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**Somos Familia**

by WhatTimeIsItInTokyo

Summary

A sudden flash of conscience from Ernesto changes Hector's life forever: By letting him have one.
Chapter 1: 1921

"I'm going home Ernesto! Hate me if you want, but my mind is made up."

Héctor wrenched his suitcase out of Ernesto’s desperate grasp and headed toward the door, drooping a little under the weight of his cases and the feeling that his lifelong friendship and potential business partnership was coming to an end. He didn’t want to end things badly with Ernesto, and he did enjoy performing for other people, but the six long months spent away from his family was too much to bear any longer.

For a while now his thoughts and dreams were clouded with images of his beautiful Imelda turning her back on him in anger, refusing to listen to his apologies. And his little Coco… Ay, those were the worst! She would just stare at him in his dreams, her head tilted quizzically at the strange man standing before her, no recognition in her eyes. He had been gone too long! She had forgotten her Papá! It was during those dreams that he would wake up with a gasp, his arms reaching out to pull his phantom daughter close to him, only to swipe at air.
Little by little his homesickness manifested from a little twinge to a full on ache in his chest and stomach, and it was also affecting his performance on stage and his relationship with Ernesto. He couldn't keep this up any longer. He felt that if he didn't leave right there and now, he would probably never get the chance to see his girls ever again.

"Oh, I could never hate you." Ernesto said, and Héctor could hear the smile in his voice. He turned around and quirked an eyebrow at his friend. What was he going to say this time to get him to stay? "If you must go, then I'm… I'm sending you off with a toast!"

_Huh. That's a surprise._

Héctor watched as Ernesto headed over to the little table that served as their makeshift wet bar. A toast? That was a very kind gesture on Ernesto's part. Maybe even he could see that he and Héctor needed some time apart. But that got him thinking.

Sending me off?

Did Ernesto really think that he wanted to end everything? No, that's not what he was saying at all! He just couldn't spend all of Coco's childhood away from her, and away from the arms of his beloved Imelda. He had to salvage this.

"This isn't the end you know, Ernesto."

His friend stiffened and turned around, a shot glass in each hand and a puzzled look on his face. "Qué?"

"What I'm saying is I'm not giving up like you think. I thought I would get inspiration to write music when I was on the road, you know, seeing all the sights. But then I realized that it's only stifled me. All of my best songs were inspired by my girls, so who knows; maybe when I get home I'll write you a dozen more songs that day!" Héctor laughed a little and stared at the ground. "I just… I just don't think I'm cut out with this touring gig like you are. I could just be the writer that stays at home and writes you hit after hit, and you be the performer who travels the world and sings for the people. We can still be a great team! What do you say to that?"

He looked up and was surprised at the expression on Ernesto's face. He looked… stricken. His eyes were large and looked like he was staring at something far into the distance. Héctor's heart lurched for his friend. He really did think he was abandoning him! "Look, if you want, I… guess I can stay for tonight and we can talk about it some more. But first that drink, eh?"

Héctor reached for the drink, but as soon as his fingers touched the glass, Ernesto let out a gasp as if he had been burned and left the glass slip through his fingers. Both jumped at the glass shattered on the ground and watched as the wooden floorboards soaked up the liquid. Neither men said anything for a moment, but Ernesto panted as if he just sprinted a few blocks and trembled a little. The man's obvious distress was lost on Héctor, who huffed out a small sigh.

"Fine... I tried to keep this partnership going, but if that's how you're going to be-

"No!" shouted Ernesto, and Héctor jumped again. Ernesto clung to Héctor's arm, sounding much more desperate than he had a few seconds ago. "No, Héctor, I-I… I hear what you're saying, a-and your right. Absolutely right, mi amigo! You should go home to your familia. I'm s… I'm sorry. I'm so… so sorry." Ernesto hung his head and trembled some more and this time Héctor noticed.

"Ernesto?"

"I'm sorry about the drink! I admit, I was… furious when you said that you were leaving. But then
you said— ... And I— couldn’t let you drink that!"

"Why? What was wrong with it?"

"It was— " Ernesto paused for a few seconds before lifting his head, a cocky smile on his face and a mischievous glint in his eyes. "It was the Del Toro! I wanted to see you spit it out as soon as it hit your tongue!"

"Ay, pendejo! I wouldn't spit it out, I would vomit it out!" Héctor gagged as Ernesto laughed. "Dios mio, I don't understand why you drink that, that… It's not even tequila, its floor cleaner in a fancy bottle!"

"It's for more refined palates, amigo."

"So what, that was your way of petty revenge for my supposed leaving?" Héctor smirked.

"Yes, petty…" Ernesto's smile faded, and Héctor couldn't see any emotion in his eyes anymore. They appeared dead. "You should go. I'll stay here, and finish up the set performances."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, go…" Ernesto whispered. "Give Imelda my love, and Coco too." He turned, walked back to the bed and sat down on the mattress. "I'll write to you, so… Don't worry about me. I'll be back to Santa Cecilia right behind you."

Héctor smiled. "Like I said, this isn't the end." He picked up his suitcase walked through the doorway. "But for now, adios mi hermano!" He kicked the door closed and made his way to the train station down the street, his whole body clenched with excitement at seeing his girls again and his heart lighter that he still had his best friend.

"Adios…" Ernesto whispered, as he watched where the poisoned tequila had spilled, slowly leaving a bleached, discolored stain in the wood.
As soon as the train squealed to a halt in Santa Cecilia station and the harried train attendant managed to pry open the door, Héctor leapt from the passenger car, belting out a soulful *grito* and twirled in a circle, swinging his cases and nearly taking out a few bewildered pedestrians in his wake.

"*Buenos Dias, Santa Cecilia! Aaaay-ha-heeyyy!*... Ah heh- perdon, señora." Héctor reigned in his excitement long enough to apologize to the poor old lady whose head was nearly knocked off by his guitar case. He also didn't notice the train attendant shake his head and sigh, glad to be rid of this annoying boy who had talked his ear off for eight hours about his beloved familia.

The train station was very small, and by the time he passed the ticket booth Héctor was in the outer marketplace. Héctor face lit up as he saw all the familiar faces at their own stalls, and he took a deep breath in. Smells of leather, straw, oil, animals, and street food, all cooking under the hot sun and melding together into a wave of nostalgia, melting away the ache in his chest. *I'm home. Finally!*

"Héctor?"

Héctor turned to the direction of the voice and smiled as he recognized his neighbor. "Facundo! Qué onda?!" He set his cases down and embraced, then lifted, the shorter man.

"Oy oy oy, basta! You know I hate it when you do that!" Héctor put the man down, but still smiled. "I am surprised to see you, though. It's been what, eight months since you left?"

"Six actually," Héctor sighed, "but it might as well have been eight. I must have really been homesick if I've missed seeing that mug of yours."

"Oh, like you're one to talk." Facundo harrumphed. "Well, amigo, I haven't seen you or Ernesto's names splashed across the papers, so I'm guessing your little path to fame and glory didn't turn out quite like you had hoped?"

Héctor scratched the back of his neck and shrugged. "Ah heh heh-… It's true, were not *famous*, per se, it's more like we're… *well known!* I haven't given up with my tail tucked between my legs, if that's what you're thinking. It's just been put on the back burner for a while so I can spend time with my precious girls."

"Ah si… your… girls." Facundo awkwardly coughed and shifted his gaze away from Héctor. "Well, I was just getting some feed for my horses, but if you want I can give you a lift back home."

"Ah, Facundo, I have so much energy right now I could practically sprint home!" Héctor sighed, and then turned with a smirk. "But if you're offering…"

Sitting backwards of Facundo's horse drawn buggy on top hard bags of grain, Héctor waved at passersby and shouted greetings to all the neighbors, the viejos, and snot-nosed brats that he didn't ever think he would miss six months ago. Some waved happily, while others, which caused Héctor some concern, shouted back that they didn't think they would ever see him again. Never come back? How? His family lived here, why wouldn't he return?

Finally, the buggy pulled up to a courtyard with the large set of green doors that he had painted himself, and Héctor jumped off in excitement and joy. "Gracias, Facundo!"
"De nada, Héctor."

"Oye, why don't you stay for lunch? It's Friday, so I'm sure Imelda will be making sopa de pescado!"

"No gracias amigo, I don't want to be caught in the cross fires."

"Eh?"

Without another word, Facundo snapped his reins and made a quick escape from the Rivera complex. Héctor shrugged. More for him anyway. In his haste to come home he had ignored his stomach by bypassing all the stalls selling grilled meats and pan dulce, not to mention he hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon, which was only half of a chorizo that had seen better days. Just the thought of Imelda's cooking made his stomach fold in on itself to remind him how empty it was.

As he walked up to the doors he heard a sweet sound, like tinkling little bells, and a large grin split his face. Ah, how he had missed that voice! Peering through the crack at the doors, his heart melted at what he saw: His sweet little Coco, sitting on the ground by the edge of the boarded up well, humming a little song to herself while making her doll dance and twirl to the tune. Even from a distance he could tell she had grown a bit since he had last seen her, and that the song she was humming was their song: Remember Me.

Héctor took his guitar out of his case and, slowly and quietly, eased the double doors open and slipped inside. Thankfully she was facing away from him. Then, very softly, he started to play the accompaniment. Coco stopped humming and looked up and around, probably thinking her mind was playing tricks on her, and that's when he finished the song with a loud flourish. Coco's head whipped over her shoulder in shock, and her eyes grew big as saucers and let out a gasp too big to have come from such a little body. Héctor put the guitar on the ground and held out his arms.

"Mija..."

"PAPÁ!"

Coco shot up from the ground and sprinted as fast as her chubby little legs would allow, letting out high pitched squeals and stumbling a little. Héctor met her halfway through and pulled her into his arms, spinning her around, laughing with tears in his eyes. Then he peppered her little face with wet kisses.

"I- *mwah* - missed - *mwah* - you - *mwah* - so much! Ay, my sweet little Coco!" He kissed the crown of her head, inhaling the scent of talcum powder, lilac soap and milk, and hugged her tight. "Pobrecita, I'm so sorry I was away for so long."

"It's been forever since your last letter, Papá! I was worried!" Coco said as she looked up with big doe eyes.

"Perdonome, mija. But I'm here now! And isn't your Papá in the flesh better than some old letter?"

"Sí!" she giggled, which turned into shrieking laughs as Héctor started blowing raspberries on her neck. They were so busy laughing and hugging, they didn't notice they were being watched, until-

"Yes, it has been a while since your last letter. A whole month, to be exact." An icy voice startled Héctor out of his revelry, and he saw his wife standing in the doorway, arms crossed and an unreadable expression on her face. Oh, that face. So strong like steel, but still so soft and warm that it made his insides turn to jelly. And those sharp eyes sent a bolt of lightning straight to his very core.
"Imelda…" Héctor whispered. "Mi amor-"

"Would you be so kind as to hand me my daughter please?" Héctor could not deny her anything, yet he reluctantly handed Coco to Imelda, despite only just being reunited with her. Imelda looked at Coco and smiled in a way that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Mija, why don't you go inside and set the table with your tios, make sure they don't break anything."

"Sí, Mamá!" Coco chirped, and skipped inside where Oscar and Felipe were waiting, looking at Héctor like they had seen a ghost. Héctor tipped his head and waved to them, which they meekly returned before slamming the door shut.

"Imelda, I cannot tell you how much I-

*WHACK!* 

An explosion of pain whitened out Héctor's vision before a sea of colorful stars cascaded down. He pinched his nose and barely managed to bite down several curses, knowing little ears were nearby. Having been so enamored with seeing his wife, he didn't notice Imelda stealthily slipping off her boot the second she had put Coco down. As his vision slowly came back, he was faced with his irate spouse, wagging the shoe in front of his face as if threatening to hit him again.

"For weeks I have waited for you without a word! Would it have killed you to at least write to let me know where you were?! I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere, or off with some tavern maid!" she screeched.

"I-Imelda, I would never- Ay, I think you broke my nose!"

"Oh please, if I was trying to break your nose, you would surely know it!" She huffed. "You could have at least written to Coco. For four nights I've had to console her, she's had such horrible nightmares of you never returning home!" Her hardened face cracked a little and Héctor could see the hurt behind the fire. "And the stares of the townspeople. And the talks I hear whispered as I walk past. I can take a lot of things, Héctor Rivera, but I will not stand being abandoned!"

Héctor sniffed and looked at his fingers. No blood. That was a good sign. "Never! I would never abandon you, mi diosa-

"Don't call me your diosa!" she snarled. "You abandoned me and your daughter as soon as you walked out the door with that payaso to follow some stupid musical fantasy!"

"You're right."

"And now you come crawling back- wait what?"

"I said you're right." Héctor smiled sadly and rubbed his sore nose. "It was stupid. I thought that if I traveled the road I would be inspired to write new songs. I should have realized from the beginning that all my inspiration came from you. And Coco. My beautiful muses." Imelda's expression didn't change from the flattery, so maybe some humor would. "You know what kind of songs I managed to come up with? Let see, there was Ten Hangovers in a Row, then came the romantic ditty Why Are There Brown Stains on the Ceiling?, and of course, my favorite, The Ballad of the Snoring, Sleep-Talking Roommate!"

Nothing, not even a smile. Mierda.

"I had writer's block so bad, I couldn't even write to you these last few weeks. I must have started a dozen letters, but nothing I wrote could describe how miserable I was, how much I wanted to sleep
in my own bed, braid my daughter's hair, hold you in my arms as we danced to La Llorona for the hundredth time. How much I just wanted to come back home. And in the end, I just figured I would show up to surprise you both! I guess you were surprised, huh?"

Imelda looked away and sighed, and the toll of the last few weeks showed in her face and voice. "I'm… relieved more than anything." She turned back to glare. "But I'm also wary."

"About?"

"You want to come home now, but what about the future? What if you get antsy again and want to pursue your fame and glory with Ernesto again? How long would you be gone then? Would you come back-"

"Then!" Héctor interjected while holding up placating hands. "Then I would think back on this trip and decide it's just not worth it! And it's not." Imelda still stared hard. "Please, Imelda, what can I do to prove to you that I'm here to stay?"

Imelda folded her arms again and pondered, and then her eyes fell to something on the ground. "Your guitar."

Héctor looked over his shoulder to where he had left the instrument on the ground and back to Imelda. "Sí?"

"Smash it."

Héctor felt the blood drain from his face and his heart lurch. He looked back at the guitar frantically and then to his wife. He let out a weak chuckle. "Pero, mi amor." He paused and gulped down the lump in his throat. "You-you gave it to me for my birthday."

"Sí, I bought it, and now I want it gone. You said you wanted to prove to me that you're here to stay; this is the only way I can keep you from wandering off again. No-more-music!" She emphasized.

His eyes widened at that. No more music? A guitar was one thing, but to give up all music entirely? Would it be worth it? But, again, he thought about the last few months were he had nothing but music, and no loving family to come home to. That life was not ideal either. Maybe some time down the line things could change and she would lighten up, but right now was a crucial moment in their relationship, and he was determined to save it. He sighed and nodded. "Aye, only for you, mi amor."

Héctor slowly walked over, picked up his guitar, and walked over the center well. That would be the best place to cause the most damage. Holding the instrument like an axe, he tapped it against the edge of the stone border, then raised it high above his head, the gold tooth of the painted skull winking at him for the last time. "Adios, amigo." He said, and then brought it down.

"NO, STOP!"
Muscles tensed in reaction, halting the guitar descent into oblivion, and then gravity kicked in, sending Héctor flying backwards and hard onto his rump. The guitar slipped out of his grasp and hit the ground with a *twang!* but was otherwise unharmed. Héctor groaned and sat up, rubbing his sore behind as a flurry of purple skirts flashed passed him and knelt by the guitar. "Dios mio, it's not scratched is it?!" Imelda shouted as she looked over the guitar from every angle before sighing, relieved to know it survived unscathed.

"Imelda?" Héctor was confused. What was going on?

Imelda looked at Héctor with wide eyes. "You—... You were really going to do it. You were going to smash your guitar, for me?"

Héctor's eyes softened and he reached out and caressed her cheek, happy that she didn't flinch away. "I would anything for you, diosa."

Imelda face crumpled and she launched herself into Héctor's chest, wrapping her arms around him squeezing hard. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I would never make you make that choice. I might as well have asked you to cut off your arms!"

"I think I might draw the line there." Héctor chuckled.
"Oh Héctor, how I have missed you." Then she planted such a passionate kiss on Héctor's lips, which he happily reciprocated. All the worry, loneliness and stress melted away from them as they reclaimed their passion for each other. All was right with the world again.

They finally broke apart when Imelda accidentally ground down on the sore part of his face. "Ay! Why did you have to hit my nose?"

"It was the biggest target." Imelda deadpanned, and Héctor couldn't help but bark out a laugh and kiss her again. Imelda squeezed his sides again, and then pinched his belly, causing him to yelp again. "You've lost weight, idiota."

"Yeah, I suppose I have-"

"You can't afford to lose weight, flaco! I can feel your ribs underneath your suit!"

"Oye!" The two of them turned to see Felipe leaning casually in the window sill, smirking. "If you two lovebirds are done screeching at each other, the sopa de pescado is about to boil over!"

"Then take it off the fire, you lazy bum!" Imelda rose to her feet and patted the dust off her dress. "And you!" she glared at her husband. "You are going to eat no less than three bowls as well some bread and fruit. You did not come home just so you can keel over and die from malnutrition!"

Héctor laughed. "Ah Imelda, you are an inspiration! I'm not home five minutes and I've already come up with some new lyrics to an old classic!" He picked up his guitar, grateful to still have his old friend, and plucked out a familiar tune.

Imelda recognized it immediately. "Oh no…"

You say "Smash your guitar!"

Ay mi amor, ay mi amor!

But then you change your mind

Ay mi amor, Ay mi amor!

"Callate!" Imelda screeched as she ran into the house, laughing like she hadn't done in a long time.

You nearly broke my nose

Ay mi amor, Ay mi amor!

It doesn't need to get any bigger

Ay mi amor, ay mi ammooorrrr…..
For hours the five members of the Rivera family sat at the quaint kitchen table, eating Imelda's delicious food as well as conversing what had happened during the last six months during Héctor's absence. Héctor regaled them with tales of all the cities he had been to while touring, the people he had seen and the best and worst shows he and Ernesto had performed. He also bemoaned the fact that for all his promises of future riches, he didn't even earn enough money to bring Coco and Imelda any gifts from his travels. Imelda was quick to reassure him that the money he had mailed to him, and his presence here and now, was enough for them both.

Héctor leaned back his chair content and completely full, even though he didn't eat near enough Imelda had wanted. He lazily peeled an orange and handed slices to Coco as he listened to his wife explain what she and her brothers had been up to as well. "I understand what you're saying, and it's a great idea…"

"But?" Imelda inquired.

"Why shoes? Why not start a candy business? I love the candies you make, so would everyone else!" Héctor looked at Coco for validation, and she excitedly nodded in approval. "Coco agrees!"

"Candies are just quick flashes of pleasure that are gone in an instant. Shoes, on the other hand, are concrete." Imelda rose from the table, as the twins groaned in unison. They knew what was coming.

"A life full of hard work and strife will always show on the feet. It takes superior craftsmanship, quality materials, and a sound work ethic to make a pair of shoes that will lesson that burden. That is where Rivera Shoes will come in. Boots for the field workers with toes of the strongest steel, huaraches for the mothers woven with the softest leather, and dance shoes so soft and light you will feel like you were floating through air! Santa Cecilia deserves have the finest shoes made from its most passionate and strongest citizens!" She finished with a fist over her heart and her chin held high.

Héctor was floored. "Diosa..." he whispered. "That was beautiful."

"Also Senor Guzman is retiring from shoemaking." Oscar said.

"And Imelda wouldn't stop pestering him until he took us all on as apprentices." Felipe added.

"I will never look at shoes the same way again." Héctor gushed, not listening to them. Coco sighed in disappointment: No candy then.

Imelda turned back. "This is just Plan B, however. A backup plan in order to earn some money while you did your tour with Ernesto."

"Might want to make it Plan A, amor." Héctor said.

"Que?"

"Well, like I said, touring isn't for me, and like you said shoes are concrete. I don't know when Ernesto is coming back, and until then maybe it's time I learned a trade instead of dallying off to the plaza everyday earning loose change. I have a family to think of."
Imelda's eyes turned soft and she smiled. "You really want to learn to make shoes with me?"

"I want to do anything with you! Always. Besides, it would be nice to have free shoes that actually fit me for once." Héctor smiled.

"Héctor…" Imelda wrapped her arms around his strong, lithe body and hugged him close. The two together again were a much missed sight for Coco, who smiled and giggled at her parents happiness.

Héctor's face lit up. "Ooh! How about a fireworks workshop instead?" This earned him a slap on the back of the head.

"And then mija, when you reach the last house on your journey, you sing the song one more time. That's when they say 'Sí, we have room! Come in!' and that's when you and the other chicos bring inside Mary and Joseph. They have found shelter at last!"

"That's sounds boring, Papá." Coco grumbled from her bed. When her father had told her that she was now old enough to take part in Las Posadas coming up in a few days, she was excited. But the thought of going out into the cold carrying around ceramic figures from the church for eight days didn't sound fun at all.

Héctor stopped strumming his guitar. "Coco!" he gently chastised. "This is a very important tradition for all little ones! I've taken part, so has your Mamá, and your tíos too. Besides, all that hard work will pay off when the party starts~." He sang and strummed with a flourish.

That got her attention. "Party?!"

"Sí! There will be singing, dancing, games, mountains of food from people all over town, and don't forget…" Héctor strummed furiously to build up tension, and then slapped the body for dramatic effect. "La Piñata!"

"Piñata?!" Coco squealed. "I love piñatas!"

"Who doesn't love piñatas?! But here's a secret for you Coco. You are a Rivera, and a Rivera has the magic touch." He whispered.

"What's the magic touch?" she whispered back.

Héctor resumed his strumming to softer, more lulling tune. "The magic touch is a secret power that all Riveras possess when it comes to piñatas. We have the gift to always be the one lucky enough to break it ourselves, whether it's the first hit or if it's been hit a hundred times before that. And the one who hits it always gets first grabs for the little presents!"

Coco giggled, and then yawned. "Okay Papá, it sounds fun now."

"Good. You're going to love it mija, I guarantee." Héctor traced a finger across his baby's plump cheeks and smiled. Dios, he had missed tucking in Coco for bed. This was going to be his evenings from now on: pure bliss. "Now then, time to sing our song, sí?"

"Sí, Papá." Coco mumbled sleepily, although she didn't last until the second verse, and didn't feel him kiss her forehead before walking out the door.

"Hello, beautiful." Héctor leered as he walked into his and Imelda's bedroom, drinking in the sight
of his lush, soft, amazing… bed. He launched himself into the air and landed with a soft bounce onto the mattress, doing snow angel movements into the blankets and moaning with pleasure. "Feels so goooood!..." he chortled, twisting onto his side and burying his face into his pillow with a contented hum. Having not slept at all on the train ride home, as well as not sleeping properly the last few days, his body was truly exhausted. He hadn't even taken his shirt or charro pants off, but he was already feeling the pull of sleep dragging him down.

"Don't fall asleep yet, Héctor." Imelda whispered from across the room, turning the end of his name into a soft purr. Héctor's eyes shot open, all exhaustion leaving him at the sound of his wife's voice. He shot up into a sitting position and looked at Imelda, and suddenly everything felt hot. Imelda was standing there in nothing but a sheer slip, with a smoldering look in her eye, and- Oh Dios mio…

"Imelda." Héctor gulped. "Your hair is down."

"Sí." Imelda smiled as she ran her fingers through curly obsidian locks. Ay, didn't she know what the sight of her loose, flowing hair did to him?! How his fingers itched and burned to bury themselves into it? "Héctor Rivera, you have neglected your wife for six months." She purred again and slinked towards him.

"Yes." He whispered.

She reached out and cupped his cheeks so that he could look into her eyes, then her fingers slowly trailed down his neck, making him shudder. She reached the first button of his collar and loosed it, then the next, and the next. Finally she slipped a hand onto his quivering chest, over his heart. "For six months you have neglected yourself as well."

"Yes!" he hissed, then he felt a hand run through his hair and yank back hard, and Imelda planted a soul-searing kiss on him. He gasped into her mouth before finding his footing and returned it with fervor, their tongues dueling each other in a way they hadn't in such a long time. Héctor grabbed his wife by the waist and shoulder and brought her to his lap, and Imelda clawed his hair with both hands now as they panted and moaned.
They broke the kiss long enough for Héctor to yank his shirt over his head and fling it across the room, and the sight of his bare chest caused Imelda to growl and she shoved hard against him, sending him on his back.

She then stood and let the slip glide off her shoulders, letting it pool at her ankles. "Brace yourself, mi amor."

"YES!" Héctor shouted, and his world was filled with Imelda.

Oscar and Felipe were doing their nightly ritual, which was reading two of their favorite novels from the small library on their nightstand before going to bed. Or at least that was what they were trying to do for the last hour, but something was keeping them distracted. Something from one of the other rooms across the courtyard. Something rhythmic. And loud. And filled with pure lust.

Oscar winced when a particularly loud shout broke his concentration from the page he had been stuck on for the last half hour, and then another caused him to throw his book down. "Dios mio, this is ridiculous! What if Coco wakes up? She shouldn't hear this."

"We shouldn't hear this!" Felipe grumbled. "That's our sister in there making those-"
"ATATATA!" Oscar recoiled and flailed his arm at his twin. "I was trying very hard to delude myself that it was someone else, so thank you for that pendejo!" He sighed and rubbed his hand across his face. "Still, I guess this is for the best that she's... happy again."

Felipe groaned "You're right though, what if Coco were to wake up and hear-"

"Tío Oscar? Tío Felipe?" a young voice peeped, and the two men let out twin yelps. To their horror Coco was standing in their doorframe, with big scared eyes. "Mamá is crying. Is something wrong?"

For a few seconds, Oscar and Felipe just stared at each other, their minds burning hot trying to come up with a plausible excuse for the toddler to understand, all the while the noises continued unabated, if anything picking up in speed. Finally Oscar managed to croak out, "Gritos!"

Coco tilted her head. "Gritos?"

"Si!" Felipe chimed in, picking up on his brother's train of thought. "Gritos are the big, soulful yells that all singers make!-"

"Your Mamá is such a wonderful singer-"

"And your Papá is such a talented musico-"

"That they're writing a brand new song!-"

"That ha-has a... lot of... gritos in it?"

Coco looked back and forth at her uncles as they stumbled through their explanation, before finishing with smiles too big to be convincing to anyone but an innocent child. Coco smiled back and nodded with relief. "Good. I'm glad no one is sad." Her uncles slouched and sighed, and for a moment there was peace, until another loud shout came across the courtyard. "Ah, that was Papá's grito, right?"

"GALLETAS!" Felipe jumped out of bed and scooped Coco up in his arms. "Who wants to go out and get some galletas?!"

"Me! Me!" Coco cheered.

"Wait Felipe!" Oscar stumbled out of his own bed. "It's eleven o'clock at night, nothing is open!"

"Some vieja that lives nearby is bound to have a galleta for this poor girl, or pan dulce, or a bottle of chamoy sauce, Dios, anything as long as it's not here!" And with that he and his brother took their niece out of the Rivera complex and into the night, all of them still in their nightshirts.

Héctor moaned as Imelda kissed along his neck and splayed her hand across his chest and belly. "Diosa, please have mercy." He whimpered as Imelda nibbled on his ear. "I don't think I have anything left." After several rounds of fierce and then tender sex, Héctor was reduced to a limp pile of goo on the bed, his flesh overstimulated and slick with sweat and his hair matted to his scalp. He had scratches all over his back that slightly stung against the sheets, his lips were kiss-swollen, and he was sore in places he didn't know existed.

"Relax, musico." Imelda hummed against his cheek before kissing it. "I don't think I have anything left either. I just want to pet you for a while. I've missed this skin so much." She buried her nose in the crook of his neck and inhaled deeply. "And your scent. It faded from the sheets so long ago."
Héctor opened his eyes and, gaining a little strength, turned onto his side to look at Imelda. He reached out and brushed his fingers against her cheek and looked at her with big, sad eyes.

Imelda was immediately concerned. "Héctor? What's wrong?"

Héctor swallowed, and then spoke whisper quiet. "I thought that… if I didn't leave Mexico City, right then and there, then I'd—..." his voice hitched and he huffed out a sigh before continuing. "Then I'd never see you again."

Imelda turned and kissed the palm of his hand, then placed hers over it. "I had the same fear, mi corazon. But we're here, together. And nothing will part us again, claro?"

"Claro." Héctor smiled, and they kissed until sleep claimed them both.

Héctor woke the next morning, confused as to where he was. This was a phenomenon he had been experiencing for weeks now, having woken up in different hotel rooms each night for the past six months. But seeing the familiar stucco of his bedroom ceiling and the rush of passion filled memories from last night come crashing back, Héctor sighed happily and laughed in relief. Stretching out the kinks in his overworked body, he saw a bowl of water on Imelda's small vanity table as well as a bar of soap and a towel. Imelda must have set it out for him. How kind, although he never knew how she always managed to wriggle out of his sleeping embrace without waking him each morning to start breakfast.

Having washed up properly, he strolled into the kitchen and was greeted by his wife standing by the stove cooking eggs and his daughter and brother in laws sitting at the kitchen table. "Buenos dias, mi familia!"

"Buenos dias, Papá!" Coco said around a mouthful of eggs.

"Mija, don't talk with your mouth full." Imelda gently scolded before turning to Héctor. "Senor Guzman will be by for lunch later, and then he'll spend the rest of the day teaching us."

"Hope he won't mind an extra pupil." Héctor said and gave his wife a long, sweet kiss. Then he grabbed a mug, poured himself a cup of coffee and sat at the table.

"Papá, what's your new song about?" Coco asked innocently.

"My new song? What do you mean, mija?"

"The new song you and Mamá were singing last night. You both made such loud gritos!"

If Héctor thought a boot across the nose yesterday hurt, it was nothing compared to steaming hot coffee shooting up and out through his nostrils. This time he didn't bother to stifle the curses of pain, though they were smothered from hacking coughs and sneezes as tears streamed down his face. A cloth was shoved into his face and he held it in place over his nose, barely managing to hear Imelda nervously say that it was time to braid Coco's hair as she whisked their confused daughter out of the room.

It took several minutes for the pain to dwindle, and when his vision finally cleared from the tears he saw his two in-laws glaring at him with dark circles under their eyes. Guess he and Imelda weren't as quiet as he thought.

"What can I say chamacos?" he said, trying to put as much swagger in his voice despite it being nasally mangled. "She can't keep her hands off me."
Both twins pushed their breakfast away in disgust.
Señor Guzman was shocked when he came to the Rivera household to find Héctor, the man who had supposedly abandoned his wife and child to achieve music stardom, sitting in the living area with Imelda, eagerly requesting that he take him on as an apprentice shoemaker as well. Having taught Imelda and her brothers the fine art of shoe-making for the past few months, she had remained tight lipped about her husband and so he had stopped inquiring about his whereabouts. But now here she was with him, smiling at him with love and pride as he prattled on about wanting to learn the trade to support his family. Given her fiery temperament, Señor Guzman wasn't going to ask what had happened in the last two days that had warranted such a drastic change. Nor was he going to question why Héctor had two wads of damp cloth shoved up his nostrils.

After a nice lunch, the twins started to clean the kitchen and wash the dishes while Imelda put Coco down for her afternoon nap. This is when Guzman pulled Héctor aside to speak with him privately.

"I know this is sudden Señor Guzman, but I want to thank you again for agreeing to teach me." Héctor beamed. "I guarantee you that my hands are up to the challenge. They're so callused from playing guitar I bet a needle wouldn't even be able to pierce them."

Guzman patted him on the back. "It's no problem at all Héctor. And it's true; you need good strong hands in order to craft shoes. Big, strong… manly hands."

Héctor's eyebrows quirked up a little at that, but he shook it off and chuckled. "Well, I don't know about that. My Imelda has strong hands as well. You've never been on the receiving end of her boot."

"Héctor, my boy." Guzman smiled and held his hands out to his sides, trying to explain. "Let us end this little game. I only agreed to teach Imelda because, basically, it was the only way to shut her up. For three months, ay Dios mio, the nagging! Always with 'Please Señor, I'm the only one in town who is able to do it' and 'Think of my poor daughter, I need to feed her'. I must admit, that's what got to me in the end. I only agreed because she was a poor mother with no husband to provide for them. But I can tell that a tiny woman like her would never be able to craft such magnificent boots by herself, so I made her bring her brothers in as well. And now," he said, slapping Héctor happily on the shoulder, "now that you're here, I can teach you in her place, and she can go back to where she belongs: Taking care of your daughter and feeding her family like a proper wife and mother!"

Throughout his little spiel, Señor Guzman didn't notice Héctor's confused smile slowly fade into a frown, nor the creaking of his teeth as his jaw clinched and his cheeks slowly turning a deep shade of red. Carefully he plucked the pieces of cloth from his nose and slipped them into his pocket and hummed a little laugh. Then he clamped a hand hard on Guzman's bony shoulder and gave him a hearty shake.

"Ah, Señor Guzman, throughout my life me and my amigos would wonder why you never had a wife of your own. See, I always thought it had been because you were too short and had the face of a gecko. But now I can see it was because of your… glowing attitude towards women a little bit stronger than you. That is all women."

Guzman sputtered at that. "What are you?!-"

"You see, the thing is, señor, I am a musician. It is my passion. I think about music and songs and
playing my guitar all day long. Shoes, on the other hand? Bah, it's just a way for me to make money. But for Imelda?" Héctor sighed wistfully. "Ay, yesterday she gave me such a speech about shoes with such a reverence it was inspiring! It was beautiful! Now, I thought that it was something you had told her, but after hearing the way you speak I now know that those words came from her heart. Shoes are her passion."

Héctor bent down to Guzman miniscule height and growled, "So, you are going to continue to teach Imelda how to make shoes, everything down to the smallest detail, so that she will build her own business and become the finest shoemaker in all of Mexico. And if you do anything or say anything to make her lose that passion, I'll take one of your magnificently crafted boots and shove them up your-"

"Sorry to keep you waiting Señor Guzman!" Imelda came in, and Héctor straightened up and gave her a glowing smile while still keeping a tight grip on the old man's shoulder. "Coco should be asleep for at least the next two hours. Plenty of time to get started uninterrupted!"

"I can't wait mi amor!" Héctor gushed. "Feels like I'm in school again. Doesn't it, profesor?" He gave the old man a little shake, who whimpered a little and nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Perfecto!" Imelda smiled back, too happy to notice the awkwardness. "This is start of a new chapter in our lives!" She left to go to the makeshift workshop with a skip in her step and humming one of Héctor's songs, something she hadn't done in quite some time.

Héctor smiled and moved to follow her, but not before turning back to the quaking zapatero. "Remember what I said cabrón." He made a circle with his thumb and index finger, and then shoved two fingers from his other hand through it with a whistling sound. "With spurs." He added.

It took two months before Imelda and the twins were deemed ready to start their own business as shoemakers. Despite picking up the craft pretty quickly, Héctor was still in need of some training, but Señor Guzman assured her that she was more than capable of teaching him the rest herself. Imelda was very surprised and confused when the day after he had said his goodbyes and good lucks to the Riveras he had packed up his belongings and moved out of the city. Héctor wasn't. It was all set up. The shop was stocked with bolts of leather, nails, tools and a beautiful sewing machine that Héctor had bought with his earnings from playing several parties over the last few weeks. Héctor had put out flyers in bright colors all over Mariachi Plaza and the nearby streets proudly proclaiming the date of the store's opening. And the twins had painted a beautiful sign on the outside wall that said Rivera: Familia de Zapateros, desde 1921. When questioned why it wasn't written as 1922 since that was when it was opening, Imelda reasoned that the whole business started when the idea popped into her head. Everyone agreed with that.

And so Héctor, the twins and Coco stood in a line, ramrod straight as Imelda paced back in forth in front of them. "Mi familia, this is it. This is the moment we have all trained for. The start of a family business, the roots of a mighty tree that will grow and branch out into the unknown! We are ready for it! Héctor!"

"Si!"

"You are still learning, but any customer that comes in today, you will get their measurements and get the supplies ready."

"Si, señora!" Héctor saluted.
"Oscar y Felipe!" Imelda barked.

"Si!" "Si!"

"You two will be in charge of cutting the materials. We'll start slow today, so Oscar you will do the left shoes, and Felipe you will do the right ones. I'll be in charge of the sewing and when that's done you two will then tack them together." Both twins saluted.

"What about me, Mamá?" Coco asked.

"Coco, your job is the most important: Customer service." Imelda smiled. "Keep the customers happy, talk to them, show them your dance moves. Just be our adorable little Coco." Coco giggled and saluted. Imelda then went to the window that had been turned into the service counter. "Alright then, you all know your jobs. Therefore, I declare the Rivera shoe workshop open!" She swung the shutters of the window wide to reveal a crowd of…

No one.

Imelda's shoulder sagged a little and she paused before turning back around. "Well, it is still early. Once people have had their breakfast then they will come out to shop."

But hours passed, and still no customers. Several people did walk by and Imelda tried to persuade them to come in, but none were interested and went on their way. After several rounds of 'are you sure you put today's date on the flyers' and 'yes, of course mi amor', it was then the afternoon and no one had had any lunch yet. Imelda's hope started to dwindle.

"I'm sorry." She said to the four of them. "You all should have eaten by now. I'll… go whip up something quick."

Héctor's heart broke a little for his wife. "Imelda, don't be so down. There's always tomorrow-"

"Discúlpame, por favor." A voice asked, and five heads whipped around to see a stocky man standing at the service counter. "Is today the day you open your shop?"

There was a second's pause before the twins rushed out the door, each taking the gentleman by the arm and dragging him into the store. Héctor pulled up a chair and dusted it off for him to sit on, and Imelda guided him to it. All the while a clamor of greetings assaulted the poor man.

"SI, YES we are open!"

"Buenos tardes, señor!"

"Bienvenidos, señor!"

"Have a seat, señor!"

"Would you like a glass of water, señor?"

"What is your name, señor?"

The customer took the glass of water from the adorable little girl and startled at the last question. "Oh! Um… my name is Manuel Fernández."

"Manuel…Fernández." Imelda wrote the name down on her notepad. "A wonderful name. A proud name! Manuel Fernández will forever be known as the first customer of the Rivera shoemakers. You must be so proud!"
"Uh, si. I guess..." Manuel muttered.

Imelda cleared her throat. "Now then, down to business. No offense, Señor Fernández, but your boots have seen better days from the looks of them." She pointed down to the man's boots, which were caked in mud and had a hole worn in one of the toes.

"Ay, si." Manuel sighed. "I've had these for only five months and they haven't lasted well at all. That Guzman was getting shoddy in his work at his age, and I'm glad he retired. I'm hoping you all could do a better job than him."

"Of course, Señor Fernández. We want everyone to know that we treat all of our customers like they were our own familia." Imelda smiled, and then gestured at her husband. "Héctor, please take this gentleman's measurements."

"With pleasure, mi amor." Héctor said as he snapped out a tape measure.

Measurements were taken and recorded, materials were selected and specifications were made for a new pair of boots, with the promise of them being ready by tomorrow afternoon. Manuel was floored.

"Tomorrow? En serio?" Manuel asked. "It would always take Guzman a week to do my boots before."

