching the scarf right off Nell’s head.

Nell let out a curse, taking off running after her misbehaving alebrije. “Damn it, Lady! Come back here!”

But Lady ignored her completely, soaring on ahead with the scarf trailing almost tauntingly behind her. The crow led her charge on a merry chase through the streets, staying just out of her reach. For blocks Nell was barely able to keep pace with her, dodging and weaving between the skeletal spirits who got in her way. As Lady banked and turned into a large plaza, Nell took her chance, putting on a final burst of speed. She just managed to catch the trailing end of the scarf when her foot caught an uneven cobblestone, sending her sprawling forward to crash into another spirit, knocking them to the ground.
“Crap! Sorry! I’m sorry.” Nell stammered, pushing herself off of them, cringing at the sight of scattered bones around her.

“Oye, qué diablos!” They cursed as their body began to reassemble itself. They reached for the arm that had been knocked free, reattaching it before retrieving their head. “¡Mira hacia donde vas!”

“Sorry,” Nell said again, then shot an annoyed glare at Lady, who had swooped down to land on the cobblestones next to her and was innocently preening her feathers. “What the hell, Lady?”

“Is that your alebrije? You really need to train her better.”

“I’m kind of new to this alebrije thing. I’ve only been here a few weeks. She’s usually much better behaved than this, so I don’t know what came over her.” Nell pushed herself to her feet, then offered her hand. “Here, let me help you up. Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” the spirit said, shooting an annoyed glare up at Nell as she adjusted her head with one yellowed hand. “Look, I know it’s tough when you’re new but -- “ She trailed off, looking stunned.

“No excuse for bad manners,” Nell finished, shooting a pointed look at her alebrije as she took the girl’s free hand and pulled her to her feet. “Isn’t that right, Lady?”

Lady let out a squawk that sounded suspiciously like laughter, giving a little skip on the stones before nudging her head affectionately against Nell’s knees.

“Yes, I forgive you,” Nell laughed, pulling the scarf back over her head. “But you have to say ’sorry’ to her too.”

Lady squawked again, turning towards the woman that her charge had bowled over and giving a small head bob.

Nell shook her head, picking up her alebrije and settling the bird on her shoulder. “Come on, you. Let’s go find Lina. And no more shenanigans, okay?” As Lady made a sound that might have been agreement, Nell turned back to the girl with a sheepish smile. “Sorry again.” And with a brief wave, disappeared into the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is! We have finally learned the secret of Lina’s identity. How many of you guessed it? I know one of you did. And well done!

I'm not sure when I will have the next chapter up but I will do my best to not keep you waiting too long.

Thanks for reading!

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