Imelda laughed haughtily. "Señor Guzman was only one man."

"We are four!" Héctor crowed.

"Señor Guzman was old." Imelda continued.

"We are young!" the twins cheered.

"Once you try on our boots, you will never go anywhere else again, because we are-"

The twins unveiled a banner behind Héctor and Imelda, bearing the store name, little Coco flung out two handfuls of colorful confetti, and they all said in unison:

"RIVERA FAMILIA DE ZAPATEROS!"
The confetti settled on the ground, all of them posing with their arms out and beaming at the confused patron. "A-Alright then." He mumbled. "I'll come back tomorrow." And with that he dashed out of the store as fast as his decaying boots would let him.

Oscar lowered his portion of the banner. "We're not going to do this for every customer are we?"

Héctor waved him off. "Nah, I think this was a one-time thing."

Felipe pouted. "So we made this banner to do this one time?"

"Enough of that, chicos!" Imelda said clapping her hands together. "Let's get to work!"

Héctor and the twins watched anxiously as Manuel walked around the workshop testing out his new boots. They had worked long and hard into the night, only stopping to eat and sleeping very little, to not only make the deadline but to make sure everything was perfect. The finished product, in their eyes, was beautiful. The first real pair of boots they had made as a business and as a family, which they would remember forever. Héctor wistfully wished he could take a foto of the boots and have it framed. Imelda scoffed at such a silly notion, but Héctor could see in her eyes that she felt the same.
Manuel stopped walking and looked up with a big smile. "I have to admit I had my doubts, but I am very impressed!"

Héctor and the twins gasped and grinned at each other. "You mean it?!"

"I do!" Manuel twisted his ankle to and fro. "It doesn't rub me anywhere so I know it won't give me blisters. It's like it was perfectly molded to my foot!" He quirked an eyebrow at them. "You sure that old Viejo Guzman taught you this?"

"Well, we may have made some tweaks ourselves." Oscar admitted.

"But in the end it came out beautifully, don't you agree?" Felipe asked.

"I agree!" Manuel reached into his pocket. "In fact, I'm going to tell all my ranch hands about this place, and all my amigos. I can tell you are all going to be a big success." He pulled out his hand and handed Héctor ten gold coins. "And I am proud to be your first customer."

"G-gracias, señor!" Héctor said as he and the twins waved their first customer goodbye. Then he shuffled the gold coins in his hand at them. "Look at it, chamacos! Our first sale!"

"We're going to eat well this week!" Oscar laughed.

"I can't believe Imelda missed it. This was because of her after all; it's really her first sale!" Felipe moaned.

"Where is she anyway?" Oscar asked.

"I don't know." Héctor said. "She said she had to go wake up Coco from her nap, but she should have been back by now."

"PAPÁ! PAPÁ!" a shriek sounded from across the courtyard, startling the three men. Coins clattered to the floor forgotten as they raced out the door to find Coco jumping up and down from outside the kitchen.

"Mija, what's wrong?!" Héctor asked.

"Mamá's sick! Help her!" Coco cried, tears streaming down her face.

"Imelda?!" Héctor rushed into the kitchen to find his wife leaning over the sink, as heaves wracked her body and she expelled her lunch into the basin. Héctor raced over to support her, rubbing circles over her back. "It's okay, mi amor. I got you." He soothed.

"I'm fine." Imelda moaned and gagged again before wiping her mouth with a rag. "I'm sorry for scaring you and Coco. I'm fine, really."

Héctor's fears weren't abated. "Imelda?" he whispered.

Imelda looked up at her husband, her eyes full of love and a smile gracing her lips. "I think you and I need to go to the doctor."
Imelda felt like a fool.

*No, I am a fool.*

Ever since her husband had returned home and the family business had started to blossom, Imelda had been in such a blissful state of happiness that she had ignored all the warnings signs of the last few weeks. But now they came crashing back to her and she felt like she could slap herself with her own boot. Like the fact that she was more tired during the day and certain smells seemed to make her stomach roll uncomfortably. She was able to control that until this morning when she caught a whiff of the fresh mulch that was in Señor Fernández's buggy that sent her racing back into the kitchen and vomiting everything she had in her stomach.

Oh, and there was also the fact that she failed to notice that she had missed her last two periods.

*Estupida! ESTUPIDA!*

Now here she was, having spent most of her first sale as shoemaker on a visit to the doctor and a bag full of loose tea leaves, mint and ginger to combat the morning sickness. Pregnant. She was pregnant! And she had no one to blame but herself. The first week Héctor had been home and she was so close to his warmth and scent, Imelda had found herself to be... insatiable. They made love so many times during that week it was hard to exactly pinpoint when this baby had been conceived. Thankfully she had the good graces to make sure that Coco and her brothers were out of the house before she and Héctor did anything after that first embarrassing night.

Speaking of Héctor, she glanced over at her husband as they walked back home from the doctor. Well, *she* was walking. On the way there Héctor held her close to him, whispering soothing words to her and rubbing her arms. Since she wasn't exactly sure at the time that she was pregnant she didn't say anything to him, and she unfairly let him assume the worst. Now that it was certain, the fear and apprehension Héctor had then turned into unbridled rapture, and he had let out such a loud and sharp grito at the news that it had nearly given the poor doctor a heart attack. Now here he was, tapping out an exaggerated Jarabe Tapatío as he sang nonsense words and danced circles around Imelda.

"Basta, Héctor." She grumbled, but smiled all the same. "You're making me dizzy."

"Dance with me, Imelda! Dance with me!" Héctor laughed. "This is a celebration!"

"People are staring at us, idiota!"

"Let them stare! Let it be known! I'm going to be a Papá! AGAIN!" He let out another trilling grito as people around them started clapping and yelling out their congratulations. "Dance Imelda! Dance!"

"Unless you want a repeat of earlier on your feet, I would advise against that." Imelda said. She wasn't lying when she said his spinning was getting to her.

"Ugh!" Héctor winced and stopped his dancing, but his excitement was still not abated as he lightly hopped up and down next to Imelda as they made their way home, giggling like a child. "This is amazing. So amazing! I'm so happy, Imelda." He pulled her close to him and nuzzled the top of her head before giving it a kiss. "A new baby! I can't believe it!"
"Si, neither can I." Imelda sighed, and Héctor finally picked up on her mood.

"Imelda?" he stopped and turned her to look him in the eyes. "What's wrong? Aren't you happy about the baby?"

"Of course I am! I always wanted more children, but… You have to admit that this is a really bad time." Imelda implored, but Héctor shook his head confused. "The first day my shoe store opens and now I find out I'm pregnant. I'll get tired more easily, I can't lift heavy things, I'll feel sick all the time. All of that will really cut down on my productivity. And once the baby arrives all my time will be in taking care of it! How am I supposed to make shoes with a new baby?!"

"Imelda." Héctor said as he cupped his wife's cheek and looked at her with love. "You shouldn't worry about that! You are not alone, remember? You have me, and your brothers, and I'm sure Coco will help out in any way she can. This is what family does, mi amor."

Imelda sighed and melted into Héctor's embrace, reveling in his warmth and scent again. Dios, she loved this man's smell. She sighed again: It was letting her desires take control over her that got herself into this situation.

"What now?" Héctor asked.

"I was just thinking…" Imelda said. "Remember when I told you I was pregnant with Coco?"

"Ha! How could I forget? You came after me with your boot screaming that it was all my fault." Héctor smiled at the memory, though at the time he had been scared out of his wits at his then girlfriend.

"Well…" Imelda mumbled into his chest, her face burning. "I guess you can say that this time that it's my fault." Imelda glowered at the ground as she felt Héctor shake from suppressed giggles.

"I wasn't going to say anything, but if you're going to admit it." Héctor hummed against Imelda's head. "I guess this time isn't that much different from the last. First when we weren't married yet, this time when we have a new business. Just lousy timing all around."

"But you're right." Imelda concluded and looked up at Héctor. "We can do this. We did it before with Coco." The thought of Coco brought a sharp gasp from her. "Coco! She's going to be a big sister!"

"The best big sister!" Héctor agreed.

"I'm excited again!" Imelda shouted.

"Dance?"

"DANCE!"

With one hand holding the bag of tea leaves and another picking up her skirts, Imelda let Héctor hook his arm around her elbow as they skipped and tapped the rest of the way home.
Oscar, Felipe and Coco were there at the kitchen table when Héctor and Imelda burst in, winded from dancing the last few blocks, and Héctor belted out, "We're pregnant!"

"What do you mean we're?" Imelda laughed.

The twins jumped up with 'aaaws' and embraced the happy couple, giving Héctor hearty slaps on the back and giving their sister a kiss on the cheek each.

"Congratulations, you two!" Oscar said.

"Yes, and we're so honored to have been there at the conception." Felipe smirked.

Héctor and Imelda blushed furiously. "C'mon you guys. Are you ever going to forgive us for that?"

"Nunca." They both said.

Héctor pouted at them, before giving a sly smile. "Hey you never know, it might not have been that fateful night. It might have been the night after that. Or the night after that. Or the afternoon after that-"
"STOOOOP!" the twins covered their ears and squeezed their eyes shut, and even Imelda hid her red face behind her hands. Héctor was going to pay for that later, but for him it was worth it.

"Mamá's not sick?" Coco asked as she walked up to her parents. "What does pegunt mean?"

Héctor smiled and bent down to pick up his daughter. "Not pegunt. Pregnant." He said, drawing out the word. "And no mija, it doesn't mean Mamá's sick. It means she is going to have a baby."

Coco's eyes grew wide and she whispered with awe. "A baby? Can I see it?"

"No mija, not now. It's inside Mamá's stomach right now." He gestured to Imelda, who rubbed her stomach in demonstration.

Coco frowned in disbelief. "That's silly. Babies are big like dollies. Mamá doesn't look like she has a baby inside her."

"Well that's because the baby is this big right now." Héctor said as he pinched his thumb and finger an inch apart from each other. "But it's going to grow bigger and bigger and big- uh…” he trailed off as Imelda glared daggers at him. "Well, maybe not that big."

"How long will it take to grow?"

"Probably about seven more months. You'll have your fourth birthday before the baby comes." Imelda explained.

"That's too long!" Coco crossed her arm in displeasure. "Can't I see it now?"

"Sorry Coco." Héctor said. "These things take time. That's just the way life is. But I promise you this: it will all be worth it in the end and you'll have a new brother or sister." He glanced at Imelda, as if he was saying it to her as well. Imelda smiled back.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" Coco asked.

"We won't know until it is born mija." Imelda said.

"I hope it's a girl. I play with Rosita a lot and she has a brother, and I don't like him at all!" Coco said in disgust.

Héctor looked up from the bed as Imelda walked into their bedroom, with a forlorn look on her face. "No new customers today."

Héctor smiled in sympathy. "I'm sorry, mi corazon. But like I told Coco earlier today: these things take time."

"Si." She muttered as she crawled in next him onto the bed. "This is infuriating. I haven't done anything today and I am exhausted." She moaned.

"You have been doing something." Héctor said as laid a hand over his wife's stomach. "You've been growing a new life inside of you. Isn't that amazing, Imelda?… Imelda?" He looked up and saw Imelda's face slack and a soft snore coming out of her mouth. "Wow…” He reached over and dimmed the gas lamp on the bedside table before snuggling close to his wife and returning his hand to her belly.

"Buenos noches, mis amores."
True to his word their first customer Manuel Fernández spread the news to his friends about the new Zapatero that had just opened up, and soon the customers started to trickle in. Then they told their friends about the excellent shoes and service provided, and before the Riveras knew it business was booming. There were orders for new work boots every day, but there were also orders for ladies high heeled shoes, children's sandals and much more.

Imelda was over the moon. Finally, her dream of owning a successful business of her very own had come true! She supposed it had all started when she was stripped of her parents at age five when they had both succumbed to malaria and she had been forced to live in the orphanage with nothing but her baby brothers and her name. The other children were envious that she was the only one who had the privilege of knowing her parents and the love they had given her, and they shunned her cruelly. All except two other boys, one three years older than her and the other one year younger.

"It's nice that you knew your parents. Unlike me and Ernesto." The younger one had said.

"Sí, but I have a last name too." The older boy bragged. "Mi Mamá died giving birth to me, but she gave me the name Ernesto de la Cruz before she was gone." He waved his hand in the air as he proudly said his name as if imagining it on a huge sign in the sky.

"I'm sorry about your Mamá." Imelda said as she bounced Felipe in her lap. Ernesto just shrugged it off and she turned to the smaller boy. "You don't have a last name?"

"No, I didn't have a first name either. The nuns named me Héctor." Then a look glazed over his eyes and he snapped open a small book by his side and started scribbling furiously into it with a pencil.

"What are you writing?... Wait a minute, you can write?! Aren't you only four?" Imelda glowered, angry because even she didn't know how to read or write yet.

Héctor grinned without looking up from his writing. "I learned last year." He said, without a single hint of arrogance. "Padre said that I got so many thoughts in my head that I should write them all down, so he taught me to read earlier than most other kids do."
"Hmmph." Imelda turned away, but curiosity got the better of her. "So what are you writing?"

Héctor read what he had just written. "He floated by, without a name, carried on the wind. Oh, so many thoughts came to my mind, if I could only give one to him."

"Better make it a she instead of a he, chamaco." Ernesto said. "I told you before; all good songs are about girls."

"Gross." Héctor wrinkled his nose but made the changes anyway.

"You're turning your thoughts into songs?" Imelda asked.

"Sí!" Héctor nodded. "And when I get bigger, Padre said he'll teach me to play his guitar. My arms are too small for it now. It's Ernesto's and my dream to become musicians!"

That had gotten Imelda thinking: What was her dream? She then decided that she wanted something that she could hold onto and keep for herself, something that wouldn't be forcibly taken from her like her parents were. Life was fickle like that though, so the thought of owning her own business seemed more plausible. But alas, she had been born a woman, and for her options were limited, especially when she found herself married to that little boy from her youth. But instead Imelda found herself a wonderful spouse and two loving brothers who were nothing but supportive and helped her achieve her dream. She had never felt so lucky.

"Imelda, hurry up with that sewing machine!" Oscar whined.

And she had never felt so stressed and annoyed.
"I can't hurry up!" Imelda turned as much as her growing stomach would allow. "I have to sew six more pairs of dance shoes for the music troupe. You are just going to have to wait! I thought you were done with the Alvarez order anyway?"

"We are…" Felipe smiled at his brother. "But we have another, more fun, project that we've been working on."

Imelda quirked an eyebrow. "Which is?"

Oscar bounced with excitement before pulling a paper from behind him. "We wanted it to be a surprise-"

"But we just can't take it anymore!"

"So for you and the baby-"

"We designed these!"

They handed Imelda the paper, which turned out to be a blueprint for a pair of boots. A very tiny pair of boots. "Are these… baby-sized steel toe boots?"

"SI!" Felipe laughed. "And this is just the prototype! We think that they will be a huge success for new mothers!"

Imelda sighed and rubbed her eyes. "You two… Babies don't work out in the fields, or around animals or heavy machinery. They don't work at all, they just lie there. Why in the world would they need steel toe boots?"

The twins' smiles faltered and they looked at each other. "Uh… Novelty?"

"Ay Dios mio… I've told you before; you need to stop experimenting with shoes! I'm just glad you showed me this before you actually wasted any material."

Felipe chuckled weakly. "Well, you see… uh-"

"We already cut out the material we needed." Oscar finished.

"ESTAS BROMEANDO?!" Imelda exploded. "We could have used that material for an actual shoe! Instead you used it for your stupid inventions! I cannot believe you two!"

As Imelda continued to scream at her cowering brothers, Héctor tacked a boot together at the center table, lost in thought. While he was happy that his wife was happy, glad to be with his family, and so excited about the new baby, there was a thought that had been eating at him the past few months.

Ernesto.

Soon after he had gotten back to Santa Cecilia, Ernesto had sent him a telegram telling him that the last remaining performances had gone splendidly and that he would hear from him again soon. That was five months ago, and so far nothing had come. It was easy to ignore at first what with all the excitement at being home and the fact that Ernesto never really was one for writing. But now fear had started to worm its way into his heart. What if he had decided that Héctor was too small-time for the great Ernesto de la Cruz and decided that he didn't need to come back to his old hometown? But no, that wouldn't happen. Ernesto was a pompous man, no doubt, but he was also his friend. No, he was his brother. They had been through so much together that he would at least
tell him goodbye to his face. No, there was a worst fear inside Héctor. What if something terrible had happened to Ernesto? What if he was kidnapped by some banditos, held prisoner somewhere dark and cold, or worse… dead?

"AY!" Héctor screamed as he hammered his thumb against the sharp tack. "Joder!" he cursed and stuck his bleeding digit into his mouth.

"Héctor?" Imelda came over and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Are you alright?"

"Sí, I'm just being stupid and not paying attention." Héctor said and showed her his thumb. She went to the cabinet on the other side of the room to fetch the small first aid kit. "Damn that smarts."

"Better watch yourself, cuñado." Oscar teased. "Or else you won't be able to play guitar anymore."

"Nah, we could just flatten the rest so you'll be all nice and even." Felipe laughed.

"Alright you two, out." Imelda ordered. "And don't think I'm done talking to you both either!" she called after them as they raced out of the work shop. She then sat in front of Héctor and examined his thumb. "Probrecito." She cooed.

Héctor rolled his eyes. "It's not that bad."

"If it's bleeding, then it's bad in my book." Imelda reasoned as she soaked a cotton ball in alcohol. She placed it against the small laceration and he hissed in pain. "Lo siento. But my stupid brothers are right. I would hate for this to get infected and you not are able to play your music. For that matter, no more playing until this fully heals."

"Sí, senora." Héctor smiled. "Unless you work the frets while I strum. Wouldn't that be a sight at the plaza." Both laughed at that but then the mood turned somber again.

"You were thinking about Ernesto, weren't you?" she asked.

"What?! No! Ppfft! Of course not. Why would I be thinking about him? I mean, it's not like he hasn't written or telegraphed me to tell me he's alright, or if he's d-" Héctor choked on the last word and paled. Imelda finished tying up the bandage on Héctor's thumb before brushing the hair out of his eyes.

"I know you're worried about him, mi amor." Imelda said.

"Yes." Héctor sighed and bowed his head. "It's been five months Imelda. The last telegram I sent him was sent back with no response. I'd go looking for him but I don't know where to start! And I can't leave you now with the baby on the way! I just… I don't know what to do!" He rested his forehead on Imelda's shoulder as she ran her fingers through his hair.

"Now you know how I felt that last month you were gone without a word, payaso." She said with a smile.

"I'm sorry." Héctor whispered. Imelda kissed him on the head and then lifted him up and kissed him deeply and passionately. Héctor sighed into the kiss and some of his fears melted away. He then pulled back feeling a little better, but then a thought struck him. "They'd tell me though, right? If he was d-dead? What if he doesn't have his identification on him? They wouldn't know who he was."

Imelda placed a hand on his cheek. "Then we'll put out alerts in all the papers asking about a man
with the chin that sunk the Titanic." She smiled as Héctor finally laughed for the first time in days and then they kissed again.

"Please, diosa!"

"No."

"Pleeeeeeeease?…"

"NO."

"It's a great name!"

Imelda glared at Héctor and rubbed her stomach. "I will not name my baby after that gun-toting, murderous maniac!"

Héctor scoffed. "Pancho Villa is a man of the people, Imelda. He's a hero! And I would be honored if my son inherits such a name."

"It's going to be a girl, Papá." Coco chimed in. "I don't want a brother."

"You'll take what you get, mija." Imelda said before turning back to Héctor. "Besides, there are already four little boys running around the town, all named Pancho. Be a little more original with the boy names, would you?"

Héctor pouted. Imelda had agreed that if the baby was going to be a boy then he would be the one to name him. But so far she had vetoed every name he had come up with! Granted they were all names of notorious revolutionaries or infamous banditos, but those guys were cool! He wanted his son to be cool too!

"Whatever." He muttered before yelling into the shop. "Chamacos, come on in, it's time to eat!"

Oscar came in first, glaring. "Héctor, we're eighteen years old, we're not kids anymore. Are you ever going to stop calling us that?"

"'Fraid not." Héctor said, smiling as Oscar grumbled. "Dig in everyone!"

Felipe looked at his plate of food and then glanced up at his brother-in-law. "Héctor?"

"Sí?"

"This is Ensalada de Noche Buena." He said, holding up his bowl.

"Sí."

"It's June, Héctor."

"Sí."

Felipe pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Why are we eating Christmas Eve Salad in June, Héctor?!"

"Ah, well that is because your dear sister was having a mighty craving for it, weren't you diosa?" He turned lovingly to his wife, who had already finished up her first bowl and was going in for seconds. She just nodded with her mouth full of greens. "And what she craves is what we eat."
"I thought you hated Ensalada de Noche Buena?" Oscar questioned, before noticing that Héctor's plate held only rice, beans and a flour tortilla.

"Actually I hate beets. "Héctor said, his reasoning being that if he wanted to eat things that tasted like dirt then he would just eat dirt. "But this is good right? I heard that husbands of pregnant wives eat more than the wives themselves and gain a lot of weight, so if she's craving foods I hate then I'll be fine."

Oscar snorted. "No offense Héctor, but you could probably eat a wheelbarrow full of pan dulce and not have an ounce of it stick to you." Both he and his brother started laughing at Héctor as he self-consciously placed a hand flat against his stomach. Even Coco and Imelda started to laugh at him!

"Oh, like you two are ones to talk!" Héctor grumbled. "You both are twigs too!"

"Not like you, espantapájaros!" Felipe chortled and high-fived his brother.

Soon the three men were shouting "FLACO FLACO FLACO" at each other, while Imelda held onto her large belly and tried to not choke on her salad while she laughed. Suddenly a knock came at the door and the noise was silenced, except for Coco who was singing flaco over and over. The knock sounded again before Héctor stood up.

"We're closed for the evening. Come back tomorrow!"

"Oh, but I'm not a customer, hermano." A voice said, oozing charm.

Héctor gasped at the voice and paled. Imelda straightened up too and looked towards the door. Finally Héctor snapped out of his shock and bolted to the door before flinging it open to reveal:

"Ernesto?!"
The four seated Riveras watched the doorway where Héctor stood facing his friend, music partner, and older brother Ernesto de la Cruz. Truth be told they all thought that when Ernesto were to reappear again he would look worse for wear, a shell of the man he used to be. After so many months without communication they had all assumed something bad had bound to happen to him. But here he was, just as suave and barrel-chested as ever, with his charming smile and the glint of mischief in his eyes.

"My friend," he grinned and held out his hands. "It has been far too long."

Héctor sputtered a little and shook his head. "Too lo-... Too long?" Imelda could see his shoulders begin to tremble from behind and his hand clench the doorknob, as if he was trying to hold himself back. "Ernesto, it's six months. How could you-... Why?-... Do you have any idea how worried I've been about you?!" he finally shouted.

Ernesto's smug grin finally faded and he had the decency to look a little ashamed. He took a step back as he held up his hands in order to calm his irate friend down. "I'm sorry, Héctor. I've been through, heh, quite the journey since I last saw you."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't flatten you where you stand?" Héctor growled as he raised a fist.

"Because you would probably end up only breaking your hand?" Ernesto said, his smile back.

Héctor immediately lowered his fist to his chest protectively. "Well... maybe. But still! I thought you were dead Ernesto! I was so- Ah, gracias a Dios!" Héctor's anger instantly faded to relief and he flung his arms around Ernesto and pulled him into a tight hug. "Gracias a Dios! You're alright!"

Ernesto's eyes widened when Héctor had embraced him, but then they softened as he returned the hug. "I am sorry, hermanito. And I'm glad to see that... y-you're alright as well." Imelda squinted a little at the look that passed over Ernesto's face. He almost looked... haunted. Then his eyes turned towards her and the cockiness had returned. "Imelda! How wonderful to see you again!" He then gestured to her full form. "I also see that congratulations are in order." He turned to Héctor and leered. "You didn't waste any time, eh muchacho?"

Imelda bristled a little at that while Héctor chuckled nervously. "Heh, si... Oh Ernesto, so much has happened since I've been home! Come, sit and eat, I'll tell you all about it."

"I also wanted to talk to you about some things, Héctor." Ernesto looked at the dinner spread on the table. "My my, Ensalada de Noche Buena! How very festive... But where's the carne?"

"Oh!" Héctor shrugged apologetically. "Lo siento. Imelda can't stand the smell of meat cooking right now. We've just had to make do-"

"My friend!" Ernesto clapped a large hand on Héctor's back. "I cannot stand to see you not meeting your dietary requirements. A man needs to eat meat! And I know just the place! How about you and me go to Salvador's, for old times' sake? We can talk there!"

"Oh, w-well, Imelda is-"

"Imelda!" Ernesto interrupted. "You don't mind if I steal your husband for the evening, do you?"
Imelda's eyes widened and her face paled. *Steal? No... No no no! Not again!*

"Stupendo!" Ernesto crowed, ignoring Imelda's obvious turmoil and began to push a weakly protesting Héctor out the door. "Come amigo, we have a lot of catching up to do. Don't worry; I'll have him back in no time!" And with that he slammed the door and left the other four Riveras reeling over what had just happened.

"Mama?" Coco glanced at Imelda with big, worried eyes. "Is Papá leaving with that man again?" Coco vaguely remembered seeing that man with the mustache from a long time ago. The last time she had seen him, her Papá had left with him and was gone for such a long time.

"No Coco, don't worry cielita!" Imelda smiled. "He is just Papá's friend who he hasn't seen in a long time! They're just going to talk. It's alright!" Imelda rubbed her stomach as she felt the baby inside of her kick. "It's alright." She repeated. Oscar and Felipe got up from the table and put their hands comfortingly on her shoulders. "It's alright..."

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Héctor bit into the chorizo sausage and moaned appreciatively. "So good." He said. "I gotta admit, I was getting tired of just eating rice and vegetables these past few weeks."

"No problem, mi amigo." Ernesto smiled. "I just want the best for you. In fact... Oye, Sal!" he yelled out to the owner. "Another bottle of tequila, por favor. The finest you have!"

"Finest?" Héctor asked and swallowed. "Ernesto you don't have to do that for me."

Ernesto placed a hand to his chest and pretended to look offended. "Héctor, you should know by now that I would move Heaven and Earth for you!" Salvador placed a dark blue bottle in front of them and Ernesto grimaced. "El Paso? *This* is the finest you have?" The owner shrugged before walking away, and Ernesto sighed before pouring three shots. "Ah, good old Santa Cecilia. I guess I've been spoiled by the wares in Mexico City."

"You were still there this whole time?" Héctor asked, dumbfounded and a little frustrated. If he had known that Ernesto was right where he had left him then he would have been able to find him much sooner. "That city is so expensive, Ernesto! How were you able to afford to live there for so long?"

Ernesto shrugged. "I sang." He said matter-of-factly and sipped at his drink, pulling a face at the taste.

Héctor's brow furrowed. "Sang what?" Ernesto didn't answer and twirled his drink around. "My songs?"

Ernesto winced and smiled apologetically. "Well, you know I never had the talent for songwriting..."

"Ernesto..." Héctor growled.

"But I gave you full credit each and every time!" Ernesto held up his hands. "Cross my heart!"

Héctor paused. *He did?* That was... very unlike Ernesto. At the beginning of their partnership Ernesto was always bragging to people about Héctor's songwriting. But towards the end of their tour, everyone started to believe that Héctor was just the background guitarist to the great Ernesto de la Cruz's act, something that Ernesto never seemed to be willing to correct. "To who?"

"Everyone, including my new manager. No, *our* new manager?" Ernesto purred.
"We have a manager?" Héctor asked, eyes wide.

"Who do you think this third shot glass is for?" Ernesto smiled as he held up the glass. Something caught his eye and he perked up. "Speak of the devil. Fredo, over here!"

Héctor turned and saw a man enter the restaurant. He was a head shorter than Ernesto, thin as a toothpick, had large, straight bright white teeth that barely fit inside his mouth, and his thinning hair was greased back. He also had on the most beautiful, most expensive suit that Héctor had ever seen and as he got closer he smelled of the finest cologne that no one from Santa Cecilia could buy. The man screamed of money.

"Ernesto, my boy!" he said in a deep, booming voice that didn't fit his short stature at all, and shook Ernesto's hand. "What a… fine establishment this is. Very quaint!" His beady eyes turned to Héctor. "Is this the maestro himself?"

"Sí, this is my songwriter, Héctor Rivera. Héctor, this is Fredo Barrera. He discovered me about two months ago." Ernesto guided Héctor to the short man, who grasped Héctor's hand in a bone crushing grip. Héctor concluded that this man was a giant in a small package.

"Pleased to meet you, señor." Héctor said, wincing as he took his hand back.
"Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine." Barrera hummed a laugh through his nose. "First I got the man with the golden voice, now I have the opportunity to acquire the real talent behind him."

Héctor quickly looked at Ernesto in alarm. Ernesto was a proud man; surely he wouldn't let this pipsqueak talk down to him like that? But to Héctor's shock Ernesto simply nodded his head and looked at Héctor with pride. Was Ernesto being... humble? What had happened to him these last few months to change him so drastically?

"Let's talk business, Señor Rivera." Barrera smiled.

Imelda sat in the rocking chair in hers and Héctor's bedroom and looked at the small clock on the bedside table, where it read 12:32 in the morning. As tired as she was there was no way she would be able to sleep knowing that her husband was with Ernesto doing and talking about God knows what. Plus the baby inside of her was kicking up a storm, possibly sensing the turmoil that Imelda was feeling and becoming anxious as a result. Imelda rocked slowly and tried to soothe her baby to sleep, trying not to let her worry get the best of her.

Things to talk about. The last time Ernesto had wanted to talk with her husband he had convinced Héctor to go on that stupid musical tour and had taken him away from her and their daughter for half a year! Towards the end of it she had had the foreboding feeling that she would never see him again. But he had managed to break free of Ernesto's grip and had come back to them, and everything had been so blissful Imelda should have known it would never last. She was ashamed to admit that a part of her had wished that Ernesto would never return, even if it would hurt Héctor, as long as he stayed with his family. But of course Ernesto was back, and he would slither his way back into Héctor's life and control him like the bully he was.

He dark musings made her miss the sound of the courtyard doors creaking open, but soon she could hear the gentle singing of her husband as he walked towards their bedroom. She clumsily pushed herself out of the rocking chair to stand and meet Héctor as the door slowly creaked open. Héctor peeked inside, but relaxed and smiled when he saw her.

"Imelda, you're awake! You didn't have to wait up for me. You and the baby should be sleeping." He walked over and placed a hand on Imelda's stomach, and Imelda recoiled at the stench coming off him. He reeked of tequila and another smell that made her nearly gag in disgust and the baby roll inside her.

"Héctor, that smell! Have you been smoking?!" Imelda asked, pressing her hands to her nose.

"Ah!" Héctor smelled his clothes and grimaced. "I'm sorry, mi amor. No, I haven't been smoking. That was Fredo Barrera, my new manager! Ernesto's and mine, that is! Can you believe it?! Mira mira!" He pulled a piece of paper from his jacket and showed it to her. "I signed a contract with him for Barrera Records! They make all of my favorite records Imelda, and now I'm a part of it! Well, Ernesto will be singing on the records, but I'm the songwriter, so my name will be right on the records with him! In print! Can you believe it Imelda?!"

As Héctor rambled on Imelda sat down on the bed in shock, her worst fears realized. She should have known. Héctor's dream had always been to play for the world. If his chance were to present itself, then of course he would, and should, take it. But the thought of him being away from her again made her feel ill. For how long would it be for this time? And after tasting the fame and fortune he craved, would he even want to come back?

"But yeah, Fredo smoked about three cigars the whole time I was there. It made me sick too." Héctor chuckled. "I had to get out of there as soon as I could, but also so I could share the news
with you! What do you think, Imelda?"

"When will you be leaving?" Imelda asked, her voice cold and strong. She had slipped back into her icy demeanor from when Héctor was gone and the whispers of the townspeople were starting to get to her. They would not see her falter and break down then, and they would not see it now. It was easy. She would not cry over this man anymore!

"Leaving?" Héctor asked.

"Yes, when are you leaving?" Imelda snapped. "You and Ernesto are a team now, signed contract and everything. I assume you'll have your own studio, have to go on more tours, build your new empire, and you can't do that in Santa Cecelia! So I repeat, when are you leaving?"

Héctor smiled. "Well, Ernesto is going to be doing all that by himself, while I stay here in Santa Cecelia with mi familia!"

Imelda's stern countenance broke and her eyes widened. "Que?" she whispered.

"It's part of my contract, see?" Héctor said as he pointed out a specification on the paper. "I will write Ernesto songs, but I can do that anywhere, which for me is right here with you! Now Fredo did want me to come back with them originally, but Ernesto, of all people, insisted that I stay here where I'm happiest. He said I could write him songs while I'm in the toilet, for all he cared!" Héctor giggled. "But don't worry, I won't. I'm a professional, you see!"

"But how will he get the songs?" Imelda asked.

"Well I could mail them to the studio, or they have… uh… Couriers? I think? Those are guys that come personally to pick up and deliver important stuff to make sure it gets back safely! It's all very complicated stuff, and I must admit I've had a little too much to drink so I can't really talk about it clearly." Héctor grinned sheepishly. "We should get to bed though. I have to get up early to deliver those work boots to the mines in the morning! We can talk about all this later."

"So… you're s-staying?" Imelda asked, daring to hope.

Héctor turned back to her confused, and then smiled at her with eyes full of love. "There's no place I'd rather be, diosa."

"Oh Héctor!" Imelda cried and crashed into her husband, wrapping her arms tightly around him and sobbing with relief. "Gracias a dios! Oh Héctor, Héctor!" She sobbed loudly into his shirt, saturating it with her tears that she had been trying so hard before to keep at bay.

"Oh Imelda, cálmese, cálmese!" Héctor soothed as he hugged her back. "Whatever is the matter, mi Corazon?"

Imelda sniffled and looked up at him with watering eyes. "I was s-so scared th-th-that you were going to… l-leave me again! Leave us! Oh, gracias a dios!" she sobbed again, harder this time.

Héctor sighed and kissed the crown of her head. "Oh Imelda, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have worried you like that." He lifted her head up by her chin and looked her in the eyes. "But you must know that I would never leave you when you're with my child. Hell, I wouldn't leave you even if you weren't. My place is with you, and Coco, even your stupid brothers. And a home filled with love, family, music, and shoes."

For the next few minutes Héctor held Imelda while she sobbed out all of her worries, while gently rocking her and singing sweet words to her. Finally her shaking abated and she soon turned
ashamed. "I'm sorry; I don't know why I cried so much."

"Oh, I know you're not a cryer, Imelda." Héctor grinned and then pointed at her stomach. "It's the kid's fault. Pregnancy has always made you weepy. Like when you put your shoes on the wrong feet the other day."

"Don't remind me!" Imelda said through a smile as she wiped her tears away.

"Well, I know something that will cheer you up!" Héctor said as he pulled out another small piece of paper from his jacket. "Want to see what two months of royalties for my songs looks like?"

Imelda took the paper from him, looked at it, and gasped. "A check! For… five thousand pesos?! Héctor!"

Héctor grinned proudly. "Now we won't have to fight over the sewing machine anymore. We can each have our own!"

"Oh, Héctor!" Imelda wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, both laughing and moaning into it as they fell back onto the bed. The fact that Héctor was finally able to live out his dream, while also still being willing to help her achieve her own, made Imelda the happiest woman in all of Mexico.

"You should have seen me when I saw the check." Héctor laughed. "I nearly choked on my chorizo!"
It was another two months before Ernesto returned to Santa Cecilia to personally review the brand new songs that Héctor had written for him. He sat outside in the courtyard under the shade of the large tree in the corner, sipping on a bottle of mango agua fresca and flipping through the dozen of sheets of paper filled with lilting melodies, toe tapping tempos and, at times, funny lyrics. He hummed out the tunes himself, laughed at the appropriate times and when he finished he happily slapped Héctor on the knee.

"My friend, you have outdone yourself this time! These songs are pure gold! I personally like *Flores de la Mente* the best, it is hauntingly beautiful. I can imagine singing it while pining for a lost love. Was that your intention?" Ernesto asked.

"Yeah." Héctor mumbled.

"But *Bang Bang Bang y Pop Pop* is wonderful too. A real toe tapper and funny to boot! We're going to need to hire some professional dancers when I perform this in public. In traditional folk garb with lots of color, what do you think?"

"Sounds great." Héctor murmured.

"Perfecto!" Ernesto pulled out some papers and handed Héctor a pen. "Now if you just sign here to give permission to Barrera Records to produce it… Uh huh, and sign here for residuals and royalties… Sign here… Initial here… Bueno! Congratulations Héctor! I'll get these to Fredo muy pronto, record them, and personally give you the debut record myself just in time when the baby comes!" Ernesto smiled.

Héctor shuddered and gripped his arms. "G-gracias…"

Ernesto's cheery demeanor drooped to a pout. He thought that Héctor would be happy that their dreams were coming into fruition, instead the younger man looked like he was about to head to the gallows. "Héctor, I cannot help but feel you're not as excited as you should be. Is there something on your mind that I should be concerned about?"

"Don't mind him Ernesto." Oscar said as he and Felipe walked out into the courtyard carrying a bottle of lime agua fresca each. "He's just being a worrywart over what the doctor told him this morning."

"Doctor? Is it about Imelda? I hope everything is alright." Ernesto said, with genuine concern.

"Tell him, cuñado." Felipe said, smiling at Héctor.

Héctor wiped a hand over his face and sighed shakily. "W-well," his voice cracked and he cleared his throat. "I've n-noticed the past few weeks that Imelda seemed a bit… bigger… than her last pregnancy. Not in weight gain, but… in here," he said, gesturing to his stomach. "But I wasn't going to say anything because I didn't want to upset her. She's been so moody lately that anything will set her off. But…" Héctor gulped. "This morning she voiced the same concern that I had… S-so we went to the d-doctor… and he s-said…" he trailed off, shaking his head with wide eyes.

"Go on, amigo." Ernesto said as he patted Héctor's back.

Héctor sighed again and closed his eyes. "He said that either it was going to be a big baby, which given how small Coco was when she was born seemed unlikely… Or-…" Héctor's voice cracked
again and he bowed his head into his hands.

"Or?" Ernesto goaded him on; even though he was now sure he knew what was coming next.

Héctor didn't lift up his head, but instead he raised his hand. With two fingers.

"Two?! Twins?!" Ernesto barked out a hearty laugh and shook Héctor by the shoulders. "Congratulations, hermanito! Ha ha! Ay Dios mio! Twins! I didn't think you had it in you!"

"I don't." Héctor growled and raised his head, glaring as he pointed an accusing finger at Oscar and Felipe. "It's them! This is their fault!"

Oscar and Felipe just rolled their eyes and sipped their drinks. "And how do you figure that?"

"You infected Imelda with your… doubleness!" Héctor accused, twiddling his fingers at them like they were some contagious disease.

"I don't think that's a word, Héctor." Ernesto pointed out.

"Whatever! They are twins, and because of them, Imelda is having twins. That's all I know!" Héctor growled, twiddling his fingers at them like they were some contagious disease.

"Well, you two are here, so it's easier to blame you." Héctor growled, and then winced at his words, immediately regretting them. "I'm sorry…"

Oscar shook his head and smiled. "It's okay, hermano. We know you're stressed. Just don't say things like that in front of Imelda." He warned. Oscar and Felipe had no memory of their parents, having been far too young when they died. But Imelda did and still held them in high esteem. She would not tolerate such words said against them. Héctor nodded and sighed again.

"Héctor you can't possibly be worried about not being able to afford two babies, can you?" Ernesto said as he held up the signed papers. "You are about to be a very wealthy man, and Imelda's business is flourishing! They'll want for nothing!"

"No, it's not about the money." Héctor moaned. "I was so worried about complications back when Imelda was pregnant with Coco, and that was only with one baby! Now that there are two, the risks have literally doubled!" Héctor sighed. "Remember that viejo Senor Bautista?" The other three men nodded in sad remembrance. "They said he was once the happiest man in Santa Cecilia. Had the most beautiful wife and had a booming business as a rancher. He had the perfect life... But then she gave birth to two stillborns and died herself soon after, and he became a bitter, broken man for the rest of his days, living in that decrepit shack on the edge of town." Héctor shook his head in fear. "If that happens to Imelda, I… I don't know what I'd do! How could I even go on?!"

"You'd still have Coco, Héctor!" Felipe said and placed a hand on his brother-in-law's shoulder. "And Oscar and I. We'd never let you go down that path, we're your family."

"You'd have me as well, my friend." Ernesto said, his eyes full of sincerity. "I know I've never said this before, but your well-being means more to me than you can possibly imagine." Ernesto smiled with a hint of sadness and looked down. "You won't be alone."

Héctor smiled at his brothers. "Gracias you guys… Gah! What are we talking about?! This is Imelda, for crying out loud!" He laughed and the others joined in. "She's stronger than all four of
"us put together!" He raised his own grape agua fresca in a toast. "To Imelda and the new Rivera twins!"

"Salud!"

Héctor, Oscar and Felipe clinked their glasses together and made move to drink, but the crash of shattering glass startled them. Ernesto had dropped his bottle to the ground as it had slipped through deadened fingers. Héctor had just enough time to see the panicked, far-away expression on his friend's face before, with a quick shake, Ernesto dropped to the ground and started to carefully pick up the shards. "S-sorry, my friends." He mumbled. "The bottle was too slick and it flew out of my hand. I'll clean it up pronto!"

"Ernesto, are you alright?" Héctor asked and placed a hand on Ernesto's back.

"Fine! I'm fine! It's just… Ha, it's just too damn hot out!" Ernesto laughed and fanned himself. "Too much condensation on the bottle."

"Why don't you roll up your sleeves then, amigo?" Oscar offered as he pointed to Ernesto's buttoned up cuffs. "It is muy caliente out here."

"Just the sight of you in long sleeves and a jacket is starting to make me broil." Felipe added.

Ernesto grinned and chuckled nervously, backing away like a cornered animal. " Seriously, I'm fine, I-

Suddenly Coco came out to the courtyard frowning. "Shh! Too noisy! Mamá is sleeping."

Héctor held up a hand towards his daughter. "Careful Coco, stay back. There's broken glass over here."

"Oh, our apologies, Coco!" Ernesto butted in and smiled down at the little girl. Good, an easy out and a chance to change the subject! "You are such a considerate child. Say, what do you think about your Mamá having two babies, niña?"

"I'm very happy!" Coco said. "Yesterday it was only one baby, today it is two babies. Maybe tomorrow it will be three babies!" And with that she happily skipped back to her room, not hearing the whine of fear her Papá let out.

As Oscar and Felipe tried to console their brother-in-law again, Ernesto huffed a sigh of relief, placed the signed papers into his jacket and then tugged at his cuffs. He needed to get back to Mexico City, and fast.

It was a rainy Sunday morning at the beginning of September, and the Rivera shoe shop was closed for the day. Normally this was because the family would head off to Sunday mass and then just laze the rest of the day away and not think of work, or orders that weren't finished, or shoes at all. But today was different for the Riveras, as well as the town midwife and her two assistants, who were also missing mass. It was a day Coco had been excited about for such a long time, but now that it was here, all she felt was terror.

She clung to her Tío Oscar's shirt and huddled against his chest as she let him rock her gently, but an ear-piercing shriek caused her to shrink even more in his hold. "Mamá…" she whimpered and watched her parents' bedroom door with wide, glistening eyes.

"It's okay, Coco." Oscar said as he continued his rocking. "This is completely normal. Your Mamá
will be fine. Just fi-" Another scream cut off his words of encouragement, and Coco buried her face in his shirt and trembled.

Felipe came in from the kitchen carrying four steaming cups on a tray. "Okay! Hot chocolates for everyone, including one with extra cinnamon for Héc-… Héctor? Where'd he go?"

Oscar bent his head to the door. "Imelda was screaming for him, and before I had a chance to blink he bolted in there."

Felipe rolled his eyes and shook his head. "A husband has no place in the birthing room! Everyone knows that!" he handed Oscar a mug. "This one has no cayenne."

"Since when have those two ever been orthodox?" Oscar took the mug and nodded his thanks to his brother. "C'mon Coco, drink some of this. You'll feel much better."

Coco took the mug and sipped the sweet chocolate and let the warmth flow through her. It did make her feel better, but she wished her Papá hadn't left her so suddenly. However even her small child's mind knew that he was right where he was needed.

Imelda sagged against Héctor's chest as she felt the baby finally slide out of her and gasped out trying to catch her breath. She felt his long arms wrap around her and he kissed her brow, but she wished he didn't do either. She felt hot, sticky and just plain disgusting, not to mention still in a whole lot of pain. But still Héctor held her close against him, letting her sweat and other fluids soak into his clothes, as he cried and babbled sweet nothings at her.

"Ay, bebé precioso!" he blubbered as hot tears dripped off his face and onto Imelda's. "Perfecto! Maravilloso! Imelda, it's so beautiful!"

"What is it?" Imelda panted.

"Oh, right! What is it, senora?" Héctor leaned over Imelda's head to peer at the baby. "It's a girl." The midwife said as she wiped the newborn's face off, and at that the baby let out a creaky wail that turned into a full bellied cry, in perfect synch with her Papá's grito.

"A girl! Oh, diosa!" Héctor peppered Imelda's face with kisses as they both faintly heard Oscar and Felipe cheering on the other side of the door. "Gracias Imelda! She's so beautiful!" He bounced excitedly. "Her name! What's her name?!"

Imelda smiled tiredly and closed her eyes. "Leticia."

"Leticia…" Héctor sighed and squeezed his wife in a hug. "Leti-ti-ticia, with flowers in her hair…" he sang. "Ha! I love it!" He watched the two other girls in the room clean her off and cut the umbilical cord with a dreamy expression. "Ay Imelda, she's so beautiful. So tiny."

"Tiny?" Imelda sat up as much as she could and looked at the small baby. "Ay, dios mio… Mierda! That means there is another one in here!" She said as she glared at her still protruding stomach.

Héctor chuckled. "I thought we already established that, mi amor."

"I know, but I was hoping that there wasn't so I wouldn't have to go through that agaiiiAAAAH!" Imelda surged back onto Héctor's chest and tensed up in pain. The midwife came back in between her patient's legs with one of her other helpers, ready for round two. Héctor braced himself behind his wife and held her up to aid her in her pushing. "Héctor…" she moaned. "Héctor, I'm so tired. I
can't do this anymore!"

"Of course you can!" Héctor said in a stern voice that surprised Imelda. "You are a Rivera, and a
Rivera never gives up on anything! You've shown me that countless times, and succeeded each
time! Why do you think I call you diosa?"

"Because you're a blasphemous idiota?" Imelda smiled and winced.

"That," Héctor laughed, "and because you are an inspiration Imelda. You inspire me every day! I
wouldn't be anything if it weren't for you! So you just lean on me and break my hand if you want,
but you can do this Imelda!"

Imelda huffed out a sigh "Alright..." And with that she pitched forward and pushed with all her
might. She squeezed Héctor's hand and screamed as the pain grew sharper, but she bore down and
fought through it all. Suddenly she felt the same flush of relief and sank into Héctor's embrace
again as another cry filled the room, even louder than the first.

"Ay, Dios mio!" Héctor laughed at the volume of the baby's cry. "That's a future trumpet player
right there!" Then something caught his eye and he gasped. "Ooh!... Oh, Imelda, it's a boy! A boy!"
He bounced again and jostled his exhausted wife. "We have a son, Imelda."

Imelda opened one eye and frowned. "If he's named Pancho, or Tiburcio, or Chucho or any other
disgusting-"

"Mateo." Héctor whispered and Imelda opened both eyes and stared at Héctor with wonder as he
smiled down at her. "After Padre Mateo. The man who taught me to read, write and play guitar."

"Oh, Héctor, he'll love that when we tell him. That's so thoughtful." Imelda sighed. "I just picked
Leticia because it was pretty."

"It's perfect." Héctor said and kissed Imelda tenderly on the lips, and they both watched as their two
children were bundled in warm blankets. "And it's good that it's a boy and a girl. I won't have
trouble telling them apart!"

Imelda laughed. "Héctor, they're your children! You would know."

"You can't even tell your own brothers apart!" Héctor quipped.

"Well!-..." Imelda started to defend herself but then just sat back and glowered. "Maybe if they
didn't dress the same all the time..."

The babies were then presented to their parents and after Imelda was cleaned up the rest of the
family was allowed into the room to visit. Coco was content with having a brother as long as she
had her sister, so in the end it all worked well. Oscar and Felipe produced two new pairs of infant
sized steel toe boots to the babies, and Héctor had to physically restrain Imelda to the bed to keep
her from leaping at them. But soon the excitement faded and everyone drifted off to some much
needed sleep.

All was right with the world.
Ernesto walked through the large green double doors into the Rivera complex, carrying a brand new record bearing his name in big cursive letters and Héctor's in a smaller print. He couldn't help but look at it again with glowing pride: Finally! Their dream had come true! Fredo had already told him that multiple stores had already sold out of the records and several reprints had already been ordered. And the reviews in the papers had been phenomenal. He was officially a record breaking, chart-topping singer and Héctor was now a critically acclaimed songwriter! It had all finally happened, and he didn't even have to-

Oh.

Once again the horror of what he had almost done to his best friend, his little brother, came crashing down on him and he had to hold back the bile that had risen in his throat. He tucked the record back underneath his arm and sighed heavily. For almost a year now the crushing guilt had been a burden on his soul and, at one point, had nearly destroyed him. But he had managed to bounce back, in some form, and had gone on with his life. It had helped a little being around Héctor and seeing him healthy and happy with his family, but he kept his distance from them most of the time. He felt unworthy to be even near that glow of contentment.

There was another reason to come to Santa Cecilia other than giving Héctor their record. It had been two weeks since the birth of the twins and, just like he had done with Coco, Héctor had asked him to come to their baptism and become their godfather. He was even kind enough to wait until Ernesto's schedule could clear up so they could do it many days later than what was normal. But Ernesto was instead going to personally decline it this time, his feelings of inadequacies and guilt getting the better of him. Surely Oscar and Felipe would make much better godfathers than him.

"Hola, Ernesto." A voice called out from the workshop.

Ah, speaking of. "Hola… Oscar?..." he hazarded a guess. At the other man's nod, he laughed. "Bueno! Such a lovely afternoon, isn't it? And how are things in the Rivera household with your new additions?"

Oscar's eyes darted nervously away and he clutched and twisted a half-made shoe in his hands. "Ah heh heh… Well you know… It's an adjustment, that's for sure… but, it--… we..."

"It's been absolute hell and I want to throw myself headfirst into our well and drown myself." Felipe finished, popping his head out from the door.

"Oh…" Ernesto winced. "That's a little extreme, don't you think muchacho? I mean it can't be that much different from when Coco-"

"There's two of them!" Felipe cried.

"And they haven't stopped crying since day one!" Oscar wailed.

"Imelda and Héctor have been taking care of the babies-"

"While we run the shop and watch Coco!"
"Orders are backed up!"

"We've barely slept!"

"IT HAS BEEN A NIGHTMARE!" both men finished as Ernesto backed away from them. Looking at them closely they did look extremely tired, with dark circles under their eyes and rumpled clothing. Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea.

"W-well, I'm sorry to hear that… But I have something that will cheer you all up!" Ernesto smiled as he pulled out the record. "Our first recording! I'm sure that my soothing, dulcet voice will calm your frazzled nerves and breathe new life into all of you! I must get this to Héctor, where is he?"

Oscar and Felipe paled, glanced at each other and pointed to the other side of the courtyard to one of the bedrooms. "Gracias, chicos!"

Felipe reached out a hand to halt him. "Uh, before you go in there, we must warn you: Don't go in there."

That stopped Ernesto. "Por que?"

Oscar chuckled nervously. "Well, you see. Héctor's taken it in on himself to be, in his words, the ultimate Papá. See, he takes care of the babies so Imelda can sleep-"

"And even when she is awake Héctor still helps with the babies!"

"He hasn't slept in days!"

"He's gone loco!"

"Don't go in there!"

Ernesto glanced at the bedroom where his old friend was in trepidation, but he quickly shook it off and smiled. "Do not worry mis amigos. If there is one of the many things I pride myself on, it's getting Héctor to see reason. I'll get him to sleep, rest assured!" And with that he walked up to the door and gave a knock. Now that he was closer to the room he could faintly hear the sound of a baby crying loudly. He turned back to flash a smile at the twins, only to find that they had scurried back into the workshop and slammed the doors. Cowards.

"Who is it?" a voice croaked out.

"Héctor, my friend! It's me, Ernesto! I've got a surprise for you." The door slowly creaked open and Ernesto held out the record. "I thought you might like to hear the fruits of our labor finally- MADRE DE DIOS!"
Héctor looked terrible. No, he looked *horrifyingly* bad. His hair was saturated with grease, was sticking up at all ends and had something white and crusty matted in some strands. His clothes were wrinkled to impossible levels and were stained with sweat and what Ernesto could only guess as excrement. And his face was *haunting*. Skin had broken out and turned waxy, stubble clashed with his ghostly pale pallor, and his eye bags were so dark it looked like he had been punched in both eyes. The whites of said eyes were pink and bloodshot, and they darted around as if looking for an unseen foe. And in the crook of one arm he held a screaming, beet red baby.

"Who followed you?!" Héctor growled as he glanced behind Ernesto.

"What? No one followed me. Héctor-"

"Get in!" Héctor pulled Ernesto into the bedroom, who recoiled at the smells wafting through the air as he stumbled to regain his footing. Héctor slammed the door shut and resumed rocking his screaming child. "They're everywhere, you know. They want my songs. They want my children. They're just being greedy. They can either have one or the other, not both!"

"Who? Héctor what are you talking about?" Ernesto asked, a little scared now.

Héctor suddenly went cross-eyed and his head tilted to the side. There was a second's pause before
the baby let out another shriek, causing Héctor to jolt back upright and start rocking again. "Cálmese, Matty. Cálmese..." he cooed, before realizing he had another guest. "Ernesto, when did you get in here?"

"You just pulled me in, Héctor. I'm here for the babies' baptism, remember?" Ernesto gestured to the crying baby and smiled. "Who's this little guy?"

"Ah, sí." Héctor smiled dazedly before looking down at the screaming child. "This is my son Satán- MATEO! Sorry, this is Mateo. Matty, this is your Tío Nesto, and also your soon-to-be godfather."

Ernesto sighed sadly and ducked his head. "Ah, about that Héctor... I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I'm sorry to say that I can't be the godfather to the twins. It's an honor, truly, but I just don't think that I'm the right person for the job. Your cuñados are much more suited than I could ever be. I hope you understand, Héctor... Héctor?" He looked up and again saw that blank, cross-eyed expression and tilted head. "Can you hear me, Héctor?... Héctor!" He slapped his hands together and Héctor jolted to life again.

"Cálmese, cálmese..." Héctor rocked the baby again, and looked up. "Ernesto, when did you get in here?"

Ernesto sighed and decided to try a different route. "I came to bring you our new record, amigo. I know it's a bit late but I thought I would just bring it when I came for-"

"Ooh, Ooh!" Héctor jumped a little and went to the other side of the room. "Speaking of records, mira mira! I've written twenty new songs, Ernesto!" He thrust a stack of wrinkled pages into Ernesto's chest. "Twenty songs for Balero Records!"

"Barrera." Ernesto corrected. "And twenty songs? Dios mio Héctor, you didn't have to write any so soon after our first release. There is such a thing as overexposure." Still his curiosity was piqued and he leafed through the potential new material.

"Ah, my friend, when inspiration hits you then you must use it! Seize your moment, right?" Héctor giggled, not noticing Ernesto's wince at his words. "I haven't slept in ten days Ernesto, and I have never felt more inspired! It was hard at first, but once you punch your way through that hard, painful wall then you can reach the same state of bliss as I have! I see the words floating through the air and I just... pluck them out and lay them gently on the page. Like little flower petals in the wind. So soft. So enchanting." Héctor giggled again as he rocked his crying son. "Yes, yes. Sing some more, Mateo! Sing for your Papá!"

"Héctor, um... these songs don't make any sense." Ernesto said as he held up the mad scribblings.

"Hmmph," Héctor stuck his nose in the air. "You just don't understand modern music! This is what the people want nowadays. This is the future of music!"

"No, I'm serious amigo. No one will like these!" Ernesto flipped through the pages. "The melodies are all jumbled, most of the songs are about shoes and colic, and this-", he held up a few pages in disgust. "This is just a five page essay about Santa Anna."

"I researched very hard on that one, Profesor Calderón." Héctor said proudly and cross-eyed again. Another cry from the baby caused him to jerk again and he looked at his friend. "Ernesto, when did you get in here?"

Ernesto growled and flung the papers away. "This is ridiculous Héctor! You can't go on like this!
You need to "sleep!"

"I can't sleep!" Héctor yelled, backing away. "Imelda needs me! My children need me! They both have colic, you see, so they're both crying all the time. But when Mateo is sleeping, Leticia is crying. When Leticia is sleeping, Mateo is crying. They have never been asleep at the same time. I've tried everything! Singing to them, rocking them, rubbing oil on them, making herbal pastes, giving them massages. I'm at a complete loss Ernesto! I'm their Papá; I should be able to take care of my own children!"

Héctor's outburst caused Mateo to start screaming again, and whatever energy Héctor had gained from his tirade immediately left him. "This baby won't stop crying Ernesto..." And then, to Ernesto's horror, his face crumpled up. "I can't stop crying either..." Héctor broke down in exhausted tears, and he started to sag as he wept.

"For Heaven's sake, give him to me before you drop him Héctor!" Ernesto reached out and took the baby from Héctor's weak grasp and looked the child in the eyes. "And you, it's time to end this madness and go to sleep, Mateo! You are killing your Papá! Be a man and suck it up!"

To the shock of the two men in the room, Mateo did just that. His crying shifted to a small whimper, a sniff, and then a sigh, as he looked up with watery eyes to this man with a large face. Then his eyes drooped and the baby eased into an exhausted slumber. Ernesto was astounded. What just happened?

"He-heh heh... He stopped crying..." Héctor smiled wildly. "Ernesto you did it! He stopped-..." Héctor violently tilted forward and it was only Ernesto's quick grasping at his shirt that prevented him from falling and hitting his head. Héctor leaned heavily in Ernesto's hold. "Ernesto... I don't feel so good..."

"Just sit down before you fall down, idiota!" Ernstos growled. "I can't hold you and a baby."

"I thought I was sitting down..." Héctor whimpered as he let Ernesto lead him to bed. As he sat down, the fumes Héctor had been running on coughed out their last pathetic puff, and after the sound of a dying engine broke out from Héctor's throat he collapsed onto the mattress and snores immediately erupted from him. Ernesto shook his head at his friend and awkwardly rocked the boy sleeping in his arms. Who was the baby in this room supposed to be, anyway?

The door creaked open and Ernesto saw Imelda walk through carrying the other baby. She looked bad and exhausted too, but not to terrifying levels like Héctor was. "Oh, gracias a Dios! He's finally sleeping! Both of them!" She walked over and placed a hand on Mateo's chest.

Ernesto smiled. "Imelda, I am very sorry to say this, but you have a very stupid husband."

Imelda sighed. "Don't remind me. That idiota has been killing himself for over a week just so I can get an hour or two of sleep!"

"What about Oscar and Felipe?" Ernesto asked. "Haven't they helped with the babies?"

Imelda snorted out a laugh. "The fact that I trust my children with this sleep-starved, crazed buffoon over my brothers speaks enough about their parenting skills with a newborn. Not since that incident with Coco and the masa..." Suddenly the little girl in her arms started to jerk around and a little whine broke out. "No Leti! No no no no!" But her mother's pleading was in vain and Leticia started to wail.

"DIAPERS!" Héctor bolted out of the bed as soon as Leticia started to cry and crashed down to the
ground, his limbs splaying everywhere. "I'll get diapers! And I'll get warm bath water! Don't worry mijia! Papá's got you!"

"No Héctor! Por favor!" Imelda pleaded, rocking her daughter and looking like she was going to start crying too. "Please, go back to sleep!"

"Imelda, let me try something!" Ernesto said as he took the little girl with his free arm and held her close along with her brother. "Leticia!" he said in the same stern voice as before. "You have cried enough for today. All your needs have been met; there is no need to complain anymore! Silencio!"

And just as before the baby's crying came to a halt as she looked up at Ernesto with wonder in her eyes. Ernesto grinned proudly at Imelda, who stared at him in shock.

"Santa Anna?..." Héctor mumbled with his face pressed to the ground, before going limp again and falling into a snore filled slumber.

"Gracias, Ernesto." Imelda whispered as she grasped his arm. "Gracias!"

"De nada, Imelda." Ernesto said. "I guess I have a way with children." He smiled down at the two babies in his arms. "Listen, why don't you get some sleep too? I can watch these two for a few hours while you and Héctor rest, what do you say?... Imelda?" He didn't notice while he was looking at the babies that Imelda had stumbled past him towards the bed before collapsing face first down on it, her snores in perfect synch with her husband's. "Alright then, I'll just leave you two alone." And with that he walked out and closed the door on the two slumbering parents.

He settled down at the kitchen table and stared at the two babies. Leticia looked just like Coco had when she was born, except not as round in the face and she had inherited her Papá's big ears. Mateo, on the other hand, was the spitting image of Héctor, right down to the slight, downward slope of his little nose. His facial features were softer that Héctor's were however, and he had his mother's sharp eyes. These were two beautiful babies alright. And to think they wouldn't even be here if he had-…

**Mierda.**

Ernesto let out a broken sigh and stared at the two babies full of guilt. "I'm so sorry, niños." He choked out. "I'm so sorry and ashamed of what I almost did to your Papá. You see, I almost k-… killed him for his songs. I don't know what came over me, if it was rage, or greed, or both... But your Papá is the best man I have ever known and I promise you that I will never hurt him, or his family, ever again for the rest of my life!"

Mateo continued to sleep in his grasp while Leticia just lazily blinked at him. Ernesto laughed a little. "I thought if I confessed to someone, it might make me feel better... But it didn't... Not that it's your fault, niños! It's entirely mine!" He stared at the two a little more and smiled. "I guess you both like me though, right? Maybe I'm not so bad after all..." Ernesto shook his head and laughed. "I know what! How about I sing you a song? Any requests?"

Leticia stuck out her little tongue, causing spit bubbles to pop out, and started to suckle gently on it. "Cielito Lindo, eh?" Ernesto smiled. "An old song, but a classic! You have good taste Leti." And as he softly sang the song and rocked the babies, he finally found himself in that glow of contentment he had thought himself unworthy of before.

"G-going so soon?" Héctor asked worriedly as he held his children in his arms.

It had only been a few hours after the baptism, but Ernesto had already packed up his suitcases and
was heading out the door. He turned back around to look at Héctor. He still looked a bit peaky, but still in far better standing than he had been two days earlier.

"Sí, I must return to Mexico City." Ernesto said. "Fredo wants me to do some publicity stuff for the new record. It is selling like crazy all over the city! You should be proud, amigo."

"Sí, whatever. When will you be coming back?" Héctor asked desperately. "The next day? Tomorrow? Tomorrow would be fantastico! These kids just love their new godfather, after all!"

Ernesto rolled his eyes. "I can't come back tomorrow Héctor, or the next day. In fact it'll probably be months before-"

"Months?!" Héctor cried as he tried to grab onto Ernesto's sleeve while still holding onto the baby. "No no no, you can't be gone that long, Ernesto! I need your help with the babies! Please!"

Ernesto placed his suitcase down and placed his hand on Héctor's shoulder. "Héctor, these are your children. You've done it before, you can do it again."

"But Ernesto, they only sleep when they're around you! When they hear your voice! What am I supposed to do?!!" Héctor moaned.

Ernesto paused a little to think, before snapping his fingers and smiling. He unlatched his suitcase, reached in, and grabbed the first record he and Héctor had ever made. Then he placed it in Héctor's hand before giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder. "There you go, all set! I autographed it and everything." He closed his suitcase again and winked at Héctor. "Adios, chamaco!"

And so he left his sputtering, desperate friend standing in the doorway, and as he got further away he couldn't help but smile when he heard two babies start to scream and cry at the top of their lungs.

Chapter End Notes

Just imagining Héctor's lines in Gael Garcia Bernal's voice makes them that much funnier.

Also I rarely make myself laugh when I'm drawing, but as I added more and more crap to Héctor's face I couldn't help it. :)

\[end chapter\]
Coco walked hand in hand with her parents on each side, while in their other arm they each held a two-year old child. Matty's head was tilted on his father's shoulder as the heat of the day made him drowsy, and he listlessly looked at the comings and goings of the people walking past. Leti, in her mother's hold, was wide awake and smiling at everyone she passed, waving jerkily and babbling words that almost sounded like greetings. Their parents, however, were focused on their oldest child at the moment.

"Are you excited, mija?" Héctor asked happily. "You're first day of school! Just think of all the ways your mind will expand and grow! Ay, I'm so proud!"

"Not really." Coco admitted. "You and Mamá already taught me how to read, and I can count all the way to a hundred. That should be enough, right?"

"They'll teach you to count further than a hundred, Coco." Imelda said. "And they'll teach you how to write properly, and the history of the world, and science, geography, Algebra, Latin."

"Atata! But not all at once! Don't worry Coco." Héctor said, seeing his daughter's eyes widen at the multitude of her studies. "You'll breeze through it nice and slow."

"Will they teach me to dance?" Coco asked hopefully.

"Pssh! You don't need a profesor for that when you've got your Papá!" Héctor boasted as he tapped out a jig, making Coco giggle and causing Matty to whine in annoyance at being jostled. "Perdon, Matty." He said soothingly to his son. Finally they walked up to a large, white-washed building with dozens of children and parents standing around it. "And here we are! Escuela Primaria de Santa Cecilia. Ah, brings back memories, doesn't it Imelda? I wonder if my name is still carved on old Calderón's desk... Oh, look! It's Facundo! Oye, Facundo!"

Facundo looked up to see his neighbors walking towards him and smiled. "Hola Héctor, Imelda, niños." He ruffled Matty's hair and laughed at the glare the little boy gave him, then gave Leti's outstretched hand a shake before bending down to Coco's level. "Are you ready to go to school Coco?"

"Eh." Coco shrugged while wiggling her hand and Facundo laughed again.

"That's quite the opposite of my dear Rosita. She barely slept a wink last night she was so excited, weren't you mija?" He turned to his daughter, a plump little girl with cheeks as pink as the flowers she loved to decorate her hair with. Rosita rushed forward and pulled Coco into a big bear hug.

"Coco! School is going to be great! We'll meet all sorts of new kids and make new friends and sing songs and learn all kinds of things!" Rosita twirled Coco up and off the ground as Héctor's raised his brows, impressed with her strength.

"Whadever you shay, Roshita." Coco mumbled with her face squished against Rosita's. Finally, when her friend released her and she gasped for air, she saw another kid standing next to Facundo and sighed. "Hola, Julio." She greeted with an air of distaste.

There was just something about Julio that rubbed Coco the wrong way. The way he always mumbled his words instead of saying them loud and proud like her parents did, the way he always nervously held his hat in his hands and twirled it around between his fingers, and the fact that he always felt that he had to watch her and Rosita play all the time like he was their guardian or
something. What could he protect them from? He was three years older than her and yet he seemed emotionally stunted compared to his sister, not to mention too short for his age. And now that she would be going to school with him, she would see more of him. That did not suit her at all.

"H-hola, Coco." Julio murmured, wincing as Facundo proudly shook his shoulder.

"Now that Rosita and Coco are going to school with you mijo, it is your duty as the eldest to look after them and make sure they don't get into any trouble!" Facundo said cheerfully, not noticing his son shrink at his words and Coco's glare deepen at the thought. Rosita just beamed back, as cheerfully ignorant as her father.

"Si, Papá." Julio sighed, and then jerked at the sound of a bell ringing, relief washing over his face. "That's the school bell! We got to go, vamanos hermanita!" And with that Julio rushed off with his sister in tow, as fast as he could from Coco's glare.

"Adios niños! Study hard!" Facundo called. "And good luck to you as well, Coco." He patted Héctor's shoulder. "Come by later for that couch, eh amigo?"

"We'll see about that, Facundo. It depends on what the final price is." Héctor smirked.

"What are you talking about?! You're the richest man in Santa Cecilia! If anything I should have made it out of gold!" Facundo laughed and tipped his hat to Imelda before heading back home.

It was true though. Héctor had become a very famous and wealthy man thanks to his collaborations with Ernesto. Their debut album had been selling like hotcakes since day one and there had been many more records made since then. Songs like the sorrowful Emociones Fugaces and the fast-tempo Corazones en Llamas were only some of the smash hits that he had written and Ernesto had beautifully sung. Not only had he profited, by Santa Cecilia did as well. Tourists came from all over Mexico to glimpse at the birthplace of the great Ernesto de la Cruz and Héctor Rivera, so businesses had flourished and more inns had popped up to house its increase in visitors.

Imelda's business had also become a smashing success. At first people had come to the shoe shop for curiosity's sake, wondering what kind of shoes the wife of Héctor Rivera could make. But then they kept coming back for more forms of footwear, impressed in the quality of the products. Orders had become so heavy that reservations had to be made from now on and Imelda had been forced to train and hire more people outside her own family to keep up with them. So even if for some reason either Imelda or Héctor would fail in their respective careers, each had the other to fall back on and leave them financially well off.

But unlike Ernesto, who flaunted his wealth in Mexico City with a huge, gated hacienda, a large staff of servants and grand parties for the elite, Héctor and Imelda were modest with their own wealth and were willing to give whenever they could and within reason. They helped finance new businesses, remodeled the crumbling church into a much grander building, and were even in the process of building a new school for the secondary students that was to be graciously named after them. The Riveras were a humble and kind family, and beloved by everyone in town.

"Alright Coco," Imelda said as she shifted Leti in her grasp. "You have your lunch, your book bag, and the flowers for your teacher. You are ready for school! And don't give me that look, young lady. You'll have a good time, I know it!"

"I'll be waiting for you right here after school mija, at three o'clock sharp." Héctor said.

"Okay." Coco sighed, and then hugged her parents' legs tightly. "Adios Mamá y Papá. Te amo"
Héctor and Imelda watched her skip to the door and with a final wave she was in the building. Imelda smiled sadly as her little girl disappeared, then sighed when she heard a sniffle beside her. "I should have known you would cry, idiota."

"I'm not crying!" Héctor growled, but his cover was blown when Matty wiped a tear from his father's face. "This is too hard. These two are never going to school!"

"Ay Dios mio..." Imelda sighed and turned. "Come on. I've got to start preparing lunch and put these two down for a nap." And Imelda had to bite her cheek to keep from smiling as the twins argued over whether to have a nap or not, with Matty being in favor of, while Héctor prattled on about the benefits of home schooling.

While Oscar and Felipe were both so alike it even confused Imelda, Leti and Matty were as different as night and day. Leti took after her father in enthusiasm and a love for life, but upped to a much more extreme level. While Coco had loved to sing and dance during her toddler years, Leti was content to just run around the courtyard of the Rivera complex, screaming at the top of her lungs. Several times concerned neighbors would come rushing in to see what was the cause of her high pitched squealing but eventually they learned that it was just a little girl enjoying herself and to just ignore it.

She also became known as the escape artist of the family, and heaven forbid if you even blinked when you were around her. One second she would be right next to you in the marketplace, the next she would be Mariachi Plaza listening to the local musicians, oblivious to her parents screaming themselves hoarse looking for her. It was after the incident when Facundo had arrived at their house at three in the morning with Leti in hand that Héctor decided to install locks on the tops of all of the doors to prevent another late night escape. But that did little to dampen little Leti. She was a people person at heart and loved to meet and befriend everyone she met.

Matty on the other hand was the quiet one and more observant of the two. Like his father he had learned how to read and write at a very young age, as he had the patience that Leti lacked and was willing to learn from his big sister after she came home from school. For all of her big talk of preferring to have a sister over a brother, Coco had grown a very close bond with Matty, as she liked to consider herself a role model. Matty was a voracious reader and Imelda was more than happy to give him books more advanced for his age, and he would always have a dictionary with him on hand to look up words he didn't understand.

However... There was no nice way of saying that Matty was a medical disaster. He was born with jaundice and colic, making the first few months with him a little unbearable. Then when he was a year old Imelda came in with him in a frantic state as he coughed and gasped for breath, leading to a desperate midnight rush to the hospital where he was treated for the croup. When he was two he slipped on the freshly mopped floor and smacked his head on the hard surface, resulting in a hairline fracture in the skull and another trip to the hospital. When he was three he sat on an ant bed and his laughs at the tickling bugs turned to screams of pain, and back to the hospital he went for the inflammation. Age four: chickenpox. Age five: broken arm. Age six: glasses. And his latest ailment, at age seven, was a tonsillectomy. Needless to say he knew everyone at the hospital by name.

"Probrecito!" Imelda would always cry as she smothered her little boy with kisses.

"You have to stop saying that, Imelda." Héctor said. "He's going to start thinking that's his name."

Despite their differences, Leti and Matty had the most unbreakable bond that only twins could have and were always together. Every time Matty was sick or hurt, Leti would kiss him on the forehead
and wished him to feel better. Matty would smile, thank her, and give her a big hug. They were each other's best friend, always playing games together, riding their bicycles all over town, and each could always tell what the other one was thinking. Sometimes it was so uncanny that it creeped Héctor out a little, but Oscar and Felipe understood it perfectly. It was just a twin thing.

Eventually it was time for the little twins to go to school as well, and it was just as hard for Héctor to let his children walk into that building the second time as it was with Coco. Matty excelled more than Leti, but she held her own as well. And it was nice to have some quiet time for a few hours without the children around, with Imelda and her team making shoes and Héctor providing some entertainment as he tested out some new songs.

The sound of the large double doors bursting open and two little children running into the shop interrupted the peace and quiet. "Mamá, Papá, we're home!" Leti cried out while panting, as Matty placed his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

"Bienvenido a casa!" Imelda said and bent forward to kiss Leti on the forehead before rearing back. "Dios mio! You're both covered in sweat! And the smell!"

"Well, it's a really hot day Mamá," Matty said nervously as he placed his book bag down, "And we both hurried home as fast as we could because we missed you all so much!" Matty smiled at his sister but flinched away at her glare.

"Uh huh." Imelda said with narrowed eyes. "How was school today?"

"Bueno! Muy bueno!" Leti grinned widely. "We did all our assignments on time today so Profesor López didn't give us any homework to do!"

"Really? That's rare." Héctor said.

"Si, well that's what happens when you raise two geniuses. You should be proud Papá!" Matty puffed out his chest and struck a grand pose while Leti sighed and shook her head. 

That got Héctor's attention and he placed his guitar to the side before crossing his arms. "Did you two even go to school?"

"Papá!" Leti gasped and placed a hand over her heart. "That hurts my feelings! Matty's too! Our education is very important to us, you know. We would never-"

"I'm home!" Coco announced as she walked into the workshop and spotted her siblings. "There you two are. Profesor López wanted me to give you the schoolwork you missed today. You two better be grateful. I shouldn't have to lug around three sets of homework just because you two decided to play hooky today." And with that she slapped down a stack of papers in front of the twins and walked away with a smirk.

It was almost comical to see the usually loud and exuberant Leti freeze in place with horror while Matty's eyes darted nervously back and forth looking for an escape, but Héctor and Imelda still loomed over their children with stern expressions, waiting for an explanation.

"Uh…" Leti finally came back to life before flashing what she thought was a winning smile. "Okay! Okay, when we said that we were at school all day, just now?… That… That was a lie! And we apologize for doing that!"
"Where were you two all day then?" Imelda asked, a little worried. As Leti stuttered trying to come up with a lie she turned to Matty. "Matty?"

"We were at the creek…" Matty murmured, and cowered back from the explosion.

"At the creek by yourselves?!" Imelda screeched. "That's two miles outside of town!"

"Estan loco?!" Héctor cried out. "You two know you're not allowed outside of town without adult supervision! I cannot believe this! Why in the world would you do this?!" He glared down at his children but they kept their mouths shut. "Fine. You two are grounded and I'm cancelling the performance at the plaza this weekend."

"What?!" the three children in the room screamed out and rushed to their father.

"Héctor…" Imelda said softly trying to reason with him, but Héctor was unmoved.

"That's not fair Papá!"

"We've been practicing for months!"
"This was supposed to be our debut!"

"Why should I be punished too when they are the ones-"

"It's my fault, okay?" Matty cried out. "I'm the one who wanted to ditch school! I didn't want to see Sergio today! He said… He said he was going to put dead bugs in my hair…" Matty dipped his head in shame, hiding his red face. "I just wanted to go someplace… fun, and… safe."

Héctor sighed and unfolded his arms, placing a hand on top of Matty's head. "Mijo, if you ever need to take a day off from school, talk to us. We'll understand. And if you need me to talk to Sergio's Papá again-"

"No! Don't! It'll just make it worse…” Matty said miserably, but he smiled when Héctor pulled his son in for a hug.

"And what about you, Leti?" Imelda asked as she ran a finger over a bruise on Leti's face. "Why did you skip school?"

"Just wanted to keep him company…” Leti said glumly. "It was bad enough he was sad… Didn't want him to be alone too." And she smiled too when her mother kissed her on the forehead.

Héctor sighed and shook his head. "Well alright then. You both made it back in one piece, so I guess everything turned out fine… And I did put up flyers all around town proclaiming the debut of the Rivera Family Musicians this Saturday, sooo…"

"Yes!" Coco pumped her fists in the air happily and hugged Héctor. "Gracias Papá! I'm gonna go practice my violin right now!" She kissed her mother and then ran to her bedroom.

"Thank you for understanding Papá." Leti hugged Héctor too and grinned. "And thank you for not punishing us!"

"Ooohh ho ho ho…” Héctor chortled as Imelda went to the other side of the room. "I didn't say you weren't going to be punished."

"Eh?" the twins eyes widened and their shoulders drooped.

"You two are on sweeping duty." Imelda said as she produced two child sized brooms to her children.

"W-well…” Leti shrugged as she looked at the broom in her hand. "That's not that bad, just sweeping the workshop. Between the two of us we'll be done in no time!" she said to her brother, who nodded.

"Not just the workshop." Imelda grinned as she hooked her arm around a smirking Héctor's. "But the kitchen too, as well as the living room, the bathroom, all the bedrooms, the courtyard, the street outside. And after you'll dust and polish all of the furniture, fold the laundry, wash the dishes after supper, finish your homework and then you can take a steaming hot bath!" After she finished the both of them relished in the look of horror on their children's faces and their slumped, defeated postures.

"Have fun~." Héctor sang, waving goodbye to the twins as they slowly trudged off to the courtyard. Then he laughed as he held Imelda close. "Can you believe those two? And Leti trying to use one of my lines on me! 'I apologize for that.' It only works when I do it!"

"Héctor, mi Corazon?" Imelda whispered as she stood on her tip-toes to kiss her husband on the
cheek. "It has never worked for you."

"Alright, hold it right there everyone and smile! Uno, dos, tres!"

*POOF*

Héctor stood proudly with his wife and children as their picture was taken in front of the gazebo in the middle of Mariachi Plaza, all of them in sparkling purple charro suits with gold trimmings. He held up his prized white guitar with Imelda by his side, Coco posed with her violin in the crook of her neck, Leti had her accordion stretched out into an arch, and Matty simply held his trumpet in one hand with his other hand on his twin sister’s shoulder.

Everyone around them applauded after the picture was taken, for they had just experienced a truly thrilling performance from the Rivera family. They had come to the show wary of how good an eleven year old and two seven year olds would sound, preparing for some halting screechy music. What they got was a marvelous spectacle as the children played like seasoned veterans, with special consideration going to Matty, who blew into that trumpet with such gusto that everyone wondered where the air came from in that little body. These musical prodigies truly were the children of the Héctor Rivera!
"Great foto!" Oscar said as he took the negative out of the camera.

"Mamá, you sang so beautifully!" Coco gushed, before scowling. "I just wished we played one of Papá's songs and not Cielito Lindo. It's such an old song!"

"We like that song!" Leti and Matty said defensively in unison.

"I was hoping that bruise on your face would have faded by today, Leti." Imelda said as she rubbed her finger over it.

"I'm sure it won't show up in the foto." Héctor said. "Speaking of… Let's have a foto of just Coco and then a foto of just the twins!"

"A picture of us?" Felipe placed a hand over his heart. "We're touched Héctor!"

"No, the cute talented twins, not the old weird twins!" Héctor sneered.

"Let Leti and Matty go first, I need to fix my hair!" Coco said as she fumbled with the ends of her braids and walked away.

"Okay gemelitos, pose again and smile!" Oscar said as he ducked under the camera curtain and held up the flash lamp. Matty placed his hand on his sister's shoulder and pulled her close as Leti held her accordion in an arch again. Then they grinned widely, sneaking a peek at each other happily before the camera flashed again.
"Moving pictures?" Héctor asked as he set the table for supper with Ernesto trailing excitedly next to him. Ernesto had made a surprise visit just an hour earlier bringing with him various toys and other gifts to the delight of the children before telling Héctor that he had some important business to talk to him about. Normally Ernesto dealt with all of the more complicated business transactions of their partnership, with Héctor just reaping the benefits and living a simpler life, but Ernesto insisted he needed play his part in this venture. "There's not many of those in Mexico. That's more of an American thing, isn't it?"

"We saw an American movie last year, Tio Nesto! With Clara Bow! It was so romantic." Coco swooned as she clapped her hands in front of her chest and gazed off dreamily.

"It was boring!" Leti said as she laid silverware down. "Matty and I saw Metropolis and it was so cool! It had robots and explosions and a lot of people died in it!"

"And the sets were amazing!" Matty chimed in, not willing to admit that the film had given him nightmares for a week.

"There's also one thing in common with those movies." Imelda said carrying in two plates stacked high with tamales. "They have no sound. You're a singer, Ernesto. Sound is an important aspect of singing."

"Ah, but that is where progress marches on, Imelda!" Ernesto said proudly. "Ever hear of The Jazz Singer? It's called a talkie! The first movie to have sound in it, it is a technological breakthrough! And that technology has finally made its way here to Mexico. Héctor, we should really grab a piece of this for ourselves." Ernesto held Héctor close and waved his hand through the air. "Just imagine your name, in big bold letters, on that large silver screen. Under my much larger name of course."

"It does sound good..." Héctor smiled. "But how much would I have to do?" Despite the eight years he had spent uninterrupted in Santa Cecilia, he was still not willing to leave his family for long periods of time.

"You won't have to do any more than what you have already done! Just write me some more zingers while you're here at home, I'll sing them on screen, and all of Mexico will eat it up as always. And just think, if American movies can make their way here, what's to say our movies can't go to America? Or Europe? Asia! Héctor, with this new form of entertainment we can literally play for the world!" Ernesto finished and smiled as he saw the stars shine in Héctor's eyes.

"Alright amigo, you sold me. Let's do it!" He shook Ernesto's hand as his children cheered and Imelda smiled. "I bet Fredo would be more than happy to go into the movie business with us as well."

"Aaah, there's the rub, my friend." Ernesto sighed. "I believe it is time for us to part ways with Barrera Records."

"Huh?" Héctor was confused. So far Fredo had been really good and generous with them. "But why?"

"Héctor, I think it is time for us to make our own company, don't you agree? See, I have recently
come across some… findings about our employer that I wish to discuss with you in private, but they have convinced me that this the time for us to seize our moment! Unfortunately that means you would have to come to Mexico City with me to sign the release forms." Ernesto turned to Imelda. "We would have to leave in the morning Imelda, but I promise you I will have your husband home, safe and sound, by three days' time, only this time as the head of his own company!"

Imelda pondered for a bit, before sighing and nodded. "Alright, I guess I can relinquish Héctor for three days."

"Can we come to Mexico City too, Papá?" Leti asked. "I've never been on a train before."

"Sorry, niña." Ernesto said warmly as he patted her head. "This is a business trip only, very boring for children. But I can promise you this: When my movie debuts, you are all invited to the premier, wearing only the finest of clothes, and I'll take you all over the city for sight-seeing!" The children tensed up with glee and chattered excitedly between themselves.

"Alright, enough talk about business at the dinner table," Imelda said. "Let's eat!"

As they ate Héctor leaned over to Ernesto and whispered, "Hey Ernesto, what did you mean about findings with Fredo?"

Ernesto swallowed a mouthful of tamale and turned serious. "Like I said, it's sensitive, amigo. I'll tell you about it when we're on the train." Then he gave a charming grin. "And you heard Imelda, no business talk at the table!"

Fredo Barrera glared from the other side of his polished mahogany desk at his two star clients, and then reread the release forms that he had just been presented with. An oily smile formed across his face and he chuckled. Clearly these men had no idea who they were dealing with! Like he was really going to release his two biggest money-makers, just so they could become his competition. And what really infuriated him is that they were asking for the rights back to their songs. No, scratch that, his songs! Over my dead body, he thought.

"Ernesto, my boy, I am really disappointed in you." Fredo said in a fatherly tone. "After all we've been through together, all the years, and you want to leave me and take the songs that have made me a fortune. I don't know whether to laugh or to cry!" Then he dropped the affection and growled, "No, I think I'll just laugh, because this is the most ridiculous thing that has ever happened in all my thirty-two years as a producer. So why don't I just rip this up, pretend this never happened, and we can all continue on as a family?"

Ernesto chuckled. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Fredo. See, Héctor and I want to get into the moving picture business, and we want to use our songs in them."

Fredo's eyes bulged in shock, then he let out a relieved laugh. "Ernesto! That's what this is all about?! My boy, if you want to become a movie star, you can! Sing your heart out for the entire world to see and hear! You would have the full support of Barrera Records-"

"That's the problem amigo." Ernesto gave a feral smirk. "We don't want you or Barrera Records to have anything to do with us ever again."

Fredo pounded a fist on his desk and roared, "You listen here, pinche cabrón! You were a nobody when I found you, singing in dive bars to pay for your hospital bills! I made you who you are, you and that esqueleto there! You think you have what it takes to compete with me?! I swear,
if you leave, I will make sure no one in Mexico ever hires you for even un quince años!"

Héctor couldn't keep his silence anymore. "And if you don't let us go then we will destroy you!" he shouted in seething rage with his fists clenched tightly to his sides. Ernesto's hand on his shoulder and his quiet shushing didn't calm him in the slightest, but it did keep him from advancing on the little man.

Fredo backed away in his chair a little, surprised at the normally reserved songwriter's ire, before laughing. "Destroy me? And pray tell how would you two do that?"

Making sure that Héctor wouldn't pounce on Fredo, Ernesto released his hold on the younger man, straightened his tie and picked up his briefcase. Reaching inside he pulled out a headshot of a young girl, with curly black hair tied up in a bow, smiling with a missing tooth, and placed it on Fredo's desk. "This is little Bianca. She's nine years old and resides from Guadalajara. She's part of your Rising Stars program, is she not?"

Fredo glanced at the picture. "Si, she is." He replied, not getting what this had to do with anything.

"Bueno." Ernesto nodded, before pulling out another headshot. "And this one is Ana Maria from Pachuca. Such an angelita, and seven years old." He placed it on the desk and continued. "Josefina from Veracruz. Now this one confused me, because how much talent could a five year old child possibly have to be hired to a talent agency?" This picture was added to the others and he leafed through the other pictures. "Then there's Delfina, Mara, Isadora... Do these names ring a bell?"

As each name and picture was presented to him, it started to click what Ernesto was getting at, and Fredo grew more and more pale and sweat started to bead on his forehead. But he kept his nonchalant glare and growled out, "Just what are you implying, Ernesto?"

"Oh, I'm not implying anything." Ernesto growled back and slapped the pictures onto the desk. "See it all started two weeks ago, when I was coming to your office for a friendly chat, when I saw little Ana Maria with her parents leaving after a meeting. While you and her parents talked, I noticed something... off about the little girl. I have to admit I am great with children, one of the many talents that I possess. So it wasn't that hard to bring her to my side and coax out the truth of what you had been doing to her and the others."

Now Fredo was beginning to look nervous. He smiled weakly and held up his hands. "Gentlemen, please-"

"Children, Fredo! You have been violating these babies!" Héctor hissed out. "How could you?! You disgusting rat!" Héctor's skin crawled and he felt nauseous at the thought of any of his precious children being anywhere near this man. Thank Dios they never had the displeasure of meeting him!

"I paid for them! I'll do what I wish with them!" Fredo roared. He would not tolerate this affront on his character!

"Is that a confession then?" Ernesto asked smugly.

"Even if it is, there's nothing you can do about it! It's my word against yours! I'm a very influential man, chicos. You two are just some two-bit musicos that I could easily replace if I wanted." Fredo leaned back in his chair confidently.

"That's the thing though; you don't want to replace us. We are just that good." Ernesto said. "So
let's say you don't sign these release forms. We will spread the word. You'll do some damage control, no one will believe us, and everything will be fine... But, there will always be that thought in the back of their heads. 'Did he really molest those babies?' And that thought will grow and fester until someone will decide to investigate further, you will be exposed for the slime that you are, and you're precious little empire will come crumbling down like a polvorón. Oorrrr...." He drewled out as he slid the release forms over to Fredo. "You can sign these papers, we keep our mouths shut, and we can all go on our merry way!"

Héctor was horrified. "Ernesto! We can't-"

"You won't say a word to anyone?" Fredo asked.

Ernesto mimed zipping up his mouth. "Our lips are sealed!"

"Fine!" Fredo barked, picked up a pen and messily signed the release forms. "Take your papers, start your estupido company and never show your faces to me again!"

And with that he flung the papers at Ernesto, who calmly picked them up off the floor and rearranged them. "Muchas gracias, señor!" Ernesto smiled jovially.

"Ernesto, are you loco?! We can't just let this man abuse more children. We have to stop him!"

Héctor cried out.

Ernesto's smile faded and he sighed sadly. "I know that Héctor, but as much as I hate to admit it, he's right. We can't prove anything." He sneered at Fredo's smug grin and turned back at Héctor with sad eyes. "I mean, what can we do? We would have to, I don't know... Round up all those little girls, take them for a tour of my mansion, give them toys, galletas, chocolates and all sorts of treats. Then we would have to convince them that they should tell their parents about what this pederast did to them. Then with the parents on board we would go to the police so that the girls can officially form a case against him, complete with vivid details about Fredo's body markings so that the police can verify it later during the interrogation. Then we would have to have the police be waiting outside the door to witness a confession from this cabrón before they bust in with a secret code word of my choosing to formally arrest him!" Ernesto gasped for air after he finished his spiel.

You could hear a pin drop, it was so silent in that room. Héctor blinked in confusion. "That's... weirdly specific..."

Ernesto grinned widely. "It's also what I did. CHIHUAHUA!" The doors busted open and several officers in uniform came in with their guns drawn and pointed at Fredo before two of them slammed Fredo face down on the desk and cuffed his hands behind him. Ernesto jumped up and down with glee and pulled a bewildered Héctor towards him. "Look Héctor look, the fireworks have begun!"
Fredo screamed, kicked and yelled out every curse word he could think of as the two officers hoisted him up and off the ground and carried him out the door. Ernesto sweetly waved goodbye to his former manager and turned back to Héctor, who stared at him in awe.

"Guh- I d-… Wha?... How did?… You?" Héctor stammered, feeling that his brain was melting out of his skull.

"This is a nice desk, eh hermanito?" Ernesto said as he walked behind it and sat down in the plush chair. "Ahhh… And this is a nice office. A bit small for my tastes, but a good starting point for Rivera de la Cruz Productions."

"Ernesto!" Héctor finally choked out and grinned widely. "I can't believe it!"

Ernesto rolled his eyes. "Don't get so sentimental. It's only because my name begins with a lower case letter, and de la Cruz Rivera would look stupid in print."

"Not that, pendejo!" Héctor laughed and went around the desk to hug his friend. "I mean about what just happened! You saved those children Ernesto, and many others! And you got us out of our contract! That was the most amazing, heroic, and sleaziest thing you have ever done!"
Ernesto leaned back in the chair and smiled proudly. "That's Ernesto de la Cruz in a nutshell. Now come with me amigo, and let's make some movie magic!"
Héctor looked to his side and smiled as Imelda gazed out the car window at the wonders of Mexico City. Not only was this the children’s first time to venture outside of Santa Cecilia, but Imelda’s as well. They had all marveled at the first-class amenities on the train ride like the country mice that they were, treating themselves to the lunch trolley and laying out in the compartment beds as they watched the scenery pass by. If they were that impressed by a train ride, Héctor couldn't wait to see their faces when they got to Ernesto's mansion.

"What do you think diosa?" Héctor asked.

"It's so… big." Imelda said a little overwhelmed. "A little too big for my tastes. You could live here your whole life and not be able to experience everything."

"Si, but there are some places in this city that no one should want to experience. Not everything here glitters." Héctor looked out the back window of the car to see another bright white Cadillac trailing behind them and he smiled as he could see his children smooshing themselves close to the windows to see everything. He then noticed that they were driving on a street that he did not recognize and turned back to the driver. "Señor, we are going to Ernesto's mansion, right?"

"Señor de la Cruz moved to a new one a week ago. Much bigger than the last one! I'm sure you will be very pleased, Señor Rivera." The driver explained.

"You've gotta be kidding me!" Héctor huffed as he leaned back into his seat. "It's never enough for that guy, is it?"

"You are the only one who ever seems to be surprised about that, mi amor." Imelda said as she kissed Héctor's cheek. It was few minutes later when they pulled up to a gate that Imelda gasped in amazement. "Dios mio!"

The gate itself was cast iron with two golden E's emblazoned on the front, which opened up to the house itself. The estate was sprawling with hedges trimmed and molded to look like musical notes, giant lush trees and a large fountain bubbling away in the center of the circle driveway. The mansion itself was sterling white with long windows that reached up three stories and huge dark blue curtains draping inside them, and ivy that crept up along the walls. The two cars drove up to the huge white double doors, which opened to reveal Ernesto himself in full evening attire. "Bienvenidos, mis amigos!" Ernesto said grandly. "Welcome to La Casa de la Cruz!"

"This is your house Tio Nesto?! Que padre!" Leti squealed as she raced up to him for a hug. "How much did it cost?"

"It's quite all right, Imelda. I'll tell you what it cost, niños." Ernesto said as he crouched down to their level. "It cost my voice and it cost your father's heart. This is the house that music built! That means that this is your house too, so go on inside and take a look around!" The children didn't have to be told twice and raced inside. Ernesto turned back to Héctor and Imelda. "So, what do you guys think of the new house?"
"It's great Ernesto, but... what was wrong with your old mansion?" Héctor asked.

"Ah, Héctor." Ernesto chuckled and looped his arms around Héctor and Imelda's shoulders. "Have you ever had a goldfish and kept it in a bowl? Well you feed it more and more, and sooner or later that fish will grow, and therefore you need to get a bigger bowl. The same concept applies to me!"

"Nice metaphor, Ernesto." Imelda said sarcastically.

"I'm sorry Imelda, but the modest lifestyle is just not for me. I need to surround myself in luxury! And I think this suits my fancy." He said as he led them inside. The front hallway had two staircases that wound to different sides to the house, and the ceiling was held up by huge polished marble pillars. Paintings decorated the walls with the center one being a large portrait of Ernesto and Ming vases were filled with flowers of all colors. The sounds of the children's laughter echoed throughout the house as their parents gazed in awe at their surroundings.

"You'd never know that there was a depression going on after seeing all of this." Imelda said dryly.

"Aren't you glad you made me in charge of your money?" Ernesto said smugly. "You would have lost it all in the crash! In fact you all should move into a nicer house as well. Lord knows you can afford it."

"Our town has been going through some hard times, Ernesto." Héctor explained. "We'd rather just spread the wealth around instead of flaunt it. Share it with people less fortunate than us. Sure, the children would like nicer things like this too, but in the end they understand."

"Mamá, Papá!" Leti came in running. "Tío Nesto has a swimming pool inside the house! And it's shaped like a guitar! Can we go swimming?!"

"Of course you can cielita!" Ernesto said. "But later, alright? First we must get you all settled in and then we will enjoy a nice supper-"

"Mamá! Papá!" Matty came in running next. "The kitchen is huge! And there are a dozen cooks in there! One of them had this big bowl of goo and he was stretching it up and over his head with a spoon!"

"Ah, that would be the aligot!" Ernesto informed them. "It's a French recipe of cheese and potatoes, and it is muy delicioso. I thought we might expand our horizons this evening and explore a different culture's cuisine."

Suddenly a high-pitched scream rose from upstairs and the three adults looked up in alarm, only to see Coco running to the top of the stairs carrying something pink and fuzzy. "Tío Nesto, I found this in my room! A mink stole! And in my favorite color! Is this for me?! Please tell me this is for me!"

"Of course Coco, only the best for my godchildren!" Ernesto smiled broadly as she clutched the stole to her chest. "I also purchased furs for Leticia and you as well Imelda, as well as dresses designed by Jeanne Lanvin herself. I want you ladies to look your best for the premier in two days!" To Héctor's surprise Imelda screamed like Coco did before she hugged Ernesto, then him, and then raced up the stairs to Coco, where they both screamed in unison and fled to their respective rooms. Leti seemed unimpressed with the clothes and raced back into the pool room.

"And you, Matty." Ernesto said warmly as he reached into his pocket. "You need to look your best too!"
"That's okay, Tio Nesto." Matty said waving him off. "Boys don't wear furs." But Ernesto snapped open a small black case in front of the boy, who gaped in astonishment. Inside were two gold cufflinks with a huge diamond in the center of each, as well as a gold pocket watch encrusted with smaller diamonds. Matty traced a finger over the words etched into the watch cover: Seize Your Moment. "Th… This is for me?" At Ernesto's nod Matty flung his arms around his neck and hugged tight. "Gracias, Tio Nesto! Gracias!"

Ernesto laughed as he watched the boy race off with his new treasures and looked back at Héctor, who stood awkwardly before saying, "Well, I guess they like some luxuries every once in a while… Did you get me anything?" he asked lamely.

"Of course, hermanito!" Ernesto said. "I give you… the pleasure of having me as company for the next week!"

"Ha ha, very funny…" Héctor grumbled before holding up his guitar case. "Well I have a present for you."

Ernesto looked at the case and scoffed. "You're going to serenade me on your guitar? Amigo, you'll make Imelda jealous-"

"My guitar is back at home." Héctor interrupted before holding out the case to Ernesto with a smile. "Here."

Ernesto's smirk faded and he looked at the case in confusion before taking it. Kneeling down he set the case on the floor, opened it, and gasped. Inside was a brand new guitar, the spitting image of Héctor's, with the same designs on the body and the painted skull on the headstock. Only this guitar was painted a beautiful golden color, the designs were a deep chocolate brown, and the skull had perfect ivory teeth. Ernesto ran his fingers lovingly along the strings, listening to them give a gentle hum. "Héctor…"

"It took a while to track down the guy who made my guitar," Héctor said. "He had moved two towns over and had retired by then, but I paid him enough money to make this one. I know how much you always liked my guitar, so I figured I'd have it made just like it, but with a more de la Cruz flare. What do you think?" Héctor looked down only to see Ernesto's shoulders shaking and he gave out a small huff. "I know it's nothing fancy, but I thought you'd appreciate it. Maybe I should have just bought you a Fabergé Egg or maybe a- GUAHH!"

Ernesto took a hold of the front of Héctor's shirt and dragged him down to the ground to his level, wrapping his arms tightly around the younger man. Héctor hesitantly returned the hug before realizing with shock that Ernesto hadn't been laughing at him, he was crying! "Ernesto…" he whispered.

"Gracias, Héctor!" Ernesto choked out. "This is… Forgive me, I'm just… so touched!" He squeezed Héctor harder and buried his eyes in his shoulder as he let out another whimper.

"De… nada, Ernesto. But-" Héctor groaned. "Can't… breathe!"

"Oh, perdoname!" Ernesto released Héctor and quickly scrubbed his eyes free of tears while they both gasped for air. "I'm sorry for my reaction, amigo. I don't know what came over me."

Héctor smiled warmly. "That's what happens when you're given gifts from the heart."

Ernesto nodded. "Si." He clapped a hand on Héctor's shoulder and returned the smile. After a few moments he gave himself a shake and laughed. "That's enough emotional nonsense for me today!"
He stood up and offered a hand to hoist Héctor up as well. "I lied by the way. I bought you some presents as well. They're in yours and Imelda's room. Hopefully they'll make you look slightly more suitable for the cameras."

"Yes!" Héctor cheered and raced up the stairs like a little boy. Ernesto watched him go before looking down at the guitar once more. He picked it up and held it in his hands reverently before giving it a gentle strum. Perfecto. He felt the tears start to well up again as he slightly curled in on himself. Of all the luxuries he had in his possession, this guitar was one that he would treasure for the rest of his life.

And he didn't deserve it at all.

El Camino a Casa was truly a spectacle to behold, especially for it being the freshman project of Rivera de la Cruz Productions. Ernesto played the role of Rodrigo, the owner of a meager piece of land that, though small in size, was a prime piece of real estate that had caught the eye of the greedy land baron Don Hidalgo. Rodrigo was in love with his neighbor's daughter, the lovely Ana Rosa, and after wooing her with a performance of Un Poco Loco the two of them were to married. But, through a lot of twists in turns, Don Hidalgo had managed to separate the two and force an arranged marriage between the poor girl and his own nephew, the lothario Humberto!
On the day of the wedding Don Hidalgo lured Rodrigo into his house under the assumption that he would let Rodrigo keep his land if he stayed away from Ana Rosa, sealing their deal with a toast. But Rodrigo soon realized that Don Hidalgo was trying to murder him! After a quick but brutal fight, Rodrigo triumphed over the dastardly villain and had his fellow ranchers hold him prisoner in his own home to await arrest. Then Rodrigo leapt onto his trusty steed Dante and raced off towards the wedding.

Before the priest finished the sacred vows, Rodrigo showed up to object to the marriage, while serenading the visitors with *The World is Mi Familia* as he walked down the aisle to his love. After a swift punch to Humberto's glass jaw, the wedding was able to continue, only this time with a different groom! And so Rodrigo took Ana Rosa onto his horse, and they rode away into the sunset to live the rest of their lives happily ever after!

As *El Fin* dissolved onto the screen and the lights turned back on the entire theater erupted with cheers and applause. The audience screamed *bravo* and *encore* as their attention turned to the box seats above them, where *the* Ernesto de la Cruz was seated with the Rivera family. Ernesto stood up and bowed gracefully at the adoring crowd and blew kisses at them, before reaching down to pull Héctor up to stand next to him. He raised Héctor's hand in the air and the crowd cheered again as they recognized the talented songwriter for the tunes they had heard. Héctor smiled as his face flushed a deep red and he couldn't remember a time when he had felt this validated as an artist. To able to enjoy it with his family as well as Ernesto was a dream come true.

After a few hours of photographs and interviews with the press, the Rivera family and Ernesto made it back to the mansion. Everyone was still buzzing about the entire evening. It would be a while before anyone was going to be able to settle down for sleep.

"My favorite part was the horse!" Matty said as he galloped around the living room. "What color was it Tio Nesto? I couldn't tell because there was no color. Was it white?"

"Actually he was a lovely cream color." Ernesto said as he draped his jacket across the sofa. "And he was exquisitely trained as well as a sweet, gentle animal."

"If I had a pet, I would name him Dante too!" Matty said. "But I can't have one because of my allergies."

"That's okay!" Leti said. "We can jump on Coco's back and pretend she's Dante! Can we, hermana?"

"No way!" Coco shook her head and crossed her arms. "You'll ruin my mink stole as well as yours! Why on Earth would I want to play the horse anyway? I'd rather play the role of Ana Rosa. She was so beautiful!"

"Si, she was." Ernesto leered and stared off dreamily. "In more ways than one. The stories I have about her and I- *Grrk!*" Ernesto winced as Imelda pinched and tugged his ear down while giving him a lethal glare. "Sorry..." he said sheepishly.

"No, I still think you should play Dante, Coco." Leti said, smiling mischievously. "After all your face already looks like a horse!" Her loud laughs turned to screams as Coco growled and started chasing after her with her clutch raised over her head, ready to strike her younger sister. The two girls sped out of the room with Matty still galloping behind them.

"Coco, don't hit your sister!" Imelda yelled out as she raced after them. "She has enough bruises already, she doesn't need any more!"
Héctor and Ernesto laughed as they sank down onto the couch. The laughter died down to sighs and they sat in silence with the only sounds being the ticking of the grandfather clock and the distant shrieks of children. They turned to each other and smiled wearily.

"Good night, eh?" Ernesto asked.

"No, great night!" Héctor said.

"I told you this would be a good idea!" Ernesto shoved Héctor's shoulder playfully. "By the end of next week the movie will be in every theater in the valley, and soon after that it will spread to the other states of Mexico. This is a bona fide hit to be sure!"

"Congratulations Ernesto. You should be proud… Then again when are you never not proud?"

Héctor laughed at his own joke, not noticing the shadow pass over Ernesto's face. More than you know, hermano. More than you know.

Chapter End Notes

1. I F$%&ing HATE drawing this guitar.
2. I had actually colored it gold and brown, but it looked so bad when it was scanned in that I gray-scaled it. I am not good with coloring...
3. I gave it a little Ernesto mustache. :>
Feliz Cumpleaños

"Uh… Imelda?" Felipe said as he slowly backed away from a sight outside. "The cakes for the gemelitos have arrived…"

"Oh, at last!" Imelda sighed in relief as she wiped her hands and made her way throughout the dozens of people that were currently bustling about in her house.

It was the little twins' eighth birthday today, and instead of the quiet family affairs they usually had Héctor decided that the whole town should be invited to celebrate. Part of this was because of the depression. It had broken their hearts to see so many families in their town suffer and go hungry, so they decided to make this party a grand feast for all to enjoy. The Rivera complex was currently ground zero for all of the food to be accumulated from the various vendors they had employed, which would then be moved to Mariachi Plaza where the party would take place. All that they needed now were the cakes, which had finally made it. "It's about time. How long does it take for the bakery to make two simple caaaaaa-….."

Héctor stood triumphantly in the center of the courtyard as two massive five tier cakes were carted through the doors. One was in Leti's favorite color of lilac, while the other was Matty's favorite of bright green, each decorated with little flowers and animals made of frosting. They were each also about five feet high with the bottom tiers being the size of a tire. The sugary sweet smell was overpowering, and Héctor laughed proudly. "Perfecto! Just like how I designed it! Gracias, señores!" Héctor addressed the exhausted chefs. "You have truly outdone yourselves. They are worth every peso!"

"Gracias for your patronage, Señor Rivera. We really needed a big order like this, what with things being so slow." The head pastry chef said gratefully.

"No problema! Now you can head over to the plaza to join the party. I'm sure you all will want to try your wares!" Héctor waved them off and turned to see his wife and brother in laws gaping at the cakes. "Well, what do you guys think? Pretty great, eh?"

"Héctor…" Imelda whispered, not knowing whether she should be amazed or horrified. "When I let you be in charge of the cakes, I never even dreamed that you would-… What in the world, Héctor?! These things are massive! What were you thinking?!"

"I was thinking of the town, mi amor." Héctor said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Everyone is going to be there, this way everyone gets a piece! And after everything that's happened with the economy they deserve a special treat, don't you agree?"

Imelda softened a little, but she was still overwhelmed. "It's just… so much cake!" she said weakly. She heard three gasps behind her and whipped around to see her children, all dressed in their Sunday best, gapping in wonder at the cakes before they started chattering excitedly and circling around the enormous pastries.

"Papá! These are our birthday cakes?!” Leti asked in astonishment as she reached a finger to swipe at the sugary designs, only for Coco to snatch her hand away.

"Sí!" Héctor said proudly before gesturing to the lilac colored one. "On the left we have Leti's cake. Light and fluffy sponge flavored with French vanilla bean, layered with fresh strawberries, toasted coconut and pineapple swimming in a sweet cream!" Then he pointed to the green cake. "On the right is Matty's cake. Rich chocolate sponge spiced with chilies and cinnamon with cajeta
swirls and crunchy nuts all throughout it! Both of them smothered with gallons of thick buttercream frosting! Mi familia, you are looking at six hundred pounds of pure, sugary cake!" He finished and laughed maniacally, and the children cheered in delight.

Oscar gulped audibly and coughed. "I've never had my whole mouth fill up with saliva before…"

"Alright, enough of this." Imelda said authoritatively. "The cakes are here, the food is all prepared, let's cart this all off to the plaza and let the celebration begin!" At her command all of the workers loaded up the enormous quantities of food onto the waiting wagons and started to haul it all out of the Rivera Courtyard. Something caught her eye and she motioned for her youngest daughter. "Leti, come here mija."

Leti came up to her mother smiling. "Yes Mamá?"

Imelda took Leti by the arm and stretched it out. "I think we need to change you into a longer dress with sleeves. Look at you! You're arms and legs are covered with bruises." She twisted the arm around and gasped. "Dios, this one is really bad!" Indeed, peeking out from the short cuff of Leti's dress on the underside of her arm was a vivid black bruise.

Leti pulled her arm back and flushed. "But Mamá, it's a hot day today! If I wear a long dress I'll get all hot and sweaty! You don't want me to be uncomfortable on my birthday, do you?" she asked as she batted her long eyelashes and smiled sweetly.

Imelda sighed before nodding. "Alright mija, but please try to be more careful when you play alright? You could seriously hurt yourself."

"I am careful when I play…" Leti mumbled as she hid some of the bruises on her arm self-consciously. "It's not my fault-

"A-ha-ha-hem!" Héctor cleared his throat loudly, directing everyone's direction towards him. He stood with his hands behind his back and was trying to smother an excited grin. "In honor of the twins' birthday, I have purchased a special gift. While Leti and Matty have received their own unique gifts, this one is not just for them, but for the whole family. So brace yourselves and close your eyes and you will get a big surprise! Cuñados, drumroll please!" Everyone closed their eyes tightly while Oscar and Felipe patted out a drumroll on their legs and Héctor brought his gift around to his front. "Okay, open them!"

Everyone opened their eyes and gasped, the children in happiness and excitement, Oscar and Felipe in fear while they looked at their sister, and Imelda in disgust. In Héctor's hands was a tiny hairless puppy with wrinkled skin and a long pink tongue sticking out of its mouth. The eyes of the puppy stared off in a wall-eyed expression before finally focusing on the children, then it started to pant and wag its tail wildly as a huge dopey grin split its face. Coco, Leti and Matty raced up to the puppy and immediately started to pet it while Matty took it in his arms. The puppy happily licked the boy's face and Matty laughed with delight. "Papá, you got us a dog!"
"Yep. I think he likes you all!" Héctor said.

"B-but, what about my allergies?" Matty asked as he handed the puppy to Coco. There was no sense in getting attached to it if it meant he would have to soon give it up.

Héctor puffed his chest proudly. "Well your Papá did a little research, and it turns out that some dogs are Hippoally-… hyper ollo… uh… Oh! Hypoallergenic! That means you can’t be allergic to them. And as luck would have it Mexico has the pelón Xolo dog! No hair means no dander means no clogged sinuses!"

"He's so ugly that he's cute!" Coco said as she hugged the puppy.

"Matty, you know what his name is, right?" Leti asked excitedly. Matty thought for a moment before he gasped happily.

"Dante! His name is Dante!" Matty smooshed the dog’s jowls together and rubbed him vigorously. "Good boy, Dante! Who's a good boy? You are!" Dante gave a little *yip!* and licked Matty again all over his face.

"Gracias Papá!" The three children said in unison as they all hugged Héctor, with the poor pup
Héctor hugged them back with a warm smile, which faltered slightly when he saw Imelda's piercing eyes on him. He let the kids go so they could play with the new member of the family before slowly walking over to Imelda sheepishly.

"First the cakes, now a dog?" Imelda asked with her arms crossed. "Are there any more life-altering surprises I should expect?"

"C'mon Imelda," Héctor pleaded. "You've always said that you wished Matty could have a pet, and I found one that won't affect his allergies! Look at them, they adore him! And they loved the cakes! In the end isn't that worth all the hassle?" He looked down at Imelda with big shimmering eyes and a small pout, and she couldn't hold back a smile.

"I suppose," Imelda agreed. "But it's going to be an outside dog!"

"I'll build him a little dog house first thing tomorrow morning!" Héctor agreed.

"Alright everyone, it's time to go. You can bring Dante too so he can get some exercise." Imelda rounded up her family before pointing a finger to Héctor. "And no more surprises!"

Héctor crossed his heart. "Claro diosa, claro!"

By the end of the afternoon the party was in full blast. The plaza was packed with people as they sampled through all of the tamales, barbacoa, empanadas and quesadillas as they were made to order steaming hot, while also chowing down on bowls of atole and hearty menudo. There was enough food to feed four towns, and because of that many people came back for seconds and thirds, grateful at the chance to eat a full meal. Several people came up to Héctor and Imelda personally to tearfully thank them for feeding their starving families and the Riveras' hearts broke a little for their pain.

"Maybe we should do this more often, Imelda? Start up our own soup kitchen." Héctor said to Imelda in private.

"As long as I don't have to cook it all." Imelda smiled.

Dozens of piñatas were strung up all over the plaza, all filled with gourmet candies, chocolates, coins and toys, and the children of the townspeople went hog-wild on them. Coco took a steadying breath, lifted up the stick like a professional baseball player, and gave the chicken shaped piñata a good hard whack, splitting it in two and causing all of the treats behind her. As she triumphantly punched the air and bent down to get first dibs on the prizes, her younger siblings groaned in disappointment.

"We were supposed to be next for the piñata!" Matty whined as Dante panted happily in his arms.

"We should have never let Coco go before us! Why do you always manage to break it on the first try?" Leti huffed.

Coco lifted up her blindfold before popping a chocolate into her mouth. "Sorry chamacos, I just have the magic touch. You'll just have to get in line for another one!" She dropped the stick in her hand dramatically and sauntered away, reveling in the groans and whines behind her.

Everyone was having such a good time that no one noticed a marching band slowly get into formation on the outskirts of the plaza. The drum major counted to three and then, with a wave of his baton, the band struck up a loud, jaunty tune as they marched down the main street. It startled many of the unsuspecting partygoers, but soon they all watched in awe as the band played on.
Héctor and Imelda were drawn away from their hosting duties to see what the commotion was, and both of their jaws dropped in shock.

Because it wasn't just a marching band. Behind them acrobats did flips and somersaults in sparkly leotards, jugglers juggled bowling pins while balancing on large balls, clowns honked horns and blew bubbles to the delight of the children, a beautiful stuntwoman did balancing acts atop a dazzling white horse, and fire breathers blew out explosions of flames into the sky.

Imelda turned her steely eyes towards her husband. "Héctor… I thought you said no more surprises!"

"I swear Imelda, I didn't do this!" Héctor said. "I have no idea who these people are, and- oh, you have got to be kidding me!" Imelda turned her attention back to the ruckus and gasped.

Coming onto the plaza was a large elephant, the biggest animal Héctor and Imelda had ever seen, its large head swaying back and forth as if dancing to the music and flapping its enormous ears. Its tusks were painted gold and it had a golden seat strapped onto its back. And sitting on that seat was Ernesto. Decked out in a shimmering gold charro suit and a huge glittering sombrero, Ernesto strummed on his golden guitar and smiled as all of the women in the crowd screamed ecstatically at the celebrity. Then he started to sing.

Estas son las mañanitas,

que cantaba el Rey David,

Hoy por ser día de tu santo,

te las cantamos a ti,

Despierta, Leti y Matty, despierta,

mira que ya amaneció,

Ya los pajarillos cantan,

la luna ya se metió.

"Ay Dios mio!" Rosita screamed out. "It's Ernesto de la Cruz!" Rosita screamed and jumped up and down as Coco walked up beside her and gave her a blank stare.

"Rosita, you've seen him dozens of times." Coco said. "You've even had dinner with him when he visits us."

"Pues, sí…” Rosita agreed, but then the excitement returned. "But this is Ernesto de le Cruz on an elephant!" She screamed again while Coco rolled her eyes and left Rosita to her foolishness.

By the time Ernesto finished singing Las Mañanitas he had made his way to the gazebo of Mariachi plaza. The elephant got into a kneeling position and Ernesto gracefully slid off the beast to stand in front of the shocked Riveras. "Feliz Cumpleaños, gemelitos!" Ernesto threw his arms open for a hug but was slightly disappointed when he saw them all looking at the massive elephant.

"Ernesto…” Héctor whispered as his face grew pale. "What is this?"

"It's an elephant, Héctor." Ernesto said as if explaining it to a child. "C'mon amigo, it's one of the
first things you learn at school. E is for eleph-

"He meant what is it doing here?!!" Imelda hissed.

"Tio Nesto, you bought us an elephant?!!" Leti shouted in joy. She reached out to touch it but Imelda quickly took hold of her and held her back. "It's my favorite animal!"

"I know niña, I remembered from when I took you all to the zoo." Ernesto said. "But sadly no, I didn't buy you an elephant, and it's a good thing too! Can you imagine cleaning up after this thing? Her droppings are bigger than a sofa!" He laughed when Leti shuddered in revulsion. "No, I just happened to buy a circus and I wanted surprise you all with a visit."

"You bought-b-b-bou-bo what?" Héctor gasped in shock. "Ernesto, why on Earth-

"Well, bought might be a strong word. I guess you could say I just hired them." Ernesto clarified. "You see Héctor, you inspired me on your last visit when you talked about your little philosophy. What was it again? Fling your cash at people?"

"Spread the wealth around." Héctor corrected.

"Sí, that. Well anyway, I came across this traveling circus that had been down on its luck for some time. Which I think is ridiculous because you saw how great they are! It's this damn depression that's been going on, keeping everyone from spending what little money they have on entertainment. Well I decided to help them out, and what better way than to make them the stars of my brand new movie?" Ernesto said proudly. "Ladies and gentlemen of Santa Cecilia, meet the cast of the upcoming Rivera de la Cruz film Amor en el Circo!"

The entire audience cheered as the circus performers danced and flipped and showed off their skills. Héctor slowly got over his shock and smiled at Ernesto. "That's actually… pretty amazing, Ernesto. Helping out those in need. I'm proud of you!" He cleared his throat and became professional. "Though as your partner you need to tell me the plot."

"Ah yes." Ernesto pulled Héctor away and whispered in secret. "I play a down on his luck musician, named Emilio, who comes across a near bankrupt circus on his travels. They have an elephant that is wild and untamable, until I play a soothing song that calms the savage beast. Soon I become a part of the circus as a musical elephant tamer, while also slowly wooing the heart of the icy, man-hating trapeze artist Inez. I'm trying to get Dolores del Río to come back to Mexico from America to play the part."

"I doubt that'll happen, but good luck with that, amigo." Héctor chuckled. "That sounds like a movie that the children will enjoy. Ooh, and I have some new songs that I've been working on that would be perfect for it!" Suddenly a scream and a peal of laughter from the children broke out and Héctor turned around, only to look on in horror. "Oh NO!"

The elephant had taken the small top tier off of Leti's cake, as well as half of the second tier, with her trunk and scooped the pastry into her gaping mouth. Héctor was livid. "No no no! Bad elephant! Bad!"

"Her name is Frangipani." Ernesto said.

"Bad Frangipani!" Héctor yelled out. The trunk unwound out of the elephant's mouth and was reaching to go in for seconds, but Héctor grabbed the end of it and pulled it away. "No more for you! One serving only for elephants!" The elephant snorted in annoyance, spraying Héctor's face and hair with lilac frosting before wiping the end of her trunk on his clean white shirt. Héctor was
frozen in shock at what just happened as Ernesto wrapped an arm around his friend's shoulder and laughed.

"Ah Héctor, you should know to never come between a lady and her sweets!" This earned him a deadly glare from Héctor as his children all joined Ernesto in laughter.

"Tio Nesto, can we ride Frangipani?" Matty asked.

Ernesto smiled warmly. "Of course you can niño! But first let's have some of these cakes. Frangipani has stirred up my appetite. Héctor you might want to go home, wash up and change into your charro suit, and then we can play in the gazebo. For old times' sake, eh?"

Héctor's glare softened before he returned a frosting covered grin. "Sounds good."

Several hours, several performances, and several pieces of cake later it was time for the last bit of entertainment for the evening: a fireworks display. Ernesto was unsurprisingly excited and overjoyed when he heard that. The family was getting ready to head out to the grassy hills near the church, Héctor and Ernesto's favorite childhood spot for fireworks, when Leti walked up to her father quietly.

"Papá, I think I need to go home…" she said softly as she looked up at her father tiredly.

"Go home?" Héctor asked. "Why mija, what's wrong? We were going to watch the fireworks I had set up for you and Matty."

"I know Papá, and I'm sorry. But I'm tired and sore, and I just want to go to bed." Leti ducked her head and sighed. Imelda walked over to her daughter and kissed her on the forehead, letting her lips linger there to check her temperature.

"You are a little warm mija. Maybe you had just too much excitement today. I'll take you home." Imelda said gently.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Matty asked with concern.

"No Matty, you stay. It's your birthday present too." Leti turned to her father and hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. "Gracias for today, Papá. It was great and I had a lot of fun." She then turned to Ernesto and hugged and kissed him. "Gracias for the circus and for Frangipani, Tio Nesto."

"De nada, Leti. Feel better!" Ernesto called out as Imelda walked away with her daughter before turning to Héctor. "You see that there? The thanks of a sweet little child makes it all worthwhile!"

"When you're right, you're right. Gracias Tio Nesto." Héctor said before giving Ernesto a sloppy smooch on the cheek, laughing and ducking as Ernesto tried to pound him into the dirt.

It was three days later as Héctor hammered the last nail into the doghouse he was supposed to have finished two days ago. After many failed attempts and several bandages to his fingers he had finally made a… passable home for their new dog as he showed it off to the pup proudly. "There you go Dante, what do you think?" Dante looked at the jagged wooden planks and the nails sticking out in bent, crooked angles before giving it a distasteful sniff and walking away to sit under the tree. Héctor scoffed in contempt. "Everyone's a critic."

"Héctor, mi amor~." Imelda's voice sang out. "Your breakfast is ready!"
Héctor winced and groaned, turning towards Imelda with a hopeful smile. "Do I dare ask what I'm having for breakfast?"

"Why Héctor!" Imelda placed her hand to her chest with wide eyes. "Don't you know it's your favorite?"

"It's cake isn't it?"

"A big, fat piece of chocolate cake!" Imelda laughed evilly as Héctor moaned and dropped to the ground. "Come and get it Héctor!"

"Diosa, I beg you," Héctor whimpered as he rose to his knees and groveled. "No more cake. I can't take it anymore!"

"We still have the whole bottom tier of Matty's cake Héctor, it would be a shame for you to let it all go to waste. And after you spent so much money on it!" Imelda said.

"Those traitors could have at least taken some cake home with them along with all the leftover food." Héctor grumbled. "How was I to know there would be so much left? I should have just let that elephant eat more of it…” As Héctor walked to the kitchen with dragging feet and slumped shoulders, the door to Leti and Matty's bedroom burst open.

Matty shot out of the bedroom and sprinted towards Héctor. "Papá, Papá! Come quick! Leti's hurt! There's blood everywhere!" A bolt of shock passed through Héctor and Imelda and they sprinted towards the bedroom. They froze in horror at what they saw. Leti was collapsed on the floor, tangled in her bedsheets, with her face smeared with blood. The front of her nightgown was stained red with blood as well as a large spot on her pillow, and fresh blood was pouring freely from her nose.

"Leti!" Héctor sank to the ground and pinched Leti's nose shut with his fingers while Imelda went around her to wrap the little girl in her arms. "Leti what happened?!"

"S-sorry Papá." Leti said weakly and nasally through her pinched nose. "It's been happening a lot lately. I thought it was because of the dry weather, but it's never been this bad. I'm sorry…” Her face crumpled as she started to gently cry: Scared, embarrassed and sick.

"Héctor," Imelda whispered with her hand on Leti's forehead. "She's burning up!"

That did it. "Hospital, now!"
Diagnosis

"Alright, now just look up for me, niña." Dr. Alviso said as he held up a nasal scope to Leti's nose. "This won't hurt at all. It might even tickle a little, so don't sneeze on me, bueno?" Leti tilted her head back and grunted a little as the nasal prong gently slid into her nostril. The doctor peered into the little lens, checking the canal at every angle, and nodded. "Alright, now the other one."

When Dr. Alviso had heard that the Riveras had come bursting into the hospital in hysterics, he had just assumed they were there because of poor Mateo again. He was a sweet boy for sure but por Dios was he torpe! It was a shock, however, to see little Leticia bundled up in a blanket in her father's arms, dried blood smeared on her face and nightgown, while her mother was screaming at the poor receptionist for assistance. Thankfully it was a slow day today and there was no need to wait as the nurses whisked the little girl off on a gurney to the back room. In their haste her parents had forgotten to bring fresh clothes for Leti, so she was now donned in a hospital gown while her soiled nightgown was disposed of. Now they stood by nervously as they watched him look over their daughter.

Dr. Alviso put the nasal scope down and wrote his findings on a clipboard. "Well, there is minor trauma to the nostrils but nothing serious, just a little scrape. She must have just bumped her nose wrong in her sleep. Happens all the time, I do it myself."

"A little scrape?" Imelda asked incredulously. "But there was so much blood! It couldn't have come from a little scrape!"

"Sí..." the doctor agreed as he stretched out Leti's arm to look at the numerous markings. "Leti, how did you get these bruises?"

"I don't know." Leti shrugged. "They just pop up. I don't even know when I get them."

"I see." He wrote that down as well, and then turned to her parents. "How is her appetite?"

"It's fine, I suppose." Imelda said. "She doesn't eat as much as I would like her to, and she rarely wants any snacks."

Again that was written down. "Leti, do you ever feel sore in your joints, like your elbows and knees?" At her nod he wrote that down. "Do you ever get really sweaty at night when you are in bed? And do you get any tummy aches?" She nodded again and he wrote the confirmation down.

"What are you writing?" Héctor asked nervously. "Do you know what's wrong?"

Dr. Alviso gave them a warm smile. "I can't say for sure, Señor Rivera. But don't worry, it might just be something minor. What I do want to do is take a few vials of Leti's blood to test, that way I can be absolutely positive." He scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Héctor. "I'm writing you a prescription for penicillin for any infection Leti might have, but I would only advise taking it if she gets worse. Better to be safe than sorry. She has a hundred degree fever, but I think she'll be more comfortable at home than here so I'm also prescribing you some aspirin to help lower it. It'll also take care of the soreness. And I suggest you ice her arms, legs and anywhere else she might be bruised."

"Alright, we will." Héctor nodded and. "Gracias, doctor."

"The nurse will be by in a few minutes to collect the blood. Feel better soon, Leticia!" Dr. Alviso waved at the little girl and left the room.
"How will they get blood?" Leti asked her parents. "Through my nose again?"

Imelda cringed and sighed sadly. "No, mija, they have to get it from a needle."

"What?!" Leti cried out, jumping off the high table and hiding behind Héctor. "No! I hate shots! Papá, please don't make them give me a shot!"

"Now, Leti…" Héctor said sternly. "You heard the doctor, it's the only way for them to see what's making you so sick." He felt her shake her head vigorously on his back, and he sighed before turning to pick her up. "Look at it this way, when we're done here we can go to the drugstore to get your medicine. And you know what that means…"

Leti perked up a little and smiled. "Helado!"

"Sí, helado!" Héctor laughed as he put her back on the table. "What flavor do you want? Butterscotch, rum raisin, ooh maybe some maple flavored?"

"Gross Papá, no!" Leti sneered in disgust. "Strawberry! Always strawberry! With nuts and whipped cream and chocolate sauce and cherries--"

"Ay Dios mío, it's not as if you haven't had cake every day for the last three days, now you want helado?" Imelda said with an amused smile.

"I tell you what, how about I go get your brother, sister, and uncles to come with us, as well as some clean clothes. You don't want to surprise Señor Chacón by waltzing into his store with your little butt sticking out the back of your shirt, do you?" Héctor laughed as Leti's face flushed red before kissing her forehead. He turned to Imelda. "Unless you'd rather go and I stay here?"

"No, you go, we'll be fine." Imelda said as she reached up and kissed his lips.

As Héctor made his goodbyes and left the room, his smile slowly faded as he walked down the hall. The doctor's words didn't calm him in the slightest. Children didn't just gush blood out of their nostrils and not have something wrong with them. A painful knot that he had never felt before was starting to form in his gut, and he feared it wouldn't fade away any time soon. But he had to power through it for his family, and especially for Leti.

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It was several long days later before Héctor finally received the call they had been anticipating from the hospital. Leti's test results had come in and Dr. Alviso had requested that he and Imelda come as soon as they could so he could discuss it with them. They had been sitting in the doctor's office for about ten minutes alone until Imelda could take it no more.

"The man tells us to come as soon as possible and then he makes us wait?!!" Imelda vented as she paced across the room. "Our daughter's health is at stake and he thinks now is a good time to have a cigarette break, or a snack, or just twiddle his thumbs for all we know!"

"Now Imelda," Héctor said soothingly, turning around in his seat to watch his agitated wife pace. "He's probably with other patients that need his help. You don't want to make a fuss like you did with the receptionist the other day, do you?"

Imelda glared at him with her hands on her hips. "Our daughter had blood pouring from her body Héctor, and that woman had the gall, the gall, to tell me to sit down and fill out some stupid papers?! Would they have made El Presidente fill out papers, no I don't think so!" At that moment the door opened up, startling Imelda as she smoothed out her hair and dress before turning sweetly towards the doctor. "Buenos tardes, Dr. Alviso."
"Buenos tardes, Señor y Señora Rivera. Sorry to have kept you both waiting." Dr. Alviso walked around to his desk with a thick folder as he slipped his reading glasses on and sat in his chair. As Imelda sat back down both she and Héctor noticed the deep frown on the doctor's face as he opened the folder, only increasing their fears. "Well, I wish I could tell you some good news, but the truth is it's very bad. We ran Leti's blood through all the tests, and she is showing a very high amount of abnormal white blood cells. This is what is known as leukemia, or more specifically acute myeloid leukemia. That's where these abnormal white blood cells form instead of healthy ones, which means there's less room for healthy blood cells and platelets to form-

"I-I'm sorry," Héctor interrupted, waving his hand in confusion. "Leukemia, what is that, what does that mean?"

"Leukemia is a type of blood cancer, Señor Rivera." Dr. Alviso said sadly. "And a fatal one at that. I am very sorry."

Cancer. That was a word Héctor and Imelda understood. Cancer was a taboo word that only brought misery and despair to any family. That just didn't seem to mesh with their little girl. Leti was so full of life and laughter, the funniest and cleverest angelita. She loved to test out the tap shoes her Mamá had made by dancing to her Papá's new song alongside her sister. She thought all of her uncle's jokes were the funniest things in the world when they certainly weren't. And Matty. Sometimes you couldn't think of one of them without thinking of the other. They were inseparable, always getting in and out of trouble together, coming up with plans to outwit the school bully Sergio, and just being there for each other. To think that this sweet child was about to be torn away from them… No.

Imelda tried to clear her throat of the knot that had formed in it, but despite her stiff countenance her voice wavered. "Are you s-sure? There are no other tests you can perform?"

"Well, there are other tests, like a bone marrow test or a spinal test, but those are very painful procedures and we wouldn't want to put her through that." Dr. Alviso gestured to the documents on his desk. "Besides, these results are showing that Leti is in a very advanced stage, she might have had this for some time. Maybe months."

"What are you saying?" Imelda asked horrified. "Are you saying that we should have noticed this earlier? I mean I-… I did notice the bruises but I just thought she was just playing too hard! Oh, Dios!"

"No, Señora." the doctor said. "Symptoms of leukemia start out very vague, you wouldn't have known. No one could have, not until it gets this bad."

"Is there a cure?" Héctor whispered after finally finding his voice.

Dr. Alviso sighed, "Unfortunately no, Señor. This form of cancer has been around for centuries, but has only been named about eighty years ago, and then the different kinds named only thirty years ago. That's about all we know about it."

Imelda was livid. "This disease has been around for thousands of years and all you doctors have done about it is name it?! I don't believe it! There must be something you can do?!!"

Dr. Alviso kept his cool. He was used to hysterical patients and parents. "Well, I myself can't help you from here on out, as I and my staff are ill equipped to treat this kind of disease. However," he flipped through the folder, pulled out a sheet and handed it to them. "There is a trial run of radiation treatments going on in Mexico City. It has shown some results, but I must warn you the cost is-"
"You know who we are, Tomas," Héctor growled, cutting off the doctor. "I am Héctor Rivera, the greatest songwriter in all of Mexico. She is Imelda Rivera, the most artistically talented, most revered shoemaker in Mexico. I don't say that with arrogance, those are just facts. We both make more money than we know what to do with so I'm pretty sure we can afford it. But even if we couldn't, I would sell every part of my body and soul if it meant I can let my daughter live for just one more day. So don't tell me about the cost, just tell me where it is and how soon can we leave."

Dr. Alviso paused for a moment and then nodded. "Alright, Héctor. I have a colleague who works at the General Hospital. I'll contact him to let him know that you're on your way." Then he smiled sadly. "I wish you all the best."

Two days later Héctor, Imelda and Leti were all packed and ready to go to Mexico City to start Leti's treatment. When they had sat down with the family for a meeting to discuss the situation, Coco had burst into tears and hugged her sister tight. Oscar and Felipe looked like they had aged ten years right then and there as they also came over to hug their niece. Matty, however, was stricken with fear. He had read books about cancer in the past and knew that it was nothing short of a death sentence. Despite his parents' reassurance that Leti was going to be getting the best treatment possible, he still slept with his sister in the same bed in a tight embrace, fearful that she would just disappear on him. Even now at the train station, he was terrified of letting his sister leave without him.

"Please Papá!" Matty begged with unshed tears in his eyes. "Let me go too! We've never been apart for that long before! I'll help her with anything she needs! Please, Papá!"

"Mijo," Héctor sighed as he hugged his distraught son closely. "Leti will be just fine. It will just be three months and then we'll be home in time for Los Posadas. And it will fly by, I guarantee. Besides you need to stay here and go to school, as well as make sure that Coco does her homework." He teased.

"What if something bad happens to her before then?" Matty whispered.

"Trust me mijo, everything will be fine. Just promise me you'll be a good boy while we're gone, alright?" Feeling his son nod on his chest he kissed his head and hugged him tighter.

Meanwhile Imelda was giving instructions to her brothers about the shop. "Make sure that Abril takes her lunch break when the others do. I don't care that she's watching her figure for her novio, I will not have her collapsing in the workshop again. Now, what am I forgetting?... Ah, sí! You know about the bookkeeping?"

Oscar nodded. "Every Monday so the supplies will get here by Thursday."

"And payday is on Friday for the workers, with bonuses for the ones who pick up the extra delivery shifts." Felipe finished.

"Bueno." Imelda nodded before she hugged them both and kissed them. "I'm trusting you two with not just the shop but with my children as well. Make me proud."

"When have we ever not?" they asked in unison.

Coco wove a lace ribbon over and around the top of Leti's long braided ponytail before tying it up in a perfect bow. "Ta-dah! Now you're all set!"

Leti felt the top of her hair and smiled as she fingered the lace. "Your favorite ribbon! Gracias, Coco! But why? You said if I ever take your ribbons you'd cut my hair off to get them back."
Coco shrugged. "I just wanted you to have something of mine for good luck. And because I love you, even if I don't show it enough. I'm really going to miss bossing you around, though." Leti laughed and hugged her sister, not seeing Coco's smile fade as she held onto her.

The train gave a piercing whistle, startling the Riveras and setting them in motion. "Alright, we've all said our goodbyes. Our suitcases are already on the train, now we must get on as well." Imelda said as she took Leti by the hand. "We'll call once we get settled in at Ernesto's."

"Adios, mi familia!" Héctor said as he took Leti's other hand, and the three of them walked towards the door of the train.

"WAIT! I almost forgot!" Matty's yell made Héctor and Imelda pause long enough for him to race up to Leti, where he stood on his toes to give her a kiss on the forehead. "Feel better, Leti." As his sister stared at him with wide eyes, Matty lowered his to the ground and blushed. "It always made me feel better when you did it for me, I just thought-"

"Gracias, Matty!" Leti smiled and pulled him in for a long hug. "I feel better already!" The family was content to stay there for a minute to make the hug last longer, before another train whistle blew and Héctor was forced to pull the twins apart. More goodbyes were made, tickets were taken, and as the three of them settled in for the long ride to Mexico City, Héctor and Imelda watched sadly as the twins waved at each other in the window, with Matty racing and failing to catch up with the train, only to be lost in the billowing clouds of steam.
Ernesto opened the door to his mansion to greet his guests with a solemn smile. "Welcome back, my friends. How was the train ride?"

"A little taxing I'm afraid, amigo." Héctor said as he carried in his drowsy daughter on his back. Twelve hours on a train was uncomfortable enough even with first class compartments, but a little while after they had left Leti had started to feel dizzy and nauseous to the point where she suddenly vomited her breakfast onto the floor. This required a new seating arrangement for the three of them and Leti had slept the rest of the way there, weakly waving off any meals from the lunch trolley.

"Well, I'll have the staff carry up your things. Right now you must be famished." Ernesto said as he gestured to his goddaughter. "I didn't know if there were any dietary restrictions for dear Leti, but I've had a light supper prepared just in case."

"Can't I just go to bed?" Leti whispered against Héctor's shoulder.

"Mija, you haven't eaten since early this morning." Imelda said, not adding that whatever she had eaten had been thrown up anyway. "You have to eat and keep your strength up." Leti sighed deeply but nodded, and Imelda smiled. "That's my girl."
Supper consisted of a nice fava bean soup, grilled lime chicken and leafy greens, with the adults drinking white wine and Leti drinking milk. Imelda had even let her daughter take a sip of wine, and her over-exaggerated grimace of disgust as she gulped it down brought laughter to everyone at the table. For a moment Leti was her goofy self again. But all too soon Leti began to wind down as she slumped over to her side after only eating half a bowl of soup and two bites of chicken, moaning slightly in pain.

"Alright Leti, that's enough. You did good, mija." Imelda walked to the other side of the table and collected her daughter into her arms. "Forgive us Ernesto, but I think we'll call it a night."

"Of course, Imelda." Ernesto nodded to one of the waiting maids. "Fernanda, escort Señora Rivera to her room and draw a nice hot bath for Leti, por favor." The maid nodded and as she walked off with Imelda and Leti in tow, Ernesto turned to Héctor. "How are you doing, hermanito?" He watched as Héctor didn't answer, but instead chug his fourth glass of wine down to the last drop. "That bad, huh?"

Héctor sighed. "I keep waiting to wake up and find out that this has been just a bad dream. That Leti will be out in the courtyard, doing cartwheels and screaming at the top of her lungs like she did when she was a baby. Healthy, you know? Then he scoffed. "Healthy… Just one week ago I thought she was just that, when instead she has been slowly dying right in front of me and I didn't even see it! What kind of a parent does that make me, Ernesto?!"

"Well, you're asking the wrong person about that, Héctor, because I don't know a thing about parenting. But I know a good parent when I see one. And that's what you and Imelda are," He patted Héctor on the shoulder. "Have faith. Leti will beat this."

"Dios, I hope so… I can't imagine what I'd do if-" Héctor shuddered and buried his face into his hands, slightly trembling.

Ernesto sighed. "Look, if you need me to stay here, just say the word Héctor. I can postpone the production of the movie-"

"No." Héctor said as he sat up with a sniff. "No, those people are depending on you for work. We'll be fine while you're gone. You letting us stay here is helpful enough. I wanted Leti to have a comfortable environment while she was getting her treatment and you provided it. Gracias for that."

"Well, you know that I would move Heaven and Earth for you, Héctor." Ernesto said, and then smiled mischievously as he refilled Héctor's glass. "You look tired as well. I suggest you get some sleep, I've seen what happens when you don't and it isn't pretty."

That earned the first real smile from Héctor. "Please, I still think you made all that stuff up." He huffed a laugh into his glass as he sipped. "Santa Anna…"

But even after a full bottle of wine by himself, sleep did not come easy for Héctor. He lay there in bed with Imelda asleep by his side, feeling a little queasy and too many thoughts racing through his head. What if this radiation trial didn't work? What if Leti got worse and this really was the end for her? How was he going to plan for the funeral? Would he even be able to do it? He was so lost in thought that he almost didn't hear the bedroom door creak open.

"Mamá, Papá?" a little voice whispered from the darkness.

Héctor immediately sat up, swaying a little in his tipsy state, and vaguely saw the dark outline of
his daughter. "Mija, what's wrong?"

Leti sniffled and said in a watery voice. "It happened again…"

Imelda was awake by now and hurried over to her daughter. "Nose or gums?"

"Gums." Leti said as she started to cry. "I tasted it in my sleep and I tried to wipe it away, but it was too late and now it's on Tio Nesto's prized silk pillowcase from Egypt! I'm sorry!" Then she weakly broke out into a sob as red spittle drooled out of her mouth and Imelda wiped it away.

"Don't you worry about that, mija!" Héctor soothed as he came over to her. "Ernesto doesn't care about that. He probably has hundreds of those pillowcases locked away in a drawer collecting dust somewhere! So don't let a little thing like that upset you."

Leti sniffled and her eyes glistened in the dark as she looked up at Héctor. "Can I sleep in here with you two? It's scary by myself."

"Of course you can." Héctor said warmly while mentally kicking himself. This was the first night she had ever spent without her brother sleeping in the bed next to hers, of course she would be scared in that large room with nothing but eerie shadows. They all settled back into the bed, with Leti in between them, and as she quickly fell back into a deep sleep Héctor and Imelda looked over her head at each other, with fear and uncertainty in their eyes.
Behind the safety of a thick brick wall and a reinforced window, Héctor and Imelda watched their daughter on the other side. She looked so tiny on that large bed in the middle of operating room as doctors manipulated a large device on a crane to different parts of her body. They kept it in place for a few minutes as it buzzed and whirred, then turned it off, repositioned it, and repeated the whole process. Leti watched it all with curious fascination at first before the tedium began to get to her and she started to hum *Bang Bang Bang y Pop Pop* to herself in boredom. But then Héctor saw her wince a little, so he walked over to the microphone connected to the wall.

"How are you doing, mija?" Héctor spoke into the microphone.

"My skin is starting to itch!" Leti yelled out for them to hear over the whirring of the machine.

"That's normal." Héctor said. "Just think of it as getting a minor sunburn. But don't worry, we'll put some lotion on your skin after we get back to Ernesto's."

"Okay!" Leti called out and then resumed her humming. The doctors walking around her smiled at her as they continued their work.

After thirty minutes the radiation session was completed and Leti was wheeled out in a wheelchair. Héctor and Imelda met her in the children's ward and winced at the pinkness they could see under her tan skin. Several other children in the ward were hooked up to IV bags, some filled with a clear fluid and some with blood, and as Leti looked at them she began to grow wary.

"Those kids have needles in them," Leti said as she glared at her parents. "Am I going to get one too?"

"No niña," Dr. Fierro said. "Those children are too sick to take their medicine orally, but you can." Leti sighed in relief while her parents chuckled, and the doctor turned his attention to them. "After each radiation treatment Leticia will need to receive a dosage of arsenic trioxide to help destroy any bad blood cells and increase healthy white-"

"Wait wait wait wait!" Héctor interrupted with alarm. "Arsenic? That's poison, isn't it?!" This caused Imelda to gasp in horror and Leti to shrink into her chair with fear.

Dr. Fierro held up his hand to calm them. "In high doses yes, but when you think about it all medicine is poisonous if you use too much of it. This is a very, very small dosage. Arsenic is used to treat many forms of cancer, Señor Rivera. Now there are some side effects, such as nausea and fevers, but this is the best treatment possible, trust me. Ah!" he exclaimed as the nurse came over with two white pills in a paper cup along with another cup of water. "Here you go Leticia dear."

Leti took the paper cup hesitantly and looked up at her parents with uncertainty. At their nod she sighed before popping the pills into her mouth and swallowing them with a long pull of water. She scrunched her eyes closed, as if bracing herself for the inevitable transformation that was to occur, before slumping back in disappointment. "Nothing's happening."

"Give it time, mija." Imelda said. "Remember this is only your first day. We have to do this every three days for the next three months."

"Can I go talk with the other children then?" Leti asked. "I mean, since I am going to be seeing them a lot while I'm here. Gotta make a good impression!"
Héctor laughed with relief. Only one treatment in and Leti was back to her old self already! Maybe things would turn out well after all. "Sure! Let's go make some new amigos." He grabbed the back of her wheelchair and pushed her over to where two boys and a girl were talking amongst themselves. When they got close enough their attention turned to Leti.

"Hola!" Leti chirped. "My name's Leticia, but everyone calls me Leti. What's yours?"

The girl of the group smiled. "I'm Martha. This is Gerardo and this is Arturo. Is today your first day?"

"Sí!" Leti said. "Is it always this boring around?"

"This is nothing," Arturo said glumly. "Sometimes they make us do our treatments separately so we have no one to talk to. And there are no toys or games or anything."

"Well if you want, I could bring some toys from my Tio Nesto's house that you guys could play with. He's got lots of stuff from when me and my brother and sister came to visit," Leti said. "He's even got some stuffed animals that look like Dante the horse from his movie!"

"His movie? Dante the- what?" Gerardo wrinkled his brow in confusion. "Wait- your uncle worked on El Camino A Casa?"

Leti nodded. "Sí, Tio Nesto was the star. He took us to the premier a few months ago, and it was the best night ever! There were cameras everywhere-"

"No manches!" Gerardo guffawed with the other two children following suit. "Your uncle is Ernesto de la Cruz? The greatest musician of all time?!"

Leti's shoulders drooped and she said softly, "Well, actually he's my godfather, but we just call him-" The three of them continued to laugh at her and sneer, and she soon turned angry. "He is my godfather! My Papá is his best friend in the whole world and his songwriter, Héctor Rivera! See?!" She pointed upwards to Héctor's face, and he gave a small wave.

"Hola, chamacos." Héctor said glibly. "I can vouch for everything my daughter says. But you niños listen here: Just because you don't believe someone, doesn't mean you should poke fun and laugh at them. She was just trying to be nice and strike up a conversation and- why are you all looking at me like that?" The faces of the three children before him slowly melted from smirking disbelief to world-shattering awe, as if they were looking at an angel appearing before them.

Arturo held up a shaking hand and pointed at him. "Y-y-you're Héctor Rivera…"

"Sí, I am." Héctor said.

"I read your interviews in the papers about the movie and your songs! And your picture was in there too!" He turned to his two friends. "It is him! I'd recognize that nose and those ears anywhere!"

Héctor glared. "Hey…"

"YOU KNOW ERNESTO DE LA CRUZ?!" The three of them shouted and wheeled their chairs closer towards Leti and Héctor, barraging them with questions about Ernesto, about the songs, El Camino A Casa and what the future projects would be. Soon other children and the staff caught wind of the new celebrities in the ward and flocked to them as well, giving Héctor anything they could grab so that he could sign it for them and telling him how much his songs meant to them. Héctor answered all of their questions calmly and professionally until he felt a gentle tug on his
coat. He turned and saw Leti staring up at him with drooping eyes and a green face.

"Papá, I don't feel good. Can we go?" she whispered.

"Oh! I'm so sorry, mija." Héctor said as he started to push her chair away. He turned to the staff. "We need to go now, we'll see you in three days." The staff nodded before redirecting the children back to their beds and going back to the regular schedules. Héctor rolled Leti over to where Imelda was standing with her arms crossed and her eyes glaring at him. "Sorry Imelda. I'm not used to all that, I was kind of overwhelmed."

"It's my fault." Leti groaned out. "I didn't know... that they would act like that. No one in our town does."

"That's because everyone in our town knows your Papá. These people don't." Imelda sighed. "Well, we can't have that again. We'll have to do your treatments in a more private setting, away from prying eyes and fans."

Leti turned to look back towards the other children, smiling as they waved at her. "It's okay Mamá. I think they like me now. I don't want to be by myself all the time. Can I please stay with the kids while I have my treatment?" Suddenly and without warning she lurched forward and vomited out what little she had in her stomach. Then she started to groan and cry as painful dry heaves assaulted her.

Héctor supported her thin frame the instant she had lunged forward and Imelda rubbed her back as the attack continued. "It's okay, Leti. You're alright. It'll be over soon. This is normal. It's okay... It's okay..."

"Why does Tio Nesto have so many horses?" Leti asked as she and Héctor stood outside the stables of the club that Ernesto was a member of. He had given Héctor and his family permission to visit the club whenever they wanted, so Héctor brought Imelda and Leti there to have a gourmet lunch as well as see the animals.

"They're not all Ernesto's, these are the club members' horses as well. I think Ernesto only has three." Héctor said.

"Why does he have horses in the first place? Doesn't he have a bunch of cars?" Leti asked.

"He likes to train them for polo." Héctor said. At Leti's questioning glance, he explained, "Polo is a game that's kind of like fútbol. You know, you knock a ball into the other team's goal, though instead of kicking the ball you whack it with a long mallet, and while you're doing that you are on horseback the entire time."

"Sounds like fun." Leti said with a smile. "Poor horses, though. Don't they get tired?"

"Trust me, mija. These horses are more spoiled than Ernesto." Héctor said with a smirk as Leti giggled. He pulled his daughter close to him and basked in the sunshine and the smells of the club's prized rosebushes. "This is nice, isn't it, just spending some quality father-daughter time? We usually do everything with the whole family."

"I miss them though." Leti said sadly before looking up at her father. "I'm feeling much better, Papá. Can't we just go home early?"

"Leti, it's only been a month. We have to finish your treatment so that there's no chance of it coming back." Héctor said. "Don't be so down. You're almost halfway there, and once you're
completely cured we can head straight home!"

"Alright." Leti sighed as she leaned onto the fence and watched the horses graze. While she had made friends with all the other children in the ward and she loved staying at Tio Nesto's house, more than anything she wanted to go home. Coco had moved on to the secondary school and that meant Matty was all alone in the primary school. He needed her to be there for him in case Sergio and his band of toadies were to gang up on him. This stupid disease was ruining everything!

Imelda walked up to the two of them carrying three bottles of agua fresca. "I thought you both would like some refreshments on this hot day." She handed Leti her usual strawberry while she and Héctor drank their grape ones.

"Diosa!" Héctor said breathily as he leaned in to her. "You're wearing breeches. I never knew how much I wanted to see that. How much I needed to see it!"

"Basta." Imelda said as she pushed Héctor's face away. "Of course I'm wearing breeches. I don't want to get my skirts dirty when we go riding."

Letti nearly choked on her drink as she gasped. "We're going to ride the horses?! Yes! Can we jump the fences and gallop across the city and into the desert?"

"Not unless you want me to have a heart attack!" Héctor said. "No, we're just going to do laps around the corral. Nice and easy."

The rest of the day was spent riding their horses at the club. Imelda looked so mesmerizing atop her purebred Andalusian that Héctor nearly slid off of his saddle trying to reach for her. His own horse was having none of his foolish rider however, and tried to buck him off a few times, with Héctor frantically clinging to the beast with all his limbs. He finally had enough of the horse's attitude and slid off, walking a little bowlegged from being saddle sore and with Imelda laughing at him. But in the end both of their attentions turned to their little girl, as she made her little filly do circles in the dirt and made it rear back while she struck a dramatic pose, as her laughter and joy brought tears to their eyes.

Imelda eyed her husband with a critical look before looking nervously at the other children in the ward. "Are you sure that this is a good idea, Héctor? Don't you think that this is a little morbid?"

Héctor looked up from the mirror in his hand as he was finishing putting on his Calaveras make-up. "C'mon Imelda, its Dia de Muertos! The best part for the kids is always the face paint! Look at them, they're having a great time!" He pointed to the children, who were all putting on each other's make-up as well.

Imelda bit her lip. "But two of their friends recently died Héctor!" she whispered harshly.

Héctor smiled sadly. "All the more reason to celebrate then, mi amor. So they know how much they were cherished from what little time we knew them."

A table had been set up at the end of the ward, with cempazuchitl petals sprinkled all over the floor leading up to it and bouquets of the sweet flowers in vases on top. Pictures of the children who had passed on were set up with glasses of water, candy, pan de muerto and other small toys to be given as offerings. Leti rolled her wheelchair over to the ofrenda and placed two autographed pictures, which consisted of Ernesto and Frangipani on the set of their movie, next to the framed photos of Arturo and Martha.

"I'm sorry these got here so late." Leti whispered as she looked at the photos of her friends. "I hope
you are able to get them now though, from the other side. I had Tio Nesto sign it for you both and everything!" Leti wiped at her eyes and sniffed. "I hope you're not hurting anymore. Gerardo misses you guys the most… Speaking of, I'd better go give him his picture! I'll come back later!"
Leti wheeled over to one of the beds set against the wall where Gerardo was, hooked up to several IVs of medicine and blood. As she got closer he weakly opened his eyes and looked at her.
"Buenos noches Gerardo."

Gerardo closed his eyes as he groaned in pain. "Hola…" he whispered.

"I have something for you. It's an autographed picture of my Tio Nesto and his co-star Frangipani the elephant! He wrote 'To Gerardo, For being my goddaughter Leti's friend, you are now my most treasured fan! Get well soon! Ernesto de la Cruz' and then he drew a little guitar on it. See?" She held the picture in front of Gerardo's face so he could look at it with bleary eyes. Ernesto was flexing a muscled arm while grinning at the camera, while behind him Frangipani was doing a similar flex with her trunk.

Gerardo's mouth quirked up into a little smile and he let out a breath of a laugh. "Wow… Th-thaaankss… L-Leti…" he slurred out. Leti slipped the photo into Gerardo's hands and he weakly clutched it to his chest. His smile faded as his eyes started to water. "Won't get b-better though… C'n feel it. I'll go j-just… like m' friendssss…"

Leti's brow furrowed in sadness as she watched a tear streak down his cheek. She wiped it away with a corner of his bedsheet before smiling as an idea popped in her head. "I know what will make you feel better. Tio Nesto's new movie is going to be called Amor en el Circo. It's not going to come out 'til next year, but I know what happens in it. Want me to tell you?" She watched as Gerardo paused for a second before he gave a slow nod. "Well, Tio Nesto plays a musician named Emilio…"

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Leti winced and suppressed a cry as her mother spread lotion on her burned skin. While it used to soothe her before, now it started to feel like acid. Not even a dip in Tio Nesto's pool could alieve the ache anymore. Still she had to tough it out if it meant getting better in the end. Then she would get to go home to her family, the only thing she wanted. One more month, just one more month…

Gerardo had died not long after Dia de Muertos, still clinging to his autographed picture of Tio Nesto. Leti refused to cry over him though. Crying would mean admitting defeat, and that she would know that she would be next. Her Papá always said that Riveras never give up on anything. That would not happen to her, she would get better! Three more weeks!...

Leti heaved into the hospital basin until nothing came up, with her parents supporting her. She had to be in the hospital for round the clock care now, so she couldn't even enjoy Tio Nesto's house anymore. And she had to have those stupid IVs in her arm now, feeding her that awful medicine that made her so sick and bags of blood that would just seep out of her nose and gums anyway. She had never felt so wretched before in her entire life. But it was almost the end of her treatment; surely she would start to improve by then! Just fifteen more days and it will all be over! I will go home!

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Héctor walked down the hallway of the hospital carrying two cups of coffee in his hands. He yawned in exhaustion before sipping one of the brews. He swallowed past the ever present lump in his throat and sighed wearily. He was so tired of being in this hospital. So tired of doctors telling him that they were doing everything they could for their daughter as she withered away before his eyes. So tired of watching all the other children die only to be replaced by new ones. Leti had started to bounce back at the beginning of the trials, but now she was only worse than before! He
wasn't going to let the doctors talk him into letting her complete the treatment; it was time to find a new hospital.

Suddenly a shriek echoed through the hallway, making Héctor stop in his tracks. He recognized that scream, but the anguish in it terrified him down to his core. Sure enough he saw doctors and nurses rushing into Leti's hospital room, and a few seconds later two orderlies were carrying Imelda out by both arms as she howled and cried. Héctor dropped the coffee cups and dashed to the door, only to be stopped and held back by another orderly. He was able to peek inside the room though. Past the doctors and nurses surrounding her, he saw his baby girl arching off the bed as she shook uncontrollably, with bloodied spit leaking from her clenched mouth and her eyes rolled over white.

"LETICIA!"
After the fit had ended Leti was left panting and sore as if she had run several miles nonstop. Her limbs felt like putty and she was quickly whisked out of her room, down the hallway, and into a large room where they lifted her off of her bed and onto an operating table. She was barely able to see her parents following close behind, yelling words of reassurance at her, but she could barely comprehend them and couldn't find the energy to call back to them. She was left there for a few minutes confused, scared and alone until a group of doctors came in wearing masks and gloves, speaking soothing words to her.

"It's alright, Leticia." One of the doctors said. Dr. Fierro, she recalled fuzzily. "We're going to see what's wrong with you, okay niña? You just relax, we're going to take off your gown, okay?"

She should have been used to this by now, but she still curled in on herself in shame and embarrassment as she was stripped of her hospital gown and left naked on the table, too weak to even try to resist. She shivered as a cool breeze wafted over her as the doctors moved around her and her flesh erupted in goosebumps. A whine managed to creak out of her throat as she watched them and one of the nurses rubbed her with warm, gloved hands.

"Alright, you're going to feel something wet and cold on your back now." Dr. Fierro said. Despite the warning Leti still gasped and flinched away as a freezing cold sponge was spread all around her lower back and her shivering only intensified. The only comfort she felt were the warm hands on her shoulders holding her still, but they soon left her and all she felt was coldness.

That's when she saw it.

One of the nurses rolled a tray over holding what had to be the biggest needle Leti had ever seen in her life. It looked to be almost the length of a pencil and it was thicker than any normal needle. Slowly things started to click together in Leti's mottled mind. By the smell alone she could tell that the doctor had spread iodine on her back, and iodine was always used before they gave her those horrid IVs. That would mean…

Leti started to pant with fright as the hands were back on her and forcing her head down to her knees so that she was in a curled shape. When she heard Dr. Fierro say that she would feel a pinch in her back, that was when she finally found her voice.

"NOOOO!" she started to scream as loudly as she could, her outburst causing all the doctors to jump away, including Dr. Fierro with the lumbar needle. She screamed again and again, her terror on full display. "PAPÁ! PAPÁ, HELP ME! PLEASE, PAPÁ!"

At the sound of her first scream Héctor reached for the locked door and tried to wrench it off of its hinges, snarling at the orderlies who tried to pull him back. "Let me in! Can't you see she needs me?! Let me in there right now!"

"Let us both in!" Imelda said as she fought against them as well with angry tears streaming down her face.

"Señor Rivera, please!" a timid nurse begged, near tears herself. "It is a sterile environment! You can't go in there!"
"Then sterilize us!" Héctor roared at the poor women before shouting to the other doctors in the room. "Do whatever you need to make us clean, but don't touch our daughter without us in there! You hear me Fierro?!"

Dr. Fierro looked down at the hysterically crying little girl and then back at the door, where he could see her father's wild desperation through the window. He let out a sigh and nodded. "Scrub Señor y Señora Rivera up. Maybe they will be able to calm their daughter down if they're in here with her."

Héctor and Imelda were scrubbed with harsh lye soap all over their arms and faces, rinsed off, and given smocks, gloves, masks, and caps to put on. Once they were suited up and given the okay to enter the operating room, they immediately headed to their daughter, still curled up and trembling as she sobbed in fear. Imelda knelt down to her level to look her in the eyes.

"Leti, mija. It's Mamá. Look at me, cielita." Imelda whispered as she ran her fingers across her daughter's face. Leti squinted her eyes open, her vision clouded with tears as she continued to cry. "Cálmese, angelita. It's alright. I'm here, so is Papá."

"Please Mamá…" Leti mumbled, her words slurring together. "Don't let them do it! Not there! I don't wanna…" Her sentence dissolved into sobs again as tears ran down her cheeks, too exhausted to say anything else. Imelda looked up at Héctor in despair and at a loss of what to do, so Héctor bent down to look at Leti.

"Mija, it's okay. It's okay." Héctor said softly. "I promise you it won't take long. You just need to relax and it'll be over quick, I promise. Shhh, shhh." He shushed Leti as he ran a gloved hand over her hair. "It's okay, mi amor."

"Scared…" Leti moaned out as a few tears leaked out of her eyes.

"I know, I know. But we're here with you, you are not alone." Héctor said in a trembling voice. "I'll hold your head still, okay? My hands will be on you the whole time. And I'll sing your special song, the one just for you, okay? You just look into your Mamá's eyes and listen to the music. We're both here."

Héctor rose up and went behind Leti as he placed his hands on her head, forcing it down again to provide the curled position. Leti whimpered and started to pant again, so Héctor started to sing in a gentle tenor:

*Leti-ti-ti-ti-ticia,*

*With flowers in her hair*

*Where are you off to in such a hurry*

*And can you take me there?*

Héctor felt Leti start to relax under his grasp, so he nodded to the doctor. When the needle was pointed at Leti's back Héctor averted his eyes and continued.

*The sun is high, let's take a break*

*While sitting in the shade*

*So I can sing with you, Leticia*
The girl with flowered braids

He could tell when the needle finally entered by the sound Leti made. A pained, guttural sound that caused tears to spring up and spill over Héctor's face. Imelda was crying by now too as she spoke calming words to their daughter, who continued to pant and moan in pain.

Time flies by, without a care

But you don't seem to mind

You take the good that comes to you

And you always pay in kind.

"Stay still, mija." Imelda whispered to Leti as the child continued to grunt and moan. The needle withdrew the spinal fluid into the vial connected to it slowly, too slowly in Héctor's opinion. Hurry up! He thought viciously as he finished the song.

The stars are out, it's time to go

But I can't seem to care

' cus I spent the day with you, Leticia

With flowers in your hair…

Dr. Fierro slowly withdrew the needle from Leti's back and screwed off the vial before giving it to the waiting nurse. "Get this to the laboratory, quickly!" he said. The nurse nodded and left the room.

"It's over, Leti!" Héctor said as he rubbed her shoulders. "You did great! Great job, mija!"

"Nnn…" Leti moaned as she peered up at Héctor with blurry eyes. "Head… hurts…"

"That's normal, Señor Rivera." Dr. Fierro said as he placed a bandage on Leti's lower back. "Spinal fluid bathes the brain, so when you take some of it out it can cause headaches. We'll give her something for the pain when we get her back to her room. We should have the results in a few hours."

Leti continued to moan in increasing volume as she was wheeled back to her room, weakly rocking her head back and forth in pain. By the time they were settled in she was sobbing again because of the pain. The nurse gently gave her a shot of morphine and she didn't even fuss over that, too lost in her own agony. Finally the medicine took effect and Leti finally drifted off into an exhausted, dreamless sleep as her parents clung to each other, trembling and crying.

It was hours before Leti finally managed to claw her way back to consciousness and was greeted by her Mamá running her fingers through her hair and smiling down at her sweetly. Leti didn't bother smiling back but instead closed her eyes and leaned into her mother's touch with a soft moan. She could tell by the slight pinch in her arm that the IVs were back in, but instead of that awful medicine it was just plain saline and blood. Good, she didn't want whatever happened to her before to come back and she knew that medicine was the culprit.

"Mamá…" Leti sighed as she opened her eyes again.
"Oh, cielita!" Imelda cooed as she kissed Leti on the forehead. "I'm so glad you're alright!"

"Not… alright." Leti mumbled out as she turned away from her mother to glance out the window. "I'm… not going to go home… for Los Posadas… am I?… I ruined everything."

"Don't worry about that, Leti!" Imelda shushed her daughter and smoothed her hair back some more. "We'll make up for all the time you've missed when we get home. We'll have a big party, and we'll invite all of your friends—"

"NO!" Leti shouted and wrenched away from Imelda's hand. "I'm not goin' home… P-Papá won't let me!" Tears started to pour down her cheeks as she shook with anger, her words slurring as she cried. "Said I can't go home… Til I'm all better! But I w-w-won't get better! Not ever! All my friends are d-dead! I'll be dead too!" She slumped back before curling in as much as she could, the pain in her back and the pull of the IVS preventing her from doing too much. "Wanna see Coco… My tios… M-Matty… I just wanna go back home! W-wanna go home. Please… I wanna go home…"

Whatever words she spoke next were jumbled together as she cried weakly on the bed, curled away from her mother. When Imelda reached for her she jerked away, so she just let the little girl cry herself back into a fitful sleep as she continued to sniffle and hiccup. Once she was certain that she was asleep, Imelda stood up and walked out of the room, white-faced and trembling as she hugged herself and sighed. She stood slumped against the wall for a while, not noticing how much time had passed, before he felt a gentle touch on her shoulder. It was Héctor.

"Imelda." Héctor said. "The results for the spinal tap came in."

The shock hit both of them in different ways. For Imelda, it was as if the last lifeline had been cut and she was let to drift out to sea to her fate. She lowered her head and sighed shakily before dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. For Héctor it was as if a bomb had gone off inside of him. He shot up from his seat to pace the room, panting with rage, and finally exploded.

"What do you mean it's spread?!!" he roared as he lunged over the desk.

Dr. Fierro flinched back a little but still held a firm countenance. "The abnormal white blood cells have spread into Leti's spinal fluid. That means that the cancer has reached the brain, and when that happens then there's nothing more we can do."

"So all those treatments, all that suffering, all that pain was for nothing?!" Héctor asked incredulously. "I trusted you to make my daughter healthy again. You only made her worse!"

"Señor Rivera, you and every other parent were made aware of the fact that these were trials." Dr. Fierro stressed. "We are doing are best to try to help everyone afflicted with this terrible disease. Unfortunately that means trial and error must occur in order to find a cure."

"Trial and error?!!" Héctor shouted. "I'd say this treatment plan is full of errors! And my daughter had to pay the price! I should have you and all those other quacks thrown in jail for the tortures you've made these children endure, and sue this hospital for every centavo it has! But first I need to get Leti out of this hellhole! I never should have brought her here in the first place…" Héctor shook his head while pulling at his hair. "I'll take her to America. Maybe California. New York if I have to!"

"Señor Rivera," Dr. Fierro said sternly, "I can assure you that if you take Leticia out of the country then she won't survive the trip!"
The doctor's words felt like a punch to Héctor's gut as he gasped and paled at the thought. He shook it away though. "We have to risk it! There's must be somewhere we can take her!"

"We can take her home." Imelda said softly.

Héctor stopped his pacing and looked at her, and as what she had just said slowly registered into his head he looked at her like she was insane. "Home? What are—… What are you saying? They can't treat her there, Dr. Alviso said so! She'll die!"

Imelda tucked her handkerchief back into her pocket as she stood up and straightened her skirts, with her head held high. "Yes, she will. All the more reason for us to go home so she can die amongst family."

Héctor shook his head. "No… No no no no no! No, we are not just going to give up! That's not what we do Imelda! We can't give up on our daughter, not when there could be a chance—"

"There is no chance, Héctor!" Imelda cried out. "You heard him! It's in her brain! It's over, there's nothing left for us to do!"

"She was doomed the moment those bruises first appeared, Héctor! There is no cure for it, it is a death sentence! We've held on to nothing but false hope for months and it has caused our daughter nothing but pain, misery and humiliation!" Imelda glared at her husband. "I refuse to let her endure any more torment, especially if it's by your own stubbornness!"

"SHUT UP!" Héctor roared as he raised his hand back to strike. Imelda shrunk back and held up her arms in self-defense while Dr. Fierro leapt up from his chair in alarm. However there was no need. Sense flooded back to Héctor the moment he felt his hand curl into a fist, and horror washed over him in an icy wave. He stumbled back into the wall and slid down it as he stared off into some unseen distance. "N-no… No no no…"

Imelda lowered her arms and looked down at her distressed husband in sadness. She slowly walked towards him, knelt down, and took his face in her hands as she gently lifted it to meet hers. His watery eyes refused to look at her though, and she sighed before kissing his forehead.

"Héctor, mi amor." She whispered. "Our baby is sick. Our baby is scared. Our baby is sad. But more than anything, our baby just wants to go home. She is dying, and nothing is going to change that… But when she does, I can think of no b-better way of going… Than in the bed she was born in… Surrounded by her family… Safe and warm… In her father's arms… As he sings to her."

The dam around Héctor's heart finally broke, and all of the months of stress, worry and grief came pouring out into heartbreaking wail as Héctor collapsed against Imelda and sobbed loudly into her shoulder. Imelda clung to him as sobs wracked his body, her own tears falling into his hair as she cried with him. Dr. Fierro sat back down in sadness as he watched the two grief stricken parents cry until their voices grew harsh and there were no more tears to shed. When they finally stopped crying, Imelda kissed Héctor on his trembling lips tenderly and wiped the tears from his cheeks as well as her own.

Héctor wobbled slightly as he finally stood up, looking at the doctor with swollen red eyes. "I'm s-sorry for what I said… I know you did everything you c-could have done… But we will be taking our daughter home now."
"Sí, Señor Rivera. I'll send you off with some morphine to give Leticia some comfort on the train ride home." Dr. Fierro bowed his head sadly. "I'm sorry things didn't turn out the way we wanted."

"So am I." Héctor said bitterly as he let Imelda take him by the arm and lead him out of the office.

Héctor and Imelda walked down the hallway towards Leti's room as if in a trance. Héctor looked over at his wife, and when their eyes met Héctor's was full of guilt and apology. He was so ashamed of what he had almost done to the love of his life. Imelda simply placed her hand over Héctor's heart and softened her gaze at him. There was no need for any apologies. It was over and they could move on and begin to heal.

They walked into Leti's room to find her still curled away from the door and in a restless sleep. Héctor went over to the side of the bed to face her and placed his hand on his baby's face as he stroked her cheek. When Leti's eyes fluttered open he gave her a big smile with his eyes full of love, trying to hold back any more tears. "Hola, mija." Leti watched him with guarded eyes as she blinked at him, but didn't say anything. He looked out the window and huffed out a forced laugh. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it? It's a shame to be wasting it in this dreary old hospital." He glanced slyly back down at Leti. "I bet it's even more beautiful back in Santa Cecilia, though."

Leti's face softened and her eyes grew big, the corner of her mouth gently twitching upward. "Papá?"

Héctor grinned and gently cuffed her chin. "What do you say we hop on the first train outta here and go home? Just in time for Los Posadas! I'll even let you go first for the piñata this time, beat Coco to the punch!"

If she had any energy Leti would have leapt into her father's arms and let out an exhilarated grito. Instead she weakly held open her arms as tears sprang to her eyes. Héctor lifted Leti up into a sitting position and wrapped her in a warm hug, with Imelda coming in from the other side of the bed to join it. Past all the sickly hospitals smells Héctor and Imelda were still able to breathe in the scent that would always remind them of Leticia: Clean skin, lilac shampoo, and strawberries.
As the doors to the train opened and the passengers were slowly let out, one man in particular turned the collar of his coat up as high as it would go to obscure his admittedly large face. Normally he would bask in the star-struck adoration of fans when they were surprised by his sudden appearance, but now was not the time for that. He made no grand entrance, had no entourage, not even an assistant with him. Ernesto needed to get to the Rivera complex as quietly and as quickly as possible.

He peered around the crowd in the small train station before he spotted the man he was looking for: Héctor's neighbor Facundo. He was to drive him discreetly to the Rivera's, as Héctor and he had agreed over the telephone. Ernesto walked up to the short, stout man with a nod. "Facundo."

"Ernesto." Facundo nodded back. "Do you have any bags?"

"Just some clothes in this suitcase." Ernesto said as he lifted the small case up for him to see. "So we don't need to hang around. I just want to get there as soon as possible."

"Sí." Facundo said as they started walking. "It is good of you to come, Ernesto. These last few weeks have been very hard on all of them."

Ernesto didn't say anything at that, and he didn't complain as he was forced to cram himself into the passenger seat of Facundo's small Volvo truck. They drove the way there in silence, but it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable. Neither of them felt like talking. What was there to talk about? This was not a cheerful moment for either of them, so there was no use to talk about the weather, goings on in the town, or even about Ernesto himself: his favorite topic! No, right now all that mattered was that Ernesto needed to be there for his little brother as his daughter was about to die. He just hoped he made it in time.

Facundo drove up to the green double doors of the Rivera house and let Ernesto out. He gave his thanks and waved goodbye as the truck drove off and rounded the corner, not questioning why Facundo didn't come in with him. This was a family matter after all, and while it warmed Ernesto's heart that he was considered part of the family there was a sharp pain there too. But he would have to endure it because he knew that his pain was nothing compared to Héctor's.

He pushed open the green doors and walked into the barren courtyard. The shop was quiet and empty, not surprising considering. Ernesto wondered how long the shop would remain closed while the family privately grieved. The workers would still get paid though, Héctor had told him, so that was good. He headed to Héctor and Imelda's bedroom and gently knocked on the door. It opened to reveal one of Imelda's brothers, his eyes red shot and swollen, and he sagged in relief when he saw Ernesto.

"Oh, Ernesto." He whispered. "Gracias a Dios. You made it just in time!"

"Gracias… Felipe?" At the younger man's nod Ernesto chuckled a little to himself. 'I'm good at this!' he thought. He walked into the room and his heart broke at what he saw. Oscar was standing at the foot of the bed with his hands on Matty's shoulders. He couldn't see the boy's face but his stiff shoulders were enough to show that he was very distressed. Standing off to the side was Dr. Alviso, with his bag set on the bedside table as he put away a bottle of morphine and an injection
Coco was sitting in a chair next to her mother, rubbing her eyes with a handkerchief and sniffling with her face of pure misery.

On the bed sat Héctor, holding Leti in his arms as she sat between his legs and laid against his chest, his chin rested on top of her head as he slowly rocked. Imelda sat in a chair closest to the bed and had her healthy tan fingers intertwined with Leti's blue ones. When she saw Ernesto she leaned over and whispered in her daughter's ear. "Mija, Tio Nesto is here. He came to see you."

Leti's eyes fluttered a little and from what Ernesto could tell the poor girl couldn't focus on anything. Her breathing was erratic and weak, but she managed to get in enough air to say. "Grassss… Fan… eeee."

Despite his best efforts Ernesto couldn't tell what Leti was saying. Luckily Imelda was able to decipher it. "She said 'Gracias for Frangipani.'"

Ernesto blinked and then let out a chuckle. "Ah yes, Frangipani. I'm glad you enjoyed her visit, niña. Only the best for my godchildren." He had hoped that this would earn him one of Leti's beautiful smiles, but instead she just gasped for breath and closed her eyes again.

Héctor didn't look up when Ernesto had entered the room, or even when he had spoken to his daughter. Nothing registered in his mind except for the child in his arms as she drew in her last breaths. When they had finally gotten back to Santa Cecilia a few weeks ago they had had a grand celebration to make up for all the time lost. A large feast had been prepared, Facundo and his family had been invited over as well as a few of Leti's friends, and they celebrated well into the night. Leti was finally happy again and she had relished sleeping in her own bed and being with her family again. Slowly but surely though her strength faded into nothing, and now all that was left to do was wait for the inevitable.

"Pa…"

The faint whisper was enough to jerk Héctor back into reality as he looked down at Leti. "Yes, mija. I'm here."

Leti gasped a few times before saying, "Can… ta….."

Héctor's eyes widened. "You want a song? Sure! Okay, uh-" He looked over to the side of the bedroom where his white guitar hung on the pegs bolted to the wall, then back down to his daughter. Well, maybe he could sing without playing the instrument. It was when Ernesto walked over to the wall that Héctor finally noticed his presence.

"You keep holding onto her, Héctor." Ernesto said as he brought the guitar down from its perch and began to tune it. "I'll provide the accompaniment."

Héctor nodded at Ernesto gratefully before bending down to whisper to Leti. "Any requests?"

At first it didn't seem that Leti heard or was unable to communicate anymore, until she was able to barely tremble out the beginning of a word. "Rrrr… Re… R…"

"Remember Me?" Coco asked.

The fact that Leti stopped trying to say the word was the sign that meant that Coco had guessed correctly. Ernesto hadn't heard that song sung in years, but he could definitely still play it. It was the best song Héctor ever wrote in his opinion, a lullaby he had written for Coco when he was still touring with him so that she wouldn't miss her father as much. How he had yearned to sing that on stage to the adoring crowds, but Héctor was adamant that the song was only for his children, and he
was fine with that. He had written him dozens of other masterpieces anyway. Ernesto strummed out the first gentle notes of the song and Héctor began to sing.

*Remember me*

*Though I have to say goodbye*

*Remember me*

*Don't let it make you cry*

*For even if I'm far away I hold you in my heart*

*I sing a secret song to you each night we are apart*

It was at that moment when Imelda and Coco joined Héctor in the song, Imelda's smooth alto and Coco's sweet soprano harmonizing beautifully with Héctor's tenor. It was only natural then that Ernesto would provide the bass. Oscar, Felipe, Matty and Dr. Alviso watched as the four talented singers gently sang the lullaby, as if performing to a crowd of thousands as opposed to one little girl.

*Remember me*

*Though I have to travel far*

*Remember me*

*Each time you hear a sad guitar*

*Know that I'm with you the only way that I can be*

*Until you're in my arms again*

*Remember me…*

When the song was finished Leti was still with them, her erratic gasps the only sign that she was. So Ernesto continued to strum the guitar and Héctor continued to sing all of her favorite songs until it finally happened. A soft sound came from Leti, a gentle breeze of a sigh, and then she was still. Dr. Alviso came over to her and placed his fingers on her throat, and with a slight shake of his head everyone knew that she was finally gone. He stepped back against the wall to let the family grieve.

Héctor held Leti in a tight embrace as he brokenly wept and kissed her on the head. Coco collapsed into Imelda's arms and they both cried clinging to each other, with Felipe kneeling down to hug them both as he too cried. Oscar curled slightly in on himself as he let out a sob, his hands still protectively on Matty's shoulders. As tears welled up in his own eyes, Ernesto noticed that the only person not crying was Matty himself. He just looked at his twin sister with a horrified expression, his eyes opened wide and his mouth slightly parted. Ernesto knew that look all too well. Something inside the boy had been shattered and broken beyond repair.

For two days Leti lay in her bedroom, a light cloth draped over her still form and candles around her as friends came from all over town to pray and pay their respects. Food was shared as well of stories of some of Leti's most wild antics, such as when she had wandered into a cantina when she was four years old and happily sang songs with all of the drunken men inside. Or the time she and
Matty won the annual kickball tournament because they had snuck out at night to practice going through the obstacle course. Everyone agreed that she was a wild one but a sweet one, gone too soon from this Earth.

But now the traditional vigil had ended and it was time to take Leti to the cemetery. Ernesto had ordered and bought the coffin himself as his own form of tribute to his goddaughter, polished and bright cherry wood with golden handles on either side. Héctor and Ernesto watched as Imelda and Coco placed bundles of clothes and toys into the coffin next to Leti.

"Thank you for the coffin, Ernesto." Héctor said quietly as he watched with sunken eyes. "It is beautiful."

"I wish I could say 'my pleasure', but…" Ernesto sighed and turned a critical eye on the coffin itself. "I'm sorry if the wood is too bright a color. Too cheery for the occasion. I just thought it would fit well with Leti."  

"It's perfect." Héctor said, cutting him off. As Imelda and Coco finished he walked over to the coffin and looked at his daughter's face one last time. Decay hadn't set in just yet, but her features had already taken a sunken in appearance, especially around the eyes and mouth. Still he was waiting for one of those eyes to wink open and a toothy grin to split her face. It was so unnatural to see Leti this still. With a heavy sigh he took the lid to the coffin and set it on top, closing him off from seeing her ever again for the rest of his life. "Let's go."

Héctor and Ernesto took the front handles of the coffin on either side, Oscar and Felipe taking the ones in the rear, and they made their way out of the Rivera complex and down the road. Imelda followed behind them with one hand on Coco's shoulder and the other on Matty's, with a black veil draping down over her face. All of them were adorned in black, save for some splash of color on the men, for they wore ties in the beautiful shade of lilac: Leti's favorite color. Mourners followed the family close by as they trekked down the streets of Santa Cecilia and towards the cemetery.
It wasn't a long walk and the coffin was very light, but it still took everything the four men had to walk perfectly and in unison, Dios forbid that they would even manage to trip or falter. Finally they made it to the raised cement slab that would be Leti's final resting place. The headstone was adorned with carved flowers and a cross, and the words were etched into it with gold:

*Leticia Rivera*

*Sept 3, 1922 – Jan 5, 1931*

*Beloved sister, niece and daughter*

*We will always remember you*

The Padre recited sermons and said some comforting words, flowers were thrown onto the coffin, and the heavy stone slab was placed over the crypt. It was over. Leti was well and truly gone. All that they had left of her were the wonderful memories that she had given them, and it would never be enough.

They had all gathered back at the Rivera house for some pan dulce and coffee, everyone talking
about what a beautiful ceremony it was and how sorry they were for the family. Coco had found solace with her friend Rosita by her side, leaning on her shoulders as Rosita rubbed her back and spoke sweet words to her. She even managed a little smile at Julio as he came over to pay respects. Imelda played hostess for all of the guests, making sure that they would have plenty of food and drink. She had been in this mode for nearly three days now and Héctor was sure that later tonight she would finally allow herself to collapse and grieve properly.

Héctor sat on the edge of the well next to Ernesto as they both held cooling cups of coffee and sat in silence. Héctor finally broke it though. "Ernesto?"

"¿Sí?" Ernesto said.

"You know-…" Héctor gulped a little before continuing, "Leti always used to ask me why, out of all the songs I had written, I never let Remember Me get recorded. I told her that it was a special song for just my children, not for the world. She never seemed to get it."

"I see." Ernesto said.

"But now whenever I think about that song, all I can think about is holding my dying child in my arms." Héctor shuddered and took a drink from his cup, wincing at its coldness. "I don't want that Ernesto. I want it to bring good memories back, not just for me, but for everyone. That's why, in honor of Leti, I-… I want you to sing it Ernesto. For the world."

Ernesto's eyes bulged and he looked at Héctor in disbelief. Despite all of their success Ernesto was sure that Remember Me would solidify them in music history for sure. But it was his own personal shame that forced down any ambitions he had towards the song, so he kept his mouth shut and just accepted the other songs Héctor had offered. Now he was getting his permission? "Héctor, I-I don't know what to say."

"It's better if you sing it Ernesto. I-" Héctor lowered his eyes to the ground. "I don't think I'll ever sing it again. I don't want to. It's just too painful."

Ernesto sighed and twirled his coffee cup around. "Look, how about I tweak it a little bit? Maybe bump up the tempo, make it a real showstopper like I said so when I first heard it. Just-… You keep the original version for yourself. Who knows, maybe somewhere down the road you'll change your mind?" He watched as Héctor slowly nodded and gently patted him on the back. "Good man. I'll get the arrangements all sorted out once I finish the movie. We'll make Leti proud."

"Señor de la Cruz?! Señor de la Cruz?!" A little boy came barreling over to where they were sitting, panting out of breath. Ernesto was about to shoo what he thought was a tactless fan away before a piece of paper was thrust into his face. "Urgent telegram for you Señor de la Cruz!"

"Oh. Uh, gracias niño." Ernesto said as he took the telegram and gave the boy a peso in exchange. He quickly scanned over it and his brow furrowed in confusion before he sputtered in disbelief. "What the-?! How?! Why?!"

"What's wrong Ernesto?" Héctor asked.

Ernesto leapt from his seated position and glared down at the telegram. "How the hell does one lose an elephant in Mexico?!!"
before turning back to look at the gravestone of his sister. His eyes burned as pent up tears threatened to burst out of his eyes, but for some reason they refused to fall.

He found himself unable to cry when Leti finally took her last breath, nor when she lay in vigil on her bed. Not even when she was finally in the ground could he even spare one tear for her. He wished he could, because he had never experienced such crushing, such soul sucking pain than he was feeling right now. This hurt more than any broken bone or miserable fever that he had endured in the past, and he had cried during those times. Why couldn't he now? As he traced the golden lettering of Leti's name he had never felt so empty in his life. Leti had taken every good emotion that he had with her, leaving him only despair.

'Just wanted to keep him company. It was bad enough he was sad… Didn't want him to be alone too.'

Matty sighed. "Well now I'm sad and alone…” He sniffled a little, but those burning tears still refused to flow. "What am I gonna do now, Leti? I can't do this without you!"
Héctor and Imelda let their children stay at home for the next few days in order to get their bearings. While Coco spent most of her free time with Rosita, Matty stayed close by either playing with Dante in the courtyard or hanging around his mother as she crafted shoes. He watched with a growing interest and asked plenty of questions, to which Imelda was more than happy to answer. He even offered to help around the workshop: sweeping the floor, fetching drinks and snacks for all of the workers, retrieving tools and materials all without being asked.

For a while Héctor just let the boy be, but soon he began noticing that the boy was deliberately tiring himself out every day. As soon as he got up in the morning he was working nonstop, barely eating anything at meal times, before crashing into a dead sleep at night. This repeated for a few days until Héctor pulled his son aside.

"Mijo, are you alright?" Héctor asked. "You've been acting like a fire is under your britches these last few days. You were supposed to be relaxing."

"I wanna learn how to make shoes." Matty simply said.

"You do?" Héctor was surprised. While he wasn't opposed to the idea, and he knew Imelda would be tickled pink at the news, he never noticed that his son had any interest in the craft.

"It's tough work, but it's a skill that I think I'd be good at and it's very rewarding." Matty reasoned. "Mamá's shop is very popular, and someday she'll want to expand it. She'll need all the help she can get, especially from family."

Héctor nodded. "Well alright then. Just make sure you take a breather every once and a while. You're running poor Dante ragged." He pointed to the half-grown pup, who laid on his side panting with his tongue flopped out onto the dirt. Matty gave a little laugh and Héctor smiled. "One other thing: I think it's time that you and Coco go back to school tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

Matty paused for a second before giving a little shrug. "Sure."

"You don't have to," Héctor said. "If you're not ready just yet."

Matty shook his head. "No, Papá. You're right. It's time to go back. Besides, I don't want to get too far behind."

Héctor patted Matty's head, careful not to ruffle his hair since he knew that was his son's pet peeve. "That's my boy." He turned to go back into the house but paused and turned back. "Matty, do you want to talk to me about anything else?"

"No Papá. I'm alright." Matty said as he gave a small smile.

Héctor nodded, but wasn't convinced. "Okay. Just remember I'm here if you need to talk." And with that he walked back into the workshop, not noticing his son sinking to the ground to hold his dog close to him for comfort as he stared off into nothing.

And so Coco and Matty went back to school on Monday, and for the most part everything was back to normal. The shoe shop was as busy as ever and when Héctor wasn't tacking together the
occasional boot he was fiddling with different songs on his guitar. Coco and Matty came home at around the same time after school, went to their respective bedrooms to do their homework and then helped out with the household chores. The only thing they seemed to do little of was talk. Even at mealtimes conversations were kept to a minimum, everyone more concentrated on eating quickly in order to get back to whatever it was that kept their minds occupied.

Anything to keep their minds off of their own sorrow.

By the time Wednesday had come Héctor decided it was time for a family discussion. Imelda had been acting too strong, Coco too aloof, and Matty was going to work himself into exhaustion if he didn't start to take it easy. When the children came home from school and the shop was closed for the day he would sit everyone down and finally have a discussion about Leti.

Héctor scooped the eggs, beans and pork that were left over from breakfast into a bowl and walked out into the courtyard with a whistle. "Dante! Ven aqui! I have your breakfast!" He anticipated the sound of the clumsy dog trip in on himself and come barreling out from whatever hole he had chosen to lay down in to get to the scraps of food, but nothing came. "Dante, comida!" When Dante still did not come Héctor dropped the bowl to the ground and shrugged. "Whatever."

He walked into the workshop and nodded his greeting to all the other workers before making his way to Imelda. "Have you seen Dante today?"

Imelda shrugged, not looking up from the sewing machine. "He's been walking to school with Matty these last few days and then comes back with him."

Héctor frowned. "So what, he just sits outside the school all day waiting for him?"

"I guess so," Imelda said. "As long as he's not tearing up my flowerbed it's fine with me."

Héctor hummed a laugh and walked back towards the kitchen when suddenly something hit him that made his hair stand on end. A sudden sinking fit in the pit of his stomach and… A rumbling beneath his feet. He looked down at the ground and saw a few small pebbles tremble slightly and a small bit of dust come crumbling from the ceiling. Then all of a sudden the slight tremble turned into lurching jerks and Héctor was almost knocked off his feet. A few of the workers screamed, some frozen in place and others running out the door.

A shout brought Héctor's attention toward Imelda, who was trying to flee as well but her skirts were caught on a sharp edge of the sewing machine. Another shifting of dust from the ceiling caught Héctor's eye and with horror he saw a support beam start to come loose right over Imelda's head. Without thinking he lunged at his wife into a tackle. "IMELDA!"

Imelda cried out as Héctor barreled into her and they both slammed into the ground, hearing a shattering crash behind them. Still the building continued to wobble and jerk around and Héctor shielded Imelda with his body as bits of wood and plaster came tumbling down on top of him. It was several long moments before the trembling finally stopped and all that was left was the sounds of people crying and screaming in fear all over town.

With a groan Héctor pushed the debris off of him and Imelda with as much force as he could, wincing as he felt several cuts on his back sting and warm blood running down it. His eyes were only on Imelda as she gasped to get the air back that had been knocked out of her lungs by Héctor's tackle. Her dress was ripped away on one side at mid-thigh, but other than that she seemed unharmed. Still he had to be sure. "Imelda, are you alright?"

Imelda panted shakily as she pushed herself up and flung her arms around Héctor's neck. "Yes,
thanks to you!” She kissed him graciously on the cheek and hugged him tightly, before she looked around her shop with a small whine. "The workshop!" she moaned. "And my new Singer sewing machine from America!"

Héctor looked around towards the sewing machine and sure enough it had been crushed and destroyed by the beam, exactly where Imelda had been sitting. "Believe me I would rather it had been the sewing machine than you, diosa."

"Oye!" a voice called from outside. "Imelda! Héctor! Are you alright?!

"Si, we're fine Felipe!" Héctor called out as he helped Imelda to her feet and they gingerly made their way past all of the wreckage and out into the courtyard. Oscar and Felipe came over and hugged them both tightly, with Oscar relenting when Héctor hissed out in pain.

"Cuñado, you're hurt!" Oscar cried out.

"It's nothing!" Héctor panted. "It's just some scratches."

"Can you believe what just happened?!" Felipe said as he gestured to the whole complex. Almost all the shingles had slid out from the rooftop to shatter to the ground, the outdoor kitchen had caved in on itself and pronounced cracks were in the walls, but other than that the whole house was still standing. "There hasn't been an earthquake in Oaxaca for over thirty years!"

"Guess we were overdue for one then, eh?" Oscar deadpanned.

"Is everyone alright?!" Imelda called out to the workers. Everyone was there and in one piece and Imelda relaxed until a horrifying thought came to her. "Héctor! The children!"

"I'm on my way there now. You three stay here with the workers. I'll bring them home."

"Héctor!" Facundo said as he got his bearings back. "Are you alright?"

"Fine!" Héctor huffed out. "Gotta get to the schools!"

"Si, my children are there!" Facundo said fearfully. "The secondary school is closest! Vámanos!"

With that Héctor and Facundo raced down the winding streets towards the school, passing by toppled over buildings, new cracks in the ground and several people huddled together as they cried and hugged each other. As they rounded the final corner they were aghast to see the condition of the building. A huge corner of it had been leveled by the quake and several trees had been uprooted, with groups of teenagers gathered around in different meeting places as they reunited with their parents. Some people were digging into the rubble and pulling out bloodied, dust covered individuals. Some of them not moving.

"Coco?!" Héctor cried out as he looked for his daughter throughout the crowds. "Coco!"

"Amigo, there they are!" Facundo cried out as he pointed.

Héctor looked and was immensely relieved to see Coco, Rosita and Julio sitting on the ground underneath one of the mossy trees. He sprinted towards them before collapsing onto the ground and embracing Coco in a tight hug. "Ay, gracias a Dios! Coco, mija, are you alright?!!"

"Si, Papá." Coco said faintly, not looking at him but instead looking at Julio. Héctor turned to look
as well and winced as he saw the boy covered in plaster and splinters of wood. He was leaning against the tree and holding a bloodied arm as he panted in pain, with smaller cuts adorning his face. Facundo dropped to his knees to embrace his son.

"Julio! What happened to you?!" Facundo cried as he gently placed his hands on Julio's face.

"Oh, Papá!" Rosita cried out, large tears rolling down her pink cheeks as she cried. "Hermano was so brave! We were standing under the tree when all of a sudden the quake started! There was this big cracking sound and a huge branch was coming down and it was going to hit Coco! But Julio, he-!" Rosita hiccupped and sobbed. "He pushed her out of the way just in time and got hit instead! Oh Julio! Oh Julio!"

"Th-think my arm's broken." Julio said between clenched teeth.

"Good thing it wasn't your head, you brave stupid pendejo!" Facundo said proudly as he wrapped his son in a tight bear hug, not hearing the boy's groaning protest. "That's my son for you! A real hero! That's my boy!"

"Gracias Julio." Héctor said gratefully before turning back to his daughter, who was still looking at Julio with wide, bright eyes. "If you're alright Coco, I need to get to the primary school and check on Matty, okay? You head on back to the house with Facundo and be careful on the way there... Coco!"

Coco blinked and shook her head before nodding. "Si Papá, I'm fine. Go see Matty." She gave her
father a hug and watched him run off in the direction of her brother's school. Feeling something sticky she looked down at her hands and was startled to see them both wet with blood.

Héctor made his way through the crowds of people as he headed towards the primary school and when it came into his view he sighed in relief. The building was still in one piece, and just like at the other school the children were all gathered out on the front lawn to await their parents. Héctor soon realized that each huddled group was composed of individual classes so he kept an eye out for Matty's teacher. When he saw her he trotted over to where they were gathered.

"Matty?!" Héctor called out. "Matty, I'm here!" He looked through the two dozen small faces, but Matty was not with them. With a growing worry he turned towards the teacher. "Señora Jimenez. Where's my son?"

Señora Jimenez looked to see that it was Héctor Rivera asking her this question and her brow crinkled in confusion. "Mateo?"

"Sí, Mateo!" Héctor said in an irritated tone. "My son, he's not with your class! Is he still in the building?"

The teacher slowly shook her head and a look of fear came to her face. "Señor Rivera, I thought Mateo was staying at home for the time being. You know, after everything that has happened…"

Héctor's throat clenched up and his heart seemed to stop. "No… No! He's been going to school for the last three days now! I see him go every morning and come home in the afternoon!"

"No Señor!" the teacher said as tears came to her eyes. "He hasn't come to class at all this week!"

An icy cold fear formed in the pit of Héctor's stomach and spread out to his chest and limbs, beads of sweat broke out all over his skin as he started to pant in terror. His eyes darted all over the yard in search of his son, even though he knew he was nowhere to be found. Still he raced to and fro across the courtyard, screaming for him. "Matty?!... Matty!... MATEO RIVERA!"

Coco sobbed into her hands as she cried out in guilt. "I'm so sorry, Papá!" she choked out. "I asked Matty if he wanted me to walk him to school, but he said he didn't need me babying him! I should have just done it! I'm so sorry! So sorry!"

"It's not your fault, mija." Imelda said as she embraced her sobbing daughter. "Don't cry Coco."

"Your Mamá's right." Héctor said as he packed up a bag with bandages, rope, a knife and a canteen of water. His back still burned and stung, even after Imelda had hastily bandaged it up, but now was not the time for rest. His son was out there somewhere in an earthquake ravaged city. "Don't blame yourself. But listen, I need you to stay here in case Matty makes his way home. The rest of us are going to go searching for him. Can you do that for me, Coco?"

Coco sniffled and nodded. "Sí, Papá."

"Good girl." Héctor said and kissed his daughter goodbye while he, Imelda, Oscar and Felipe made their way out into the street. As they turned around the corner they met Facundo and dozens of other men. "Facundo."

"I gathered up a little search party." Facundo said. "There weren't many that weren't injured or preoccupied with excavating, but I think this might be a sizable amount."
"Gracias, amigo." Héctor said before addressing the small group. "Alright listen up! I want to thank you all for helping me find my son! So here's what we're going to do: The city has five main corners, so I want you all to split up in five groups and search every building, even if it's damaged. After one hour we all meet up at Mariachi Plaza to reconvene. If you find Mateo, please bring him there as well. We will do this every hour on the hour until my boy is found! Understood?" The group yelled out in agreement and Héctor nodded. "Vámanos!"

For hours the search party looked in every house, building, restaurant and every pile of rubble in search for Matty, hoping to find him alive and well but that hope was starting to grow faint. Every hour they met up at the plaza to rest for a few minutes and get a drink of water before the search continued. No one looked harder than the Riveras. By the afternoon nearly all of Héctor's strength had ran out and he dizzily leaned against a wall in an alley way as he panted the nausea away. His back was screaming for him to rest, but his heart would not let him. He would not give up on another child. He would not let another of his children die!

"Héctor!" A voice cried out and Héctor forced himself to stand upright and hold back the pain. Felipe came running up to him. "We searched all through the Diaz's leveled house, but there were no bodies."

"Mierda!" Héctor cursed as he pounded the wall. This jostled his back even more and he had to pause for a second so he could swallow back the bile in his throat.

"Héctor, it's alright!" Felipe said as he patted Héctor's shoulder, not noticing the pained flinch. "That means Matty wasn't in that building."

"Of course he wasn't in that building!" Héctor snapped and he jerked Felipe's hand away. "There'd be no reason for him to go into the Diaz's house, nor the church, nor the firehouse! We've been searching all over town and it hasn't gotten us anywhere! Not even the places he would go!" Héctor lowered himself to the ground with a groan and gingerly let his back rest against the wall as his body sunk in exhaustion.

Felipe knelt down next to Héctor. "It's okay, Héctor. Matty'll be alright."

"Matty…" Héctor moaned out as his eyes fluttered closed. "Where are you, mio?… Mateo…"

…

*It's my fault, okay?!

*I'm the one who wanted to ditch school…

*I just wanted to go someplace… fun, and… safe.

…

With a gasp Héctor sat upright, his eyes wide with terror and understanding as he looked at Felipe. "He's not in the town. He struggled to stand back up, groaning as his stiff muscles protested from their disturbed rest. "Dios, all this time, I never even thought-!" As he stumbled he was caught by Felipe.

"Héctor, what are you talking about?!" Felipe asked worriedly.

Héctor grabbed Felipe by the collar and stared at him with wild eyes. "The creek, Felipe! Matty's at the creek!"
A dozen trucks roared out of Santa Cecilia and onto the dusty roads heading towards the dense wooded area outside of it. The forest surrounding the town was full of tall pine trees dried out into husks as the dry seasons ravaged them, and as they drove past they saw numerous trees uprooted and collapsed from the earthquake. This did little to ease the fears of the Riveras as they looked at the devastated flora around them. Héctor sat next to Facundo in the leading truck as they sped towards the creek and he prayed that his boy didn't end up in the water. While the creek was the local hotspot for families during the summer, the waters were chilled to a near unbearable level during January.

The trucks stopped when the trees grew too thick to drive through and everyone jumped out, immediately calling Matty's name. They crawled through dense brush and thorny bushes until they finally made their way to the bubbling creek. Sure enough trees had collapsed along the bank as well, making it unrecognizable to the search party. Despite the fact that the creek was several miles long, a little boy couldn't have gone that far. He had to be in someplace.

"Mateo!" Héctor called out, his voice hoarse from hours of screaming and from the constant pain he had been enduring. "Matty, are you here?!"

Several members of the party called out as well, and at one point there were so many voices crying out that Héctor had almost missed it. A long, mournful noise followed by several smaller bursts. Héctor turned a sharp ear towards it and concentrated until he found the direction it was coming from. He trotted as fast as he could go, the pain in his back hindering his movements, before he rounded the bend and nearly ran into a small, hairless animal.

"Dante?!" Héctor gasped out when he recognized the dog. Dante twirled in a circle and frantically yelped at Héctor before reaching down to tug at his pant leg. "Dante, you know where Matty is?" Another yip came. "Take me to him, Dante! Please!"

Dante didn't have to be told twice and raced off in the opposite direction, only pausing to turn around and make sure that Héctor was following him. Héctor limped after the pup as fast as he could, making their way off of the riverbed and into a thick grove of trees. They came upon an old, overturned tree precariously perched on top a bed of rocks. Dante stopped running and started twirling in circles, yapping all the while. Was this it?

"Matty?!" Héctor called out. "Matty, are you there?!" He climbed up the rock formation and as he was reaching the next foothold he heard a sound: The sound of a child moaning in pain. Héctor gasped and hurried his ascent towards the tree and when he looked through the numerous branches, twigs and leaves he saw a mop of dark, black hair and the shine off of a pair of glasses. "MATTY!"

Matty stirred weakly and turned his head to the sound of Héctor's voice. "Papá?..."

"Yes!" Héctor cried victoriously and started to break away at the branches. "Don't worry Matty. Papá's here. I'm going to get you--"

"NO! STOP!" Matty shouted before he moaned again and cried out in pain. "Don't move the tree!... It's got me... In the shoulder..."
Héctor peered down slightly and sure enough there was a thick, broken off piece of a branch piercing Matty through the shoulder, a small pool of blood staining the rock beneath him. Héctor's face paled and his heart jumped into his throat when he saw it, but he held the panic at bay and cracked a smile. "Niño torpe." Héctor chuckled. "Just like your Papá... Don't worry mijo. Help is on the way. We'll get you back on your feet in no time!"

Héctor maneuvered his way through all of the branches until he was within reaching distance of his son. "Here's some water," he said as filled the cap of the canteen. "You drink this, I know you're thirsty." He slowly tipped the cap into Matty's mouth but still the boy lightly choked on the liquid. When he managed to swallow it he filled it up again.

Dante in the meantime had wound his way through the branches and curled up against Matty, who sighed in relief. "You've been keeping him warm this whole time? Good boy Dante, very good boy!" He rubbed the scaly skin on Dante's head and the puppy thumped his tail happily at the praise.

"Héctor?!!" Facundo shouted as he rounded the bend.

"Facundo, I found him!" Héctor yelled out, causing Matty to wince in pain. "Get everyone over here pronto, especially Dr. Alviso!" As Facundo raced back to the party, Héctor rubbed his son's face gently. "We're going to get you out of here soon, mijo. Just relax, it'll all be over soon."

It wasn't surprising that Imelda was the first of them to reach the fallen tree and when she saw
Matty she burst into tears. "Oh, mi hijo! Matty, pobrecito! You're bleeding!" She reached out to cup Matty's cheek.

"Mamá…" Matty moaned and leaned into Imelda's touch, savoring the warmth.

"Stand back!" Dr. Alviso called out as he made his way towards the boy. "Dios mio, Mateo! We've really got to stop meeting like this!" He said jokingly as he examined the branch impaling Matty. "It looks like we were in luck. The rocks stopped the tree from crushing him completely, but at the same time the tree is providing enough pressure to stifle the bleeding. If one or the other was missing it would have been too late."

Héctor and Imelda paled as they looked at each other. Matty would have died from either being crushed or having bled out.

"We need to do this slowly and carefully." Dr. Alviso said as he dug out a small needle from his bag. "First we need to cut away these branches so we can all reach the trunk. We need to saw them off, no axes and no standing on any part of the tree. We can't risk adding more pressure to the wound." He filled the syringe up with a small dose of morphine. "Then we have to lift the tree up in the exact angle it pierced him so it doesn't tear him anymore. Mateo, you're going to feel a slight pinch but you'll start feeling better soon." At Matty's faint nod Dr. Alviso stuck him in the neck with the needle. Matty didn't even flinch. "Once the tree is off him we have to immediately pull him out and apply pressure to stop the bleeding. Claro?"

Héctor nodded and rubbed Matty's face as the boy started to doze off. "We'll get you out of here, mijo." He whispered.

It took another trip back into town to get enough saws for everyone to use, and despite everyone working together it took hours to slowly saw away the branches. Finally all that was left was the long, knobby tree trunk pinning the little boy. Héctor and Imelda grabbed hold of Matty's arms and braced for their cue. On the count of three all the men lifted the trunk straight up. Matty screamed in pain as the jagged end of the branch slid out of his shoulder and his parents quickly pulled him out from underneath it. Dr. Alviso immediately applied pressure to the hemorrhaging wound and transferred Matty to the stretcher waiting to the side. With a mighty heave the tree was tossed off the rock formation to tumble into the creek below.

"Let's get him to Aldo's truck!" Dr. Alviso called out. "He has the biggest bed!"

Oscar and Felipe took hold of the stretcher and gently lifted up, slowly walking down the rocks and onto the river bed with Dr. Alviso still applying pressure to the wound. Héctor and Imelda followed on the other side of the board, whispering reassuring words to their son as he lay unconscious. They made their way through the thick brush again until they made it back to the trucks. Matty was laid down on the bed of Aldo's truck as his parents and Dr. Alviso climbed in with him.

The truck sped off towards the hospital at top speed, every bump and jerk causing Matty to cry out in pain. "Give him some more of that morphine, Tomas!" Héctor said.

"I don't want to give him too much, Héctor!" Dr. Alviso yelled back over the noise and wind. "He might have a concussion as well! It could affect his brain!"

As they reached the hospital Matty was immediately placed on a waiting gurney and whisked off into the emergency room. Héctor, Imelda and the twins were left standing in the entrance hallway, watching the little boy disappear behind closed doors. Héctor sighed and leant against the wall in relief. This terrible day was coming to a close.
"That was a good thing you remembered the creek, Héctor." Oscar said smiling.

"Good? No it was great!" Felipe exclaimed.

"Yes, it was." Imelda said with tears in her eyes. "You saved our son, Héctor! Gracias!" Imelda rushed to her husband and wrapped him in a big hug.

Héctor cried out in pain as the worse muscle spasm he had experienced yet shot electrical pain all up and down his spine. His vision whitened out and the last thing he heard as he collapsed to the ground was his wife's frantic voice.

He didn't know how long he was out, but the next thing Héctor knew he was laying on his own gurney surrounded by nurses as they wheeled him down the hallway.

"N-no..." Héctor mumbled out. "I'm fine. Gotta see Matty..."

"Mateo is in surgery right now." Another doctor that Héctor didn't recognize said. "Don't you worry, he's in Dr. Alviso's hands now and will pull through. Right now I need to check your own injuries, Señor Rivera."

"B-but-"

"You will listen to the doctor!" Imelda said as she briskly kept up with the gurney. "No more of this machismo Héctor, it doesn't suit you! You were hurt protecting me, and you will make those injuries seem minor compared to what my boot will do to you!"

Héctor shrunk back onto the gurney. "Sí, capitán..."

The doctor examined Héctor's back, cleaning and stitching up the worse of the cuts while also rubbing and pulling at different spots. Héctor would jerk and moan at each pull, trying not to crush Imelda's hand as she held his for comfort. The doctor finally wrapped up Héctor's torso with his findings.

"Well, you have some torn back muscles and a cracked rib. No concussion, which is surprising. It's amazing you were able to walk around and lift stuff for so long. Love and adrenaline are amazing things, eh?" The doctor joked. "The only way to heal these is just to rest. No heavy lifting, but there are some exercises you can start doing in a few days. I'll prescribe you some pain pills as well."

"Gracias doctor." Imelda said. "When will we know about Matty?"

"Can't say for sure, Señora." The doctor said. "But you can both sit in the waiting area for the time being."

It turned out to be over an hour of waiting in quiet desperation for the Riveras. Oscar and Felipe had returned home to fetch Coco, so now the whole family was waiting for news on their youngest child. Finally Dr. Alviso came out, with Imelda helping Héctor to stand as he approached them.

"Well, I cleaned and stitched up the wound." Dr. Alviso said. "The branch didn't hit any arteries, but infection has already set in and he lost a lot of blood. He's on heavy antibiotics right now and I want to keep him in the hospital for a few days. Puncture wounds are tricky things, especially when they're from dirty objects like that tree branch. I want to keep an eye on it." Then he managed a small, reassuring smile. "That being said I think we made it just in time. Mateo's tougher than he looks."
"Can we see him?" Héctor asked quietly.

"Sí." Dr. Alviso nodded. "He's asleep right now in recovery. Just one person at a time though."

"You go first, Imelda." Héctor said. "I-I need to sit down." Héctor gingerly sat back down on the chair as he watched Imelda leave with the doctor. Coco sat down next to him and leaned her head on his shoulder, with Héctor also leaning against her. A small wave of relief washed over him and he closed his eyes tiredly. His son was going to be alright.

It was pure luck that when it was Héctor's turn to sit with Matty that the boy's eyes fluttered open. He let out a soft sigh which alerted his father to his bedside. "Mijo? Are you awake?"

Matty winced a little before swallowing. "Thirsty…"

"Of course you are, you lost too much fluid!" Héctor filled up a paper cup with water and gently lifted the boy's head up to drink. "Slowly mijo, nice and slow." Once Matty had taken a few sips to wet his mouth and throat Héctor set him back down and retrieved his glasses off the bedside table. "There you are, now you can see." He said as he placed them on his son's face.

Matty blinked the blurriness from his eyes before they settled on Héctor. "Papá…"

"Oh, Matty!" Héctor said as he bent forward to kiss Matty on the head, wincing slightly at the pull on his back. "Gracias a Dios. We thought we were going to lose you! I was so terrified!" He sniffled a little and placed a hand on Matty's cheek. "Why mijo? Why were you at the creek alone? Why didn't you go to school all week? If you weren't ready you should have just told me!"

Matty glanced away from his father's questioning eyes. "Didn't think there would be an earthquake…"

Héctor's brow furrowed. "Don't dodge the question, chamaco." He said sternly. "Why were you skipping school? You've had all of us worried sick, we deserve to know why."

Gradually Matty's face began to scrunch up and turn red, his mouth in a tight line as he tried to hold a flood of emotions back. Then a small burst erupted from him and it was all downhill from there. Maybe it was the drugs in his system, the shock of the whole day, or maybe it was just finally time, but the tears that had been kept dormant in his eyes since his sister's death suddenly erupted forth and the poor boy was wracked with heaving painful sobs.

Héctor kept his hands on his son as he jerked with the force of his sobs, trying to keep the healing wound from reopening. "Matty! It's alright, cálmese! We're not angry with you, you are not in trouble!" He wiped the tears pouring down Matty's face. "It's okay."

Between a few choking gasps, Matty managed to squeak a word out. "…me…"

"What?"

"It should have been me!" Matty sobbed as he scrubbed at his eyes furiously. "I was the smaller baby. I'm the one who always gets sick or hurt. I'm the one who has no friends, so no one would miss me! It wouldn't be this painful for our family if it was me! Leti shouldn't have gotten sick, I should have! I was the one who was supposed to just… die!"

Héctor had to physically restrain himself from grabbing hold of the boy and shake some sense into him. Instead he placed his hands on Matty's shoulders, his eyes wide with horror. "No! Don't say that! Don't even think for a moment that is true!" Tears came to his own eyes as he cried. "Mateo, I
love you! I love you so much that it hurts! When I thought you might have been dead as well, I—…
I felt like dying myself! You have to realize how loved you really are!"

Matty continued to cry and shake his head, and Héctor sighed in sadness. "Matty, when Leti died, a
part of all of us died with her. Especially in me. I tried so hard to make her well again that when
she did die I felt like a failure. But mijo, just because I wished she never died doesn't mean I would
have rather it had been you, or Coco, or Mamá, or your tios. Every single one of you are so
precious to me. I will do everything in my power to keep my family safe and loved. Even if I have
to hold you close and smother you in kisses every minute of the day. But you wouldn't want that,
would you?"

Matty still sobbed out in grief, but a small quirk of his lips and a pained laugh escaped him.
"No…"

"Matty…" Héctor whispered as he kissed the boy's forehead. "I love you more than life itself.
Don't you ever forget that."

"I'm sorry Papá…" Matty whimpered as he held his arms out for a hug. Héctor gladly gave it to
him. "I love you too. But—… I miss her so much. I feel so empty in my heart."

"I know mijo. I feel it too."

The week slowly crawled by as Héctor and Matty were stuck in bed while their wounds healed,
with Imelda stuffing them both with too much food and fussing over them to sleep more and more.
When they were finally cleared for light work by their doctors Héctor sighed with relief while
Matty was still apprehensive. While he still wasn't ready he knew he needed to go back to school.
All that homework piling up was going to hurt him in the long run.

In order to quell his parents' fears he allowed Héctor to walk him to school on his first day back,
despite the embarrassment, and would be walked back home by him as well. When he arrived in
the classroom he was greeted by warm welcomes from his teacher and by the other students as
well, some of them giving him cards and candies in order to make him feel better. In fact it did lift
his spirits up, that is until his eyes fell on Sergio, who was sneering at him with a malicious glint
that he was all too familiar with, and his nerves began to fray again. Still he was determined to
stick it out and complete his first day back.

The day ended without a fuss, and as the children all ran off towards their own homes Matty sat on
the steps of the school, sucking on one of the tamarind candies given to him as he waited for his
father to come. He felt a presence behind him and suddenly a foot shoved him on his back, sending
him tumbling down to the ground. With a groan he pushed himself up only to see Sergio with his
friends.

"Well well, Fatty Matty is waiting for his papi to come pick him up from school like a baby."
Sergio laughed crudely as he elbowed his friends in to join him. To Matty's surprise Sergio's
friends didn't laugh along with him, instead they just looked at Matty with what he could only
describe as empathy.

"Don't call me that!" Matty said. "I'm not fat…"

"I know you're not, estupido! It's an ironic joke!" Sergio growled. "You too stupid to know what
that is? You probably weigh ten pounds soaking wet, and most of the weight is probably from your
nose!" Sergio picked up the bag of spilled candy and popped one into his mouth. "You don't mind
if I take this, do you?"

"Sergio, c’mon!" One of Sergio's friends pulled at the bully's shoulder pleadingly. It was Barto, one of the fatter kids at school who used his bulk to his advantage to pick on other kids. But apparently he had standards now. "This isn't right! He just lost his sister…"

"Yeah?" Sergio scoffed. "Well I would have left him alone too, until he decided to run away and get himself beat up by a tree! You know my Papá wasted his time trying to find you? Worthless, if you ask me!" He handed the near empty bag of candy to Barto, but the boy didn't dare eat any of them, nor the rest of his friends.

"Leti was cool, unlike you. Even if she did push my face in the mud a few times for picking on you, I knew she liked me too." Sergio boasted as he circled Matty, who was still kneeling in the dirt. Sergio kicked up a few clouds of dirt at Matty, who flinched every time as he kept staring at the ground. "She was really cute, had tons of friends. All the girls cried when she died. Do you think they'd cry as much over un burro feo like you?"

Matty hunched his shoulders and squeezed his eyes shut as he tried to block out the insults, but tears still threatened to spill over.

"Sergio, stop! Please." Barto said imploringly.

"Hey, I'm trying to help him." Sergio said with fake sincerity. "Rivera probably thinks he should have died instead of his sweet twin sister. His better half. But I know how to make you feel better, Rivera!" He hunched down and placed a comforting hand on Matty's trembling shoulder. "Why don't we all go down to the cemetery, open Leti's crypt, take her out and stuff you inside it instead?!" Sergio laughed cruelly as his friends gasped in disgust. "And while you rot underneath, I'll show Leti a really good time that she never got to experience in life! Make a real woman out of her!"

Matty had a lot of makeup homework in his knapsack, filled with worksheets and thick volumes of textbooks that he was going to have to read in a short amount of time. He practically had to drag the bag outside on the ground, it was so heavy. But now it seemed as light as a feather as a newfound strength coursed through his muscles and he swung the sack as hard and fast as he could into an arch, and it came crashing into Sergio's stupid ugly face.

Sergio's head snapped to the side, bloody spit spewing out of his mouth and a crackling pain striking his cheek as he was thrown off of his feet onto the ground. Before he could even register what had happened a small bony body jumped onto his chest and knocked the wind out of him. Then bursts of pain came raining down him as his vision became blinding white flashes of stars and other shapes, all the while a voice was screaming horrible curse words at him.

As Héctor made his way to the school, he noticed a group of children gathered around in a huddle by the entrance and screaming. His brow twisted in confusion at the sight until a little girl came running up to him. "Señor Rivera, come quick! Matty's in a fight with Sergio!"

"Ay, joder!" Héctor whispered and broke out into a sprint towards the watching crowd of children. He knew one day it would come to this. No matter how many times he had talked with Sergio's father and no matter how many times the boy had been lectured, Sergio was rotten to the core. There was absolutely nothing good about that little slime, despite his young age. He was a stupid brute too, having been held back three years and using his age and size to rule over all the smaller children. Now that he had finally laid a hand on his son Héctor was not going to hold back this time.
He pushed his way through the children and instead of finding his son in danger, the exact opposite was happening. Matty was straddled on top of Sergio's chest, his fists bloodied and torn as he continued to pound and slap at the older boy, who was frantically screaming and crying with his face a bloodied mess. Matty was also crying, but instead of misery his face was skewed up in such a rictus of rage that it chilled Héctor to his bones. All the while one of the teachers was trying to pry Matty off of Sergio, but Matty was too strong and too full of rage to be pulled away.

"*Vete al infierno, mamahuevo! No me jodas!*" Matty roared as he continued to punch Sergio. The little girls surrounding him covered their mouths, scandalized by the swears Matty was screaming. "*You sick sadistic monster! I'll kill you!*"

"Matty, stop!" Héctor said as he grabbed hold of Matty and managed to pull him off the screaming, crying child. "That's enough!"

Matty fought against Héctor's hold as he spat on Sergio. "*Talk about my sister like that again and I will blind you!*"

"**MATEO**!" Héctor yelled as he gave a harsh slap against his son's face. Matty's face jerked back and his eyes went wide in surprise, his face falling into a stupefied expression as he gazed off into nothing. Héctor took him by the shoulders and gave him a shake. "*Snap out of it, miojo! C'mon, Matty breathe. It's okay, breathe!*"

Matty blinked a few times before coming back to the present with a gasp, slowly registering that all of his schoolmates were staring at him in horror. Then he noticed he was being held by his father. "*Papá?*" he whispered in a hoarse voice.

"It's okay miojo." Héctor soothed and held the boy close. "You're alright. It's okay."

"*El esta loco!*" Sergio screamed as he tried to crawl his way backwards towards his gang. "He attacked me for no reason!" He turned towards the teacher with pleading eyes. "I was just talking to him and he started beating me up!"

Matty shook his head, his anger returning. "*No!*" he yelled. "*You said you were going to put me in Leti's grave and then do terrible things to her body!*" His last word came out as an anguished sob as he collapsed into Héctor's hold. Héctor and the teacher looked back at Sergio in anger and disgust.

Sergio shook his head vigorously. "*No I didn't! He's lying! He's a liar! He lied about going to school when he was playing hooky and he's lying now!*"

"*You did say it!*"

"*No I didn't!*"

"*Yes you did!*"

"*No I didn't!*"

"*Yes he did…*"

A new voice popped up and everyone turned towards Barto and the rest of Sergio's gang. Barto stepped forward and spoke in Matty's defense. "*Matty was just sitting there and Sergio came over and kicked him to the ground. And then he said all of those horrible things about Leti. About giving her a good time and making her a real woman. Didn't he?*" He turned to the rest of the gang, and they all nodded their heads in agreement. The teacher was appalled as she glared daggers at Sergio.
Sergio was livid, but in too much pain to do anything else but scream. "You traitors! Barto, you filthy rat!"

"You're the filthy one, Sergio!" Barto said, before looking Matty in the eyes. "You don't speak that way about people after they die." Matty still lay limp in his father's arms, but he gave a slight nod of gratitude towards Barto and his friends.

"Señor Rivera, you may take your son home." The teacher said before roughly pulling Sergio to his feet. "I'll take care of this little deviant. The rest of you go on home as well!" And with that she took the little hellion by the arm and dragged him back into the schoolhouse.

"Matty beat up Sergio!" one child said.

"A boy half his size beat him up! Ha ha! Qué perdedor patético!" another laughed.

"Hooray for Matty! Olé!"

The children cheered for Matty, coming over to give the boy a hearty pat on the back and congratulate him for conquering the school bully who made all of their lives miserable. Even Barto came over to apologize for his past actions. Had he not been so tired from his fight Matty would have relished all the positive attention, but the rush had fled him now leaving him sore and exhausted. He even let his father carry him in his arms as they made their way out of the schoolyard and down the street.

"I'm sorry Papá." Matty said quietly when they were finally alone.

"I know you are mijo." Héctor said with a warm smile.

"Am I in trouble?" Matty asked.

"I think I'll let it slide this time." Héctor said. "I always knew and feared you two would come to blows one day, I'm just glad you were the victor. I won't even ask how you learned all those bad words."

Matty blushed. "I didn't know what I was saying, really." He sighed and rested his head on his father's shoulder. "Are we going home now?"

"Nope, we're going to the doctor." Héctor said.

"Eh?" Matty lifted his head up. "But why?"

"You've sprung a leak." Héctor said as he pointed to Matty's shoulder, which was stained red with blood. The stitches had burst through all of the mad flailing.

"Oh…"

Chapter End Notes

I had also drawn a picture of Matty beating up Sergio, but in the end I didn't like how it turned out. Maybe I'll add it one day, but I just wanted to hurry up and post the chapter.
My First Dia de Muertos! (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Remove the cinnamon sticks and cloves with a slotted spoon. Pour in the simmered onion mix. Stir well. Then finally add the chopped chocolate. Stir until perfectly melted. Perfecto!

"I think it's ready Mamá!" Coco said as she stood back from the simmering pot of homemade mole sauce that she had spent the last two hours on. She watched nervously as Imelda stirred the pot with a spoon before scooping a bit up for herself, blowing on it, and taking a small sip. Coco clasped her hands together as she watched for any facial clue to tell her if what she had made was either delicious or a complete failure. "Well?"

Imelda swallowed and smiled. "It could use a little more salt." She said as she reached for the salt shaker. Coco was quicker than her and snatched it away.

"N-no! I'll do it. It's my mole sauce, so I have to be the one to make any adjustments to it. R-Rosita is counting on me. It has to be perfect!" Coco added a dash of salt and stirred the pot vigorously. "Now that the sauce is done I need to grill the chicken. Do you think marinating it for only one day was long enough?"

"Coco, relax!" Imelda laughed. "The mole sauce is good, you marinated the chicken long enough, and everything will be delicious. I'm sure Rosita will love it."

"I hope so…" Coco said as she went to the small refrigerator to grab the plate of lime and chile chicken, looking at it critically. "Do you think it's too late to bake a cake as well?"

"Yes Coco, far too late." Imelda said. "I need the stove to cook for tonight too, you know. And remember I want you back before sundown. It's Dia de Muertos, and you know that it's a special one this year."

Coco sighed sadly as she forked the chicken onto a hot oiled skillet. "Sí Mamá, I know." Then she perked up with a smile. "But that means Leti's coming home tonight! Isn't that a wonderful thing?"

Imelda smiled wistfully. The last few months had been tough for the Rivera family. But as Santa Cecilia slowly rose up from the devastating earthquake, so did the family from their heartache. Music wove it's way throughout the house again as inspiration had come back to Héctor, resulting in a new record being produced with Remember Me as the number one song all throughout Mexico. The shoe workshop was rebuilt and expanded upon, as well as the house itself. Several of their neighbors didn't want to rebuild after the destruction, so the Riveras paid a generous sum of money for their properties and now their home was basically the whole block. Matty was doing much better as well at school, having made new friends and was even smiling and laughing again. And Coco was starting to become a beautiful young woman, taking a great interest in learning to cook with a few successes and a lot of burnt dinners. Things were starting to look up finally.

Héctor walked into the kitchen a sniffed the air. "Ooh, are we having Pollo con Mole for lunch today?" He reached for a spoon of the sauce, but his hand was gently slapped away by his daughter.

"No! This isn't for you! It's for Rosita!" Coco said with an edge to her voice. "It's a very special
meal just for her for Dia de Muertos."

"Rosita?" Héctor asked confused. "I thought she hated mole sauce though?"

Coco's face started to turn bright red and her eyes darted left and right. "N-n-no," she stuttered. "She loves mole sauce..."

"No, I distinctly remember," Héctor said as he thought about it some more. "We had mole sauce one time when she, Facundo and Julio came over for dinner and she scraped it off of her meat. And I thought it was strange because usually she eats everything in front of her, but apparently we served her the one thing she didn't like."

"Yes, that is strange," Imelda said with a knowing smile as she stared at Coco. "But you know who loved our mole sauce so much that they asked for double servings of it? -"

"Okay, you two need to leave, please!" Coco said frantically as she pushed her parents out of the kitchen. "You know the saying, too many cooks in the kitchen spoils the pot!" Once they were in the other room she slammed the door shut on their faces.

Imelda tried to stifle her laughter behind her hand as she walked over to the basket of cempazuchitl flowers waiting to be plucked, but sighed in exasperation when she saw her husband's clueless face. "Oh, come now, you must know who she's really cooking for? Think about it, idiota!"

Héctor placed his chin in his hand as he thought back to that dinner, the pieces slowly falling into place until with a gasp he turned disbelieving eyes towards Imelda. "No!"

Imelda nodded. "Sí!"

"Really?!"

"Sí."

"But... why?"

Imelda shrugged and went back to plucking the petals off of the stems into a basket. "Love comes to us in mysterious ways, mi amor. And our dear Coco has had it bad for the boy for months now."

"But why him?" Héctor asked incredulously. "He's so quiet, and fidgety, and short! And I'm sorry, but no sixteen year-old boy should have a mustache that thick!"

Imelda smiled mischievously. "What can I say? Coco must have strange tastes in men. She gets it from me, I'm afraid."

Héctor nodded. "I guess you're right... Hey!"

A pale purple ribbon was carefully placed atop a section of thick black hair, and slowly but surely was woven along another section of plain hair. From the top to the bottom the hair was braided until it reached the very bottom and the end was tied up in a neat little bow. Then tiny white flowers were strung through the braid at each turn of the hair, the bangs brushed and picked to the right amount of fluffiness, and then spritzed with a sweet and fragrant perfume. When it was all done, she sat back and admired her work of art.

"Perfecto! This is so much easier than when I was alive!" Leti said as she took her hair off of the mannequin head and placed it atop her skull. She skipped over to her bedroom mirror and made
sure that it was in the right position. After a few adjustments she picked up a small toothbrush, squirted some Bone-Glo on it, and brushed at the several colorful markings on her face. She was very proud of her soul markings, the lilac circles on her top brow that shrunk to little pinprick dots under her eye sockets, the streaks of gold on her cheeks, even that weird green sprig-thingy that was in between her eyebrows. She scrubbed them until they had a glossy sheen and smiled at her reflection.

"Muy guapa!" she said smugly, and turned around back towards her bed. "What do you think, Frangipani?"

On her pillow sat a pink elephant that was no bigger than a cat, with green polka dots on her back and a multicolored checkerboard on her belly. She had golden tusks, green toes, purple eyes and the underside of her giant ears were the pattern of a Monarch butterfly's. She looked at Leti and gave a small *toot!* of appraisal from her trunk.

"Great, now I gotta decide what I'm going to wear." Leti walked into her closet and rifled through her wardrobe. "Let's see… That dress is too stuffy… Too casual… The dress I was buried in? Nah, too depressing. Aha!" Leti walked out with a shirt and two skirts in hand. "My embroidered blouse! This is nice, I'll wear this!... Now what about shoes?"

Suddenly a knock came at the door, startling both Leti and her alebrije. "Mija? Are you almost ready?"

"Uno momento, Abuelita!" Leti said, before changing her mind. "Actually, can you come in here? I need your opinion on something."

The door opened and in walked a female skeleton, one who had died too young but had a sweet maturity in her eyes. Her hair was done up in an elegant bun, she wore a modest pink dress cinched tightly around her spinal column, and her soul markings were green and gold triangles above her eyes and gold leaves on her cheeks. "Leticia, you aren't even dressed yet!"
"That's what I want your opinion on!" Leti said as she held up two skirts. "Which one do you think, the red one or the green one?"

"Hmm…" The skeleton pondered thoughtfully. "The red one."

"That's what I thought too!" Leti said as she hiked the skirt over her hip bones. "And I need to pick the proper shoes as well. Shoes are very important in our family, you know. Saddle shoes are too common and offer no support, which I'll need since I'll be walking around a lot. And boots are too clunky, I want to look my best tonight!"

"Mija…" Leti's grandmother said softly. "You know they won't be able to see you, right?"

Leti deflated a little. "I know, but it's my first Dia de Muertos from the other side. I just wanted to look my best for the occasion. Tio Nesto always says that your appearance matters more than what you say or do."

"You know some skeletons go to the Land of the Living with no shirt on at all. Just their ribs sticking out." Her grandmother laughed.

Leti grimaced in disgust. "En serio? Mamá wouldn't like that all. She'd say they'd have no class."

"Leticia! Mirasol! Hurry up!" An irritated voice called from downstairs. "It's half past six already! Vámanos!"

"What?!" Leti cried out as she flung shoe after shoe out of her closet in a hurry. "I didn't know it was that late! Mamá always has dinner for Dia de Muertos at seven o'clock sharp! We're gonna miss it!" She hopped out of her closet, pulling on some woven leather huaraches over her skeletal feet. "These will have to do!"

"Okay, let's go!" Mirasol said and she ushered her granddaughter out the door and down the stairs. Waiting at the bottom was her husband Gaspar. He had also died quite young, his thick black hair oiled up and slicked back and dressed in a simple white shirt and tan slacks. His markings were purple and silver swirls, slanted downwards on his brow giving him a permanent grumpy expression. Marisol smiled sweetly. "Mi amor, you know you must never rush a woman when she's getting ready."

Gaspar pointed at his watch. "Well by the time we get there the food will all be cold. It's going to take forever to get to the gate, let alone cross the bridge and reach the house!"

Leti looked down guiltily, before a thought sprung in her mind and she grinned. "I got an idea, Abuelito!"

Gaspar knew his granddaughter's look and his eyes narrowed. "Oh no. No no no no no no…"

But it was too late and Leti was already running outside the house and giving a sharp whistle. "FRANGIPANI!" By the time Leti had made it out into the wide street Frangipani had zipped down the stairs, flew past an agitated Gaspar and an amused Mirasol, and plopped down in front of her owner. Leti grinned down at the little elephant alebrije. "Okay Frangipani. Grande grande!"

Frangipani crouched down into herself, inhaling long and hard into her trunk, and she began to swell. Her soft plump figure grew into hard, scaly skin, the green polka dots shifting into vibrant tiger stripes. Her tusks turned from little nubs into razor sharp instruments of death, and her ears grew larger and larger into a gigantic set of butterfly wings. Her cute little toots turned into powerful trumpets, and when she was finished she had grown into a fully sized elephant. She lowered her large trunk down to Leti, and the little skeleton giggled as she lightly walked along it.
up to the massive knobby head.

"Now we can get there in no time! C'mon Abuelita!" Leti said happily.

"Muchas gracias, Frangipani." Mirasol said pleasantly as she too walked up the trunk to sit behind Leti. She looked down at her husband and frowned when he looked away with his arms folded over his chest. "Gaspar…"

"I am not getting on that thing ever again!" Gaspar growled as he pointed at the elephant with disdain. "Not since it thought it would be funny to fling me into the river. Mis amigos still laugh at me about it."


"I'm not an old man! I'm only twenty-five years ooOOOH!" Gaspar was suddenly lifted off his feet by Frangipani's massive trunk, swung over her head, and none too gently plopped onto her back behind Mirasol. His eyes rattled in his skull as his wife laughed at him, and he sighed in defeat. "Alright, fine. Let's go."

"Fly Frangipani, fly!" Leti cried and let out a loud grito as Frangipani flapped her large ear wings and took off into the air.

As they soared Leti relished in the feeling of cool crisp air against her bones and drunk in the beautiful view of the Land of the Dead. Before the most beautiful place she had ever seen was Mexico City. But when she first stepped out of the Department of Family Reunions with her grandparents and saw her surroundings she was amazed. High, winding structures of buildings on top of buildings, sky high trolleys connected on wires crisscrossed all over each other, sounds of music, laughter and cheer from every corner, and the colors! So many bright and vibrant colors, the most predominant being purples, pinks and golds. Mamá and Coco would love that whenever they finally got here. She herself would never get tired of this aerial view.

Frangipani dove down towards the ground and landed gracefully outside of the Marigold Bridge terminals. She knelt down to let Leti and Mirasol slide off of her, while Gaspar tumbled down into a pile of bones, moaning weakly. "Feel… sick… I hate flying."

Mirasol chuckled as she picked up her husband's skull. "Oh, so dramatic." She held the skull up and out in front of her as the rest of Gaspar's body magically rose up and reconnected itself back together, making their granddaughter giggle. "Alright, I'm going to stop by this stall first and rent some knapsacks and baskets. I have a feeling we're going to have a good haul this year!"

As Mirasol walked off, Gaspar checked his watch again. "Well, I hate to say it, but I think we've made good time. Good thing too, I can taste my little girl's menudo already!" He rubbed his hands in anticipation of the feast, grinning until a large pink trunk plopped down heavily on his shoulder. "Ugh! Alright, alright, thank you for the ride, alebrije. You happy now? Now go on home, we can just take a trolley back later." As Frangipani flew off with a powerful gust of wind, Gaspar called out, "And shrink back down before you get there! I don't want to have to clean up your giant caquitas!" He turned his attention back to Leti and smiled down at her. "Are you excited to go home, mija?"

While Gaspar had been dealing with her alebrije, Leti had been looking at the gate terminals separating the city and the Marigold Bridge, watching as skeletons were scanned and approved to cross the bridge per their ofrenda picture. But one skeleton's scan ended in a loud buzzing sound and the dejected soul was left to simply limp back towards the Land of the Dead. "Abuelito, why did that skeleton not get to cross the bridge?"
Gaspar looked to where Leti was pointing and winced at the skeleton's yellowed, dusty bones and limp posture. "Ah, his foto wasn't put up I'm afraid, and if your foto isn't put up then you can't cross over. By the looks of him no one has for a while. He's being forgotten."

Leti watched the poor skeleton with wide eyes. Suddenly her excitement for the holiday turned to fear, and she looked up at her grandfather. "W-what if Mamá and Papá… didn't put up my foto?"

Gaspar's brow furrowed and he knelt down to look Leti in the eye. "What makes you think they wouldn't put your foto up? Your parents love you, mija. Heck, anyone with half a brain cell would love you as soon as they met you! You don't have to worry about that."

Leti looked down at the ground. "It's just that… When I got sick, everyone was so sad. Everyone cried, even Tio Nesto. What if they're mad at me because I made them so sad? That they wish they could just… forget me?"

Gaspar sighed but smiled warmly as he traced a finger over her skull markings. "Leticia, you couldn't help getting sick. Never blame yourself for that. Look at your Abuelita and me! We both got sick and died when Imelda was only five years old and our sons only a few months old." His eyes turned sad and he paused as he let the old wounds of his past make themselves known. "For the longest time I hated myself for my own weakness, and I was sure that Imelda would try to forget us if only to ease her own suffering."

"But instead, she told everyone our stories, even though we spent such a short time together as a family. We meant that much to her! She told all of our stories to her friends, her husband, and even you kids as well."

Leti grinned. "Like the time you kicked a fútbol into a beehive and got stung so much that you looked like a prickly pear cactus?"

Gaspar glowered. "The point is… Imelda knew we never meant to leave her, just like she and the rest of the family know that you didn't mean to leave them. They aren't angry at you, mija. Trust me."

Mirasol walked back over carrying three baskets and bags, noticing the pair's solemn faces. "Is everything alright?"

Gaspar stood up straight and placed his hand on Leti's shoulder. "Sí, just some 'First Time Crossing the Bridge' jitters. We've all been there! But everything's okay now, right Leticia?"

Leti nodded and smiled up at her grandfather. "Sí, I'm ready now, let's go!"

The three of them walked up to the terminal, and when it was Leti's turn she was given a first timer's welcome by the crossing agent and a round of applause by the whole staff, making her giggle. She smiled widely for the camera, even though inside she was still a little anxious, before the reassuring ding sounded. "Your foto is on your parents' ofrenda! Have a wonderful visit, Chiquita."

Leti sighed in relief. "Gracias, señor!" she exclaimed and walked a little ways past the gate to await her grandparents. She gazed in awe at the huge, glowing orange bridge before her, watching the footsteps of the skeletons walking on it light up and inhaling the sweet aromas that were beckoning her to come forward and join them. A few seconds later Mirasol and Gaspar came up next to her and took her by the hands. Her excitement had returned. "I'm going home!"
I can stand the sight of worms
And look at microscopic germs
But technicolor pachyderms is really too much for meee
Ooookay.... Here's the thing.

For the past month I have been having printer problems that I haven't been able to fix. And I feel incredibly guilty because I am so far ahead in the story that the only thing keeping me from updating it here on AO3 is wanting to add illustrations to it.

So for the time being I'm just going to upload a new chapter every day until I am caught up with the current story and later when I am able too I will add the chapter illustrations.

I hope you guys understand. ;)

EDIT: NEVER MIND, I FIXED IT! LOLFCNBXBBBS!! :P

As Imelda opened the double doors into the courtyard, Coco whisked her way in at top speed carrying a bowl full of strawberries, panting as she slowed down to a halt. "Made it!"

"Barely." Imelda said with a raised brow. "I was about ready to go over there and drag you back by your braids." Then she smiled. "So, did Rosita like your food?"

"Mamá, please." Coco looked away while blushing. "I know you know who it was really for, so stop teasing me."

"Oh, mija." Imelda cooed and gave her embarrassed daughter a hug. "I meant no harm. I went through the exact same thing that you are going through right now. Did I ever tell you about the first time I realized that I loved your Papá?"

Coco rolled her eyes. "When you and he sang *La Llorona* at the creek."

"No, that's when your Papá fell in love with *me*." Imelda said. "I fell in love with him much later, at mis quince años in fact. You see the year before that your Papá was much shorter than me, so short that I could rest my arm on his head like an armrest. But during that year your Papá grew thirteen inches."

Coco's eyes widened. "In one year?! That's impossible!"

"It's true, you can ask him about it! Poor boy, he had such painful aches and terrible fevers as his body grew uncontrollably. You can still faintly see the stretchmarks on his shoulders if you look closely. But anyway, on mis quince años the nuns dressed me in this disgustingly ugly blue dress, despite my wishes for a purple one. During the party I was by the snack table and your Papá made his way over to get something to eat."

"Then he tripped on himself, not used to his long gangly limbs, and fell straight into the table. The
sangria bowl flew off the table, flipped in the air, and then the bowl fell down on me, spilling all over my head and that hideous dress. I was furious and humiliated! I looked down at that stupid boy, ready to give him a thrashing he would never forget. He looked up at me in horror, covered with cake and other snacks, before he cracked the goofiest, most infuriating grin ever and said—"

"Well, at least your dress is purple now, diosa!"

Imelda smiled at the memory. "I looked down and sure enough the sangria had stained my dress into a lovely shade of purple. My anger immediately vanished and I laughed so hard my stomach hurt and I couldn't breathe. And that's when realized that I wanted to be with him for the rest of my life, so we could laugh and play and sing together forever."

Coco looked over at her father, who was standing on a chair as he hung up papel picado across the courtyard, and giggled. "Papá is so silly." She sighed mournfully. "But Julio… as sweet as he is I don't think he's ever going to get much taller."

Imelda laughed. "Maybe not thirteen inches, but we can always hope." She clapped her hands together. "Now then, go put those strawberries on the ofrenda! The food is ready, the offerings are put up, and we are all here. It's official: Dia de Muertos has begun!"

As if that was their cue, three glowing orange spirits rushed passed the doors as well, stopping in the middle of the courtyard and pulling air into their phantom lungs. Gaspar straightened up and laughed. "Ha! Did you hear that? We made it just in time! That's a new record for us Mirasol, less than a millisecond to spare!"

"Congratulations, mi amor." Mirasol said as she watched Leti while smiling.

"Mamá!" Leti cried out as she flung her arms around her mother and hugged her. "Mamá, I've missed you so much! I have so many things to-ah!" Leti jerked back in surprise as Imelda walked through her with no resistance, leaving a weird tingling feeling in her bones. Her smile faltered a little until she saw Héctor. "Papá! Papá, you're hanging up the papel picado? I made the one with the star on it two years ago. Ah, there it is! Papá…" Héctor hopped off the chair and walked away, leaving his daughter alone. As Coco came out of the ofrenda room Leti tried to get her attention as well, but to no avail and her shoulders sagged in defeat.

Mirasol came over to her granddaughter and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, Leticia. They can't see us."

Leti crossed her arms. "This is stupid. What's the point of even coming here if they can't see, hear or feel us?"

"Now now…" Gaspar walked up and patted Leti's head. "Just because they can't see us doesn't mean they aren't thinking of us. That's what this day is all about: Being remembered and honored by those who loved us. In fact, why don't we take a peek into the ofrenda room and see what they left for us?"

"Okay." Leti said as she let her grandparents guide her into the ofrenda room. As usual the back wall was set up with a table filled with cempazuchitl flowers, candles and a giant cross on the top tier. Mirasol and Gaspar's wedding picture, the only foto that Imelda had of them, was on display, but what Leti saw left her in awe.

There were a dozen pictures of Leti on every tier of the table display, from when she was a newborn baby wearing her tio's infant sized steel toe boots, to her first day of school with Matty in their brand new uniforms, and the family group picture on that wonderful day when they all performed at Mariachi plaza. At the center of the table was a large glamour shot of Leti that her
Papá had specially done, with a soft glow around her and her hair done up just like her Mamá’s. She had felt like a true princess that day and it was her favorite picture of herself. Then she saw the offerings.

"My accordion!" she squealed as she ran up to the ofrenda. "I've missed playing it! And strawberries from Rosita's garden! She always grows the best strawberries, they're as big as the palm of your hand!"

"Go ahead, mija. Pick them up!" Mirasol said.

"Pick them- really?" Leti looked at her accordion for a moment before placing a finger on it. It felt solid under her touch. She placed her hands on either side of it, making sure she had a good grip on it, and lifted it up with ease. Sort of. The accordion stayed in place on the ofrenda, but in her hands she held an exact copy of the instrument, glowing as orange and as translucent as she was. "Whoa…" She stretched out the bellows, listening as it musically inhaled, before pumping out a familiar oompah pah and swaying to the music. Her smile and excitement had returned. "Que padre! What did you guys get?"

"Looks like the usual. Pan de muerte, of course. Ooh, a very expensive bottle of tequila. Gracias, yerno. Aha, and best of all! " Gaspar exclaimed as he held up a copy of a large bowl of seeds. "Pepitas! And lots of them too!" This was how Gaspar made his living both in Santa Cecilia and the Land of the Dead. He was renowned for his green thumb and grew the best vegetables and gourds around, but his specialty was pumpkins. His pumpkins always grew big and fat and were never quick to spoil, and Mirasol would always make wonderful food with the products they didn't sell. Pumpkin soup, candied pumpkins, pumpkin empanadas, and plain roasted pepitas with a hint of salt.

"Some of my happiest memories with mi hija were just sitting on the front porch with her while we ate roasted pepitas and enjoyed each other's company." He let the pumpkin seeds run through his fingers as he looked fondly at them. "She always leaves me a bowl of them every year. It's my favorite offering." Mirasol wrapped an arm around Gaspar and he leant into her embrace while Leti smiled at them. "This is what Dia de Muertos is all about, Leticia. Seeing how much we are still loved by our living family because they remember the good times with us."

"Mi amor, there's another offering for you." Mirasol pointed out.

"Eh?" Gaspar looked back at the ofrenda, and sure enough next to the pepitas was a paper envelope. He picked up a copy of it and looked inside. What he saw inside made him smile and he looked at Leti. "Strawberry roots."

Mirasol gasped and smiled at Leti. "Dios mio. They must know that we're looking after you! Oh, our daughter is so clever, and so thoughtful!"

Leti smiled. "Abuelito, you can grow me some strawberries?"

Gaspar harrumphed arrogantly. "I can grow anything if I set my mind to it, even from bedrock! Just you wait mija. I'll grow you strawberries twice as big, twice as sweet, twice as juicy, twice as-"

"Matty…"

Leti stared at the doorway to the room, where there stood her beloved twin brother. Gaspar and Mirasol looked at their grandson and then at Leti. "We'll leave you two alone, mija." Mirasol said as she and Gaspar went back outside.
It was just the two of them now. Leti set down her accordion and waited as Matty walked over to the ofrenda and placed a thick envelope in front of Leti's portrait. Her name was written on it in careful cursive letters, and she assumed that he had just learned how to write that way in school. Leti walked up to her brother and smiled. "Hola Matty… I know you can't see me or hear me, but… I've missed you so so much! These past ten months all I've been thinking of was how you were doing."

"I'm doing fine."

Leti gave a startled gasp when Matty spoke. "Wh- Matty?! Y-you can hear-"

"In case you were wondering." Matty continued.

Leti's hopes dropped back down. He hadn't heard her, he was just speaking out loud. It was pure coincidence that he was seemingly talking with her. Still she let him speak.

"I hope that you're doing okay too. Mamá says that you're with our abuelos in Heaven, so I hope they're treating you well. You deserve it after everything you went through. I'm so sorry you got so sick and were in so much pain. For a long time I wished it was me instead of you that got sick, but you'd probably smack me on the back of the head for saying that." Matty laughed, not feeling a skeletal hand pass through him as Leti tried to do just that.

"It still hurts Leti. Papá says it'll get better, and it has, but it still hurts really bad. Your bed is still in our room, and I make sure that it's always made and your stuffed animals are in the right spots, but… It doesn't smell like you anymore. It's like you're slowly fading away and I can't stop it. Pretty soon I'll forget what your voice sounds like. All that's left of you is in here." He pointed to his head. "I don't ever want that to fade away. I want to be back with you so badly, but… I guess I'll just have to wait. Until then I'll write you letters every Dia de Muertos so you'll know what I've been doing all year. It's okay that you can't write me back. I know you're okay now. I love you, hermana…"

His face crumpled and a soft cry escaped his lips as he scrubbed at his eyes. If she could Leti would have cried with him. Instead she stepped over to him and gave him a ghostly kiss on the forehead. "You feel better, Matty."
As if he could feel it, Matty sniffed one last time and gazed at Leti's picture on the ofrenda, smiling at it as he touched his forehead. Then he leant over and gave a kiss on her picture's forehead as well. Leti was elated. Even though they were separated by death, their bond was still as strong as ever.

The peaceful moment was interrupted however when another figure came into the ofrenda room. Leti looked over and gasped in alarm. It was Barto! Why was one of Sergio's goons at their house?!

Despite there being little that she could do Leti still stood in front of her brother, providing a defensive barrier. "Gordo Barto! What are you doing here?! Don't you dare-"

"Hola, Matty." Barto said cheerfully. "Sorry I'm late."

To Leti's surprise Matty turned around and smiled when he saw the other boy. "Hey Barto! Wow, I'm actually surprised you're this early. Weren't you and your family going to the cemetary?"

Barto waved a hand. "Eh, we're done already. Mi Papá's way of celebrating Dia de Muertos is 'Hola Abuela. Here's some galletas. Adios Abuela.' It basically takes about five minutes and then we just do whatever we want for the rest of the evening. Besides…" He took a large jar out of his knapsack and handed it to Matty. "I wanted to leave this for your family's ofrenda. For Leti."
Matty gasped as he took the jar. "You filled up a whole jar with strawberry hard candies?! How many bags did you have to buy to fill it?!"

"Ten." Barto said proudly.

"What about the other flavors?" Matty asked. As Barto looked at the ground guiltily Matty laughed. "En serio?!"

"They don't call me Gordo Barto for nothing." Barto laughed back as he pulled out a small paper sack and handed it to Matty. "I didn't eat all of it though, I saved you some mango ones. Good thing too, I was about to throw up from all the sugar."

"Well gracias, amigo." Matty said as he put the jar on the ofrenda. "Are you going to stay and eat with us?"

"No, Mamá has dinner waiting for me. But I suppose I could eat a little before I go home." Barto wrapped an arm around Matty's shoulder and they walked outside. "Luis and I passed the spelling test, by the way. Thanks to you…"

Leti was stunned at what she was witnessing. Matty and Barto were friends now?! It looked like they were enjoying each other's company, and she detected no malice in Barto's words. Things must have really changed since she had left. Now she was definitely going to read Matty's letter when she got back to the Land of The Dead! Still she smiled as she took a copy of the jar and placed it in her knapsack. It seemed she didn't have to worry about Matty at all. He was strong and he had a long, full life ahead of him. She wasn't sure how long it would be, but she knew she would at least be there for him once a year until they met again.

Three empty chairs had been set out for the deceased and the three ghosts sat down in them, pulling copies of plates and bowls of food towards them when it was time to eat. Dinner was delicious, though that wasn't a surprise, and Gaspar had managed to stuff himself full to the point that he was left moaning and slouched in his chair. Leti had to wonder how it was possible for a skeleton to get indigestion, but Mirasol said that some things just couldn't be explained in the Land of the Dead as she rubbed her husband's back.

As the living family ate they also told stories about Gaspar, Mirasol and Leti. Matty told Barto about the time he and Leti had snuck into Héctor's liquor cabinet in the middle of the night when they were five, wanting to taste some of Papá's special grownup drinks. They both managed to knock down three shots each before they stumbled drunkenly into their parent's bedroom, vomiting and crying as the world wouldn't stop tilting and swirling. Leti hid her face in her hands as her grandfather nudged her and laughed, but soon she was the one laughing when Imelda told them all of the time Gaspar got bucked off a donkey and thrown into a huge dung heap.

"Why is it always the embarrassing stories?" Gaspar grumbled.

"Because those are the best kind! The most memorable!" Leti said brightly, and Gaspar couldn't help but smile back.

After dinner the family made their way to Santa Cecilia's cemetery and Leti got her first good look at her gravestone. It felt a little weird looking at it, knowing that her remains were buried in that crypt. "Can I go inside it? I wanna see if my skull has these same markings."

Mirasol grabbed her granddaughter as she made a move to dive in. "Atata. No mija. Trust me, it isn't pretty." She glanced and shook her head at Gaspar, who shuddered at the memory of when he
had done the very same thing to his own grave.

Candles were lit at each gravestone and the living family prayed for the wellbeing of their dearly departed. Then they gathered on the hill by the church to watch the fireworks, and Leti was reminded of her Tio Nesto and wishing he was there with them. Maybe next year.

Hours had passed and the three dead Riveras were still at the house even after the living family had all gone to bed, simply watching their loved ones sleep. Leti kissed her parents, her tios, and Coco goodnight, saving Matty for last. She had watched him sleep the longest out of everyone else, but soon she heard Mirasol calling out for her. It was almost sunrise and it was time to go. She leant over and gave Matty a kiss on the cheek, and just like before it seemed as if he had felt it as he snuggled deeper into sleep with a smile. "Adios Matty. See you next year. I love you too."

And so the three skeletons went back across the Marigold Bridge and into the Land of the Dead, with Mirasol and Gaspar swaying side to side as Leti skipped and played on her accordion the whole way there.

Chapter End Notes

It came to my attention later on after I had written this chapter that, uh... You can't grow stuff in the Land of the Dead. Not even trees or flowers. Cuz, you know, it's DEAD. Which would have made Gaspar's profession moot.

Oops.

While I am someone who strives to make this story as canonically accurate as possible, I'm going to have to take some creative liberties on this minor issue. Gaspar can grow stuff. He's just THAT good of a farmer.

(Ernesto voice) I know you understand. :)

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Also for the illustrations I'm going to color all the living stuff in black-n-white and all the dead stuff in color. Kind of like a Corpse Bride feel, ya dig?
"It's getting to be too much, Imelda!"

"We need to expand the business, branch out."

"That means opening another shop."

"Somewhere outside of Santa Cecilia."

"But not too far."

"We know how to run things-

"So you won't have to worry!"

"What do you think, hermana?" Oscar and Felipe finished and pushed the papers they had drawn up towards their sister.

Imelda looked at both of her brothers with a frown and her arms crossed. It was true, despite having expanded Rivera Zapateria throughout the years, including another workshop on the other side of town, demand was too much for the workers to keep up with. Not since word got out that Ernesto de la Cruz got his famous sequined and studded boots from Imelda herself. Now everyone wanted replicas of Ernesto's boots, as well as all the other shoes they had come up with. She was no longer regulated to just work boots and sandals, but also elegant women's shoes that she had begrudgingly let Oscar and Felipe design themselves, if only to keep them from experimenting with their useless ideas about footwear. The ones with wheels that popped out of the heels had been the last straw for her.

She blew out a sigh and nodded. "I see your point. And you both are right, we do need to expand the business towards other cities. Maybe even a warehouse. It would provide a lot of jobs for people."

Oscar nodded happily. "And we would also be the heads of the research and development department! We got some good ideas for-"

"Just... sensible... footwear! Por favor!" Imelda pleaded with a glare. "Your novelty items won't get you far, trust me." Then her face turned soft. "But still, the thought of you two leaving to go off to some big city is a little heartbreaking. We've been together since you two were tiny babies. I'd... I'd miss you."

"Aaaww..." Felipe went around the table and hugged his sister, with Oscar following. "Don't be sad Imelda. We won't go that far, trust us."

"And it's going to be a while before we'd have to leave," Oscar added. "These things take a lot of planning. But we'll always come home for the holidays."

"Ay, mis hermanitos!" Imelda said as she squeezed them both. "I could use a break from you two..."
though." They all laughed at that and hugged some more.

Coco came into the workshop twirling in her new dance shoes and humming a slow, romantic waltz. When she spotted her mother and tios hugging her dreamy smile grew bigger. "Aw, isn't that sweet? Love is truly in the air tonight." She danced in more dizzying circles before making her way over to a workbench to sit and giggled in ecstasy.

"My my." Imelda said with smirk. "Someone is in a good mood today. Are you going dancing with Julio again?"

"Mmmm, sí." Coco swayed and picked at the end of one of her long braids as she grinned from ear to ear. "But that's not why I'm so happy… Mamá," she beckoned her mother over with her finger. When Imelda came closer, she said in a stage whisper, "Julio told me that he had something he wanted to tell me tonight."

Imelda's eyes grew big and she gasped into her hands. "You don't mean-"

"Sí!" Coco squealed. "I think he's going to ask me to be his wife!"

"WHAT?!"

Coco sighed in exasperation as she heard her father's shout from across the courtyard. He had been plucking at his guitar from underneath the tree, but it only took a few long strides for him to storm into the workshop with a worried expression on his face. "Papá, how in the world were you able to hear that?"

Héctor pointed to his large ears. "These things aren't for show mija. But that's beside the point! What do you mean you're going to be someone's w-w-wife?!!" He shuddered as the word left his mouth. "You're just a baby!"

"I'm eighteen years old, Papá." Coco said. "I'm not a baby anymore, I'm a full grown woman."

"Nope!" Héctor crossed his arms over his chest and tried to look stern, which Imelda always thought looked comical on him. "Eighteen is far too young to get married, Coco."

"Cuñado, you were seventeen when you got married." Oscar said.

"And eighteen when you became a father." Felipe added.

Héctor slumped and gave a sheepish cough. "Yes, w-well… It was a different time back then… And I was… And your Mamá… Ay Dios mio…" He flopped down next to Coco and whined as he leaned onto her shoulder. "My sweet little Coco. I used to change your diapers, and feed you mashed bananas and tuck you in your little bed with your dolly…"

Coco patted her father's head. "Aw don't be sad, Papá. You can still do all that with your future grandchildren!" Héctor only moaned louder and hugged her closer to him, causing her to roll her eyes.

"Estas loco! Estas loco!"

Five heads whipped up at the voice shouting from outside the shop, when Matty walked towards a workbench in a huff with Barto trailing behind him in desperation. "This was a once in million, life changing, mind-blowing opportunity and you just threw it away! Pinche idiota!"

"Nice to see you too, Bartolomeo." Imelda said, not appreciating the teenager's profanity.
Barto shrunk back from Imelda's glare. "Ech... Perdoname, Señora Rivera. It's just that your son is loco! Patricía Alvarez, the most beautiful, the most prestigious girl in school, with her grande culo and gigante tetaaaAAAaaahhh..." Imelda's glare turned to fire. "Perdoname! Anyway, Patricía came up to Mateo after school and asked if he wanted to be her novio. This never happens, Señora! A question like that, from a girl like her, is like a gift de Dios! And what does this pendejo say to her? Hmm?!"

As his family turned their heads towards him for the answer Matty sighed and put down a half sewn shoe. At fourteen years old Matty was almost as tall as Héctor. Unlike his father however, who had been whupped so hard with puberty that it had literally knocked him off his feet, Matty had grown gracefully into a young adult. His hair was thick and glossy, his complexion smooth and blemish free, and his build was thick and muscular. His childhood allergies had diminished to almost nothing and his endurance had increased, letting him partake in sports and excelling at them. He still needed his glasses, but all they seemed to do was enhance the shape of his almond shaped eyes: His mother's eyes.

Matty was on his way to becoming a very handsome man and was the ideal partner to all the girls in school. He just didn't want anything to do with them.

Matty shrugged. "I told her no."

"No! No!" Barto pointed an accusing finger at his friend. "That is not what you said! Tell them!"

Matty sighed in disgust. "I said I would rather go out with a decaying, maggot-infested goat than with her."

"He made her cry!" Barto exclaimed. "I tried to give her my shoulder to cry on, but Aye! She pushed me away and ran home in tears. Pobrecita..."

"Oh, mioj..." Héctor said with disappointment. "That was a little harsh, don't you think? The poor girl obviously likes you, why would you say something horrible like that?"

Matty threw the shoe he had been trying to work on angrily before grabbing his book bag. "Patricía Alvarez used to sit behind me in primary school and thought it was funny to stab me with her pencil for a whole week! I have these silver spots embedded on my shoulder that will never go away! Then she took a pair of scissors and lopped off a chunk of my hair and later sprinkled it onto my lunch. On three separate occasions! So excuse me if I have no sympathy for a girl who thought I had forgotten that she used to torture me! Did she honestly think I would go out with a brat like her?! No lo creo!" And with that he stomped out of the workshop, went to his room and slammed the door shut with Barto right behind him.

Héctor blinked in surprise. "Well alright then."

Imelda moaned. "We're never going to get grandchildren from him, are we?"

"Not at the rate he keeps breaking girls' hearts." Oscar said.

"But still, he has to learn to forgive and forget." Imelda said as she went back to her own workbench. "It's not healthy to hold on to grudges for so long. Honestly, I don't know where he gets it from!" She then started to work on an order, not noticing Héctor elbow her brothers in the gut to keep them from saying anything.

"Well, as fun as all that was," Coco said as she stood up and twirled towards the door. "I have to go now and start the rest of my life!"
"Coco!" Héctor called out. "J-just… don't make any rash decisions. I hear that long engagements are a thing now. We can all sit down and plan it out for about, eh… five, ten years?"

"Papá, don't be so clingy! Everything will be fine." She hugged herself and sighed dreamily. "I love him and he loves me, and I'm ready to spend the rest of my life with him. Wish me luck!"

As Coco bounded out through the courtyard and out into the street, Héctor waved after her. "Good luck…"

Dante looked up from the bed he was sleeping on when Matty stormed into his bedroom with Barto right behind him. The poor dog was startled when the door slammed shut, and when Matty saw him his anger melted into an apologetic smile. "Sorry Dante." He walked over to Dante and scratched behind his ears until the dog started to lean into him and then he rubbed his soft underbelly. Dante thumped his tail happily as his tongue lolled out, making Matty laugh.

"Okay, okay. I understand your point." Barto said as he twirled the antique globe on Matty's desk. "Patricía, as gorgeous as she is, es una bruja who deserved to be put down for once in her snotty little life. But that doesn't explain why you've also shot down both Blanca and Pilar. Those two are like angels sent down to Earth!"

Matty smirked. "You know who was also an angel sent down to Earth? Satán."

"C'mon, amigo!" Barto whined. "I meant those two girls are nice. They have always been nice to you, so you can't fault them for treating you badly in the past because they haven't. What's so wrong with them?"

"Nothing's wrong with them." Matty said as he draped Dante across his lap and continued to rub him. "It's… it's me. I think there's something wrong with me."

Barto's brow furrowed in confusion and he sat down on the bed with his friend. Now was the time to be serious. "What do you mean?"

Matty sighed. "I don't know. I see these girls and they see me, and they turn all lovey-dovey and I just can't force myself to do the same. I want to, but something is stopping me. I don't know what…"

"Uhh…" Barto rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Maybe it's not… girls you like? M-maybe it's… guys?"

"No, idiota." Matty said with a glare. "I told you I don't know what is stopping me from connecting with them. If I was a homosexual then at least I would have an answer for what I'm feeling right now! But I don't! It's like there's a wall around my heart. And it's not just girls either."

Matty leant backwards until he was lying on the bed. "I do really well in school, but it's boring to me. I'm good at fútbol but I could take it or leave it without a care. Even being around my family irks me… I do love them, but the love feels muted, you know? Distant." He took off his glasses, draped an arm around his eyes and sighed tiredly. "And I know I'm not supposed to feel this way, that it's wrong. I just don't know what to do about it."

Barto looked at Matty sadly, at a loss on what to say or do. "I'm sorry Matty… Have you talked to your parents about it?"

"No." Matty said bitterly, not raising his arm. "They'd probably just send me to a doctor, and we've all learned the hard way that throwing money at doctors doesn't help anything." He sat up and gave
Dante another rub before turning to Barto with a small smile. "Besides, telling you was a little helpful."

Barto took Matty's glasses off the bed and put them on his own face. "Ja, zat is vat I am here for, young man. Now you must tell me about your dreams und I will tell you how it involves your mother somehow."

Matty tossed a pillow at Barto and sneered. "Ha ha, very funny."

Barto handed the glasses back to Matty. "I could tell you weren't a homosexual, by the way." He rubbed his hands seductively down his chunky figure. "How else could you stand not getting a piece of all this?" This time Matty did laugh with Dante in between them, happily panting that his master was feeling a bit better now.

"Think about it Héctor! Cavallero has been mayor of this town for over twenty years, solely because no man has had the cajones to run against him." Facundo said as he sat at the kitchen table with Héctor. "He flaunts his wealth and spoils his stupid family, letting them walk around town like they own the place, which yes they kind of do. But Héctor, you are wealthy too! You could literally give Cavallero a run for his money!"

Héctor held up a hand. "Facundo, I'm sorry amigo, but I have to decline. Musicians should never get involved in politics. Besides I already co-run a major motion picture and recording studio, and write songs, and make shoes, and raise a family. I'm thirty-six years old and I already have these!" He pointed to his temples, where his hair was now streaked with grey and white. "You add being mayor to that and you'll put me into an early grave."

"Better that than this." Facundo said as he ran a hand over his smooth bald head. "But actually, I wasn't thinking about you for mayor, amigo. You are well-respected and you give generously to the town, but you're usually just holed up here with your family. A mayor needs to be a man about town. Who works with the people, meets with them daily, listens to their concerns, gives low prices on highly crafted sofas and armchairs."

"Wait wait wait wait…" Héctor interrupted as he finally got the point. "Are you saying that you want to run for mayor?"

Facundo shrugged. "Mis amigos at the tavern all agreed that I would be the best pick, so I'd have their votes at least. But Héctor, this is something that I think I would be good at. I could fix the potholes in the streets, give the poor better access to education, and finally bring progress to Santa Cecilia. Cavallero embezzles the town's money, you know that! I could use it to do good! I just need your support in my campaign. What do you say, amigo?"

Héctor scratched his chin and thought deeply. "Hmm… I don't know."

"Come now, mi amor." Imelda said as she came towards them with cups of coffee. "What is your motto again? Spread the wealth around? Only this time it isn't throwing a fancy party for the town or building a new restaurant. This would help people's lives. I seriously think you should consider it."

"Well said, Imelda!" Facundo grinned as he took a cup of coffee and held it up towards Héctor. "So?"

Héctor grabbed his own cup, watched as the coffee swirled around, and grinned. "I think we'll finally make a difference to Santa Cecilia. Salud!"
Before Héctor and Facundo could clink their mugs together, the doors to the complex burst wide open and Coco came barreling in towards her room, letting out heart-wrenching sobs and scrubbing at her eyes. When her eyes landed on Facundo, her face twisted into hate and rage. "What is he doing here?! I want nothing to do with him, or Rosita, or J-Julio, or their whole damn family ever again!"

"Coco!" Imelda cried out in alarm as Héctor and Facundo also stood up in worry. "Whatever is the matter?!"

Coco yanked at her braids hard and sobbed again. "Julio! That bastardo! He said he didn't want to court me anymore! He said I wasn't good enough to be his wife! I wasted five years of my life waiting for him to ask me to marry him, and he just drops me! Oh, Mamá!" She collapsed into Imelda's arms and cried out her heartbreak. "Mamá, I love him! I love him so much! What am I going to do?!"

"Cálmese, mija. Shh shh." Imelda slowly rocked Coco side to side and kissed her red face. "What exactly did he say?"

"H-he s-s-said that-" a loud snort came from her nose and she coughed out another sob. "He said that I was too tall! That a man was supposed to look down at his wife, not eye to eye!"

"Oh, mija!" Héctor cooed as he came over to hug his distraught child. "You are only one hundred and sixty centimeters. That's not too tall, cielita!"

"This is all your fault, Papá!" Coco screeched as she pointed a finger in Héctor's face. "You made me too tall! I'm a giant because of you!"

"Of course it's my fault!" Héctor said in exasperation as he flung his arms up in the air. "It's always my fault. 'Papá, you made me too tall! Papá, you gave me your big nose! My ears are just like yours, Papá!' Apparently Imelda you mated with a man who's even worse than a leper! Heaven forbid I show my wretched face out in public!"

"What is going on out here?!" Matty said as he walked up towards the kitchen table.

"You!" Coco turned her accusations to her little brother. "What is it about you… you men?! Why do you think it's okay to spit such vile words at us poor girls and break our hearts?! You should be ashamed! All you men should be ashamed!"
And with that she ran towards her room and slammed the door shut, crying all the way.

"Everyone in this family is loco!" Matty fumed as he too went back to his room and also slammed his door.

The three adults were left reeling at what had just transpired, before Facundo solemnly picked up his hat and placed it on his head. "Well, it looks like our deal isn't going to happen after all. It appears that my family is not welcome here anymore, and I apologize for that."

"Don't worry Facundo." Héctor said as he patted the smaller man on the shoulder. "This isn't over. We'll talk about it later."

Facundo nodded. "Gracias, Héctor. Now if you'll excuse me I need to go home and beat my son into oblivion for hurting your girl."

Héctor nodded. "Right behind you, amigo."

"ATATA! No!" Imelda held up a hand and stopped both men in their tracks. "You two are not going to do anything to that boy, and we are also not going to do anything with Coco. We are just going to sit back and watch."

Héctor and Facundo looked at each other in puzzlement before turning back towards the scheming matriarch. "Imelda?"
Imelda smiled and entwined her fingers together. "Those two are head over heels in love with each other. Sooner or later their pride will falter and they'll be racing back into each other's arms. We just have to let this all unfold naturally. Trust me chicos, all will be well in the end."

Chapter End Notes

That's right y'all. Oscar and Felipe invented Heelies before they were cool... by about 75 years. Jealous?
The next morning at the shoe shop things were as busy as ever. Between all the workers coming to and fro carrying bolts of leather, crates of boots and other supplies, one would have missed the stranger weeding through all the comings and goings. That is if it weren't for the flashy bright suit he was sporting, clashing against the casual, earthy tones of the staff, and the slicked up pompadour that crested over the crowd of heads. The young man sauntered over to the door of the main living quarters of the Rivera house and gave a hearty knock, straitening his tie and holding up a bouquet of flowers. Héctor opened the door and immediately scowled at who it was.

"Ah, buenos días, Señor Rivera! How are you and your lovely family doing this morning?" Ignacio Cavallero said with a gleaming white smile. Ignacio was the youngest grandson of the town's mayor and self-proclaimed handsomest man in Santa Cecilia, if not all of Oaxaca. It was true the boy was tall and handsome, but he was also known as the town lothario and was spoiled rotten by his family's wealth. His own greeting at Héctor oozed with insincerity, something that irked Héctor from the start.

"Hola, Ignacio. I'm surprised that you're here to pick up your father's boots yourself. Don't you have manservants to do that for you?" Héctor asked. "Well they're not going to be ready for a few days, so-"

"Oh no, Señor Rivera, it's not about Papí's boots. I am here for more sentimental reasons." He held up the bouquet and grinned with a slimy charm. "I've come to court!"

Héctor glanced at the bouquet with a raised brow. "Well as flattered as I am, I'm already married chamaco."

Ignacio let out a braying laugh. "Ah, you are funny Señor! But actually I have come to court your lovely daughter, Socorro!"

Héctor's already soured mood turned a little darker at that. "And how exactly do you know that my daughter is available to court?"

"Ah, bad news travels fast, I'm afraid. Everyone is talking about last night when that carpenter's son broke poor Socorro's heart. I wasn't there myself, but I heard that she was absolutely shattered." Ignacio sighed despondently before perking up. "But this is good news for me! Now is my chance to be her literal knight in shining armor and sweep her off her feet!"

"Papá, who is it?"

A small, tired voice from behind Héctor caused both men to look as Coco came to the door. Her eyes were still swollen from a night full of crying and they appeared lifeless. When she saw Ignacio however she mimicked her father's scowl. "Oh, hola Nacho."

"Ignacio!" the man hissed in instant anger, before coughing and putting on a love-struck expression. "Ay, Socorro! What a vision you are this morning! I'm sure that with a little make-up you could hide that puffiness and look even more stunning!"
Coco's eyes widened with hurt, but then she glared harder. "What do you want, Ignacio?"

Ignacio thrust the bouquet into Coco's arms and bowed like a gentleman. "Socorro Rivera, it would be an honor for both of us if you would consider to be my most treasured novia! With both of our family's wealth and prestige, we are truly a match made in heaven."

Coco looked at the bouquet of flowers in her hands as she felt tears threatening to come out again. As lovely as the assortment of flowers were, they were nothing compared the simple flowers that Julio would pluck from the ground and place behind her ear. Then he would say that her beauty put all the flowers in Mexico to shame, and he would kiss her so sweetly… She shook the thoughts away and turned back to Ignacio. "W-well… Thank you for the flowers Ignacio, but-… I don't think I'm ready just yet to be involved with another man. I hope you understand."

"I thought you might say that, what with the wounds still being fresh, so I've come prepared!" Ignacio pulled out a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket. "A poem that I wrote myself just for you, my dear Socorro. Let the words provide a soothing balm for your heart and lift your spirits high." He cleared his throat and began.

Ay Socorro, mi Socorro, your awful night is done,

Your heart has weathered every rack, but the prize I sought is won,

The church is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,

While follow eyes the steady keel, of Socorro bold and daring!

He finished with a beaming grin and Coco looked at him as if he had just asked her to eat a plateful of bugs. Then she turned to her father. "Papá, please get him out of here."

"With pleasure." Héctor smiled before taking the smug boy by the arm and leading him toward the street outside.

"Fine, it's alright. I can wait." Ignacio said as he brushed himself off and put his poem back in his pocket. "I'll just give her some time, but soon she'll come to realize that we are simply meant to be. You must know this too, Señor Rivera. Surely I, Ignacio Cavallero, would be a much better match for her than a son of a lowly carpenter!"

"Walt Whitman." Héctor said.

Ignacio looked up. "Que?"

Héctor crossed his arms and glared. "That was Oh Captain, My Captain by Walt Whitman chamaco, albeit with your own words messily placed into it. I wonder why, however, you chose to steal from a poem about the death of Abraham Lincoln instead of the thousands of other romantic poems in the world. That was strike one for the boy in Héctor's book. If there was one thing he couldn't stand it was a person taking credit for others' works.

Ignacio's face paled as he realized he had been caught before puffing up with arrogance again. "Forgive me, Señor Rivera. I didn't know that some orphans could be so well read, especially in another country's literature. I guess Papi was right about you new money people. They always try to make up for what they lacked early on, and end up trying too hard."

Strike two. "Why don't you go back home to your Papi? His boots will be ready in two days, and make sure you send someone else to get them."
Ignacio bowed. "Of course, Señor Rivera. But don't count me out just yet! I will win your daughter's heart, and our families will become one. Mark my words." And with that he turned on his heel and left, not noticing the crude gesture Héctor made at him behind his back.

It took another five days before Coco managed to leave the house, although it was unwillingly. She had been making shoes almost nonstop, barely eating and sleeping, and when she did go to her room the soft sounds of crying could be heard from the other side. Héctor was tempted many times to either go in there and console his poor daughter or go over and drag Julio back to apologize, but Imelda held him back each time. However even she knew that Coco had to leave the house at some point. So she decided that the whole family would go out to lunch that day and then to the marketplace for some shopping.

Once again Coco barely ate anything at the café, giving half of her meal over to Matty, and she trailed sluggishly behind her mother at the marketplace stalls. She tried to block out the stares of the townspeople and whispers that she knew were being made about her behind her back. Imelda would hold up a new blouse against her chest or direct her attention to a pair of earrings and other jewelry, but Coco was slowly reaching the end of her tether. She couldn’t bear to be out in public anymore and was ready to bolt.

Just as she was about to announce her intention to leave, a voice started crying out from amongst the crowd. A high-pitched, desperate voice, pleading at whoever they were talking to. As it got closer the Riveras heard two more voices.

"Hermano! Please Julio, this is a very bad idea!"

"Mijo, stop! You are in no condition-"

"Get offa me, Papá! You too, Rosssita!" A voice slurred in agitation, and as the crowd parted Coco gasped at what she saw. Julio was making a beeline towards her, his eyes bleary and his face completely red, straining against the hold of both Facundo and Rosita. He stumbled to his knees and was hoisted up by his father, but he swatted at him clumsily to finally break their hold on him. "Gotta do this! Gotta make it right!"

"Héctor, stop him! He's drunk out of his mind!" Facundo pleaded.

Héctor stood in front of Coco and glared down at the drunken young man. "I think you better listen to your Papá, chamaco. After what you pulled the other day I don't think Coco wants to hear anything else you-"

Julio growled and pushed Héctor to the side, his usual timid and gentle nature replaced by liquid courage. "I ain't here to talk to you! Y-y-you chapulín!"

Héctor was shocked. "Ch-chapulín? What?!

"Coco Rivera!" Julio shouted as if he was on the other side of the plaza instead of just two feet away from her. "I am sorry for what I said to you!"

Coco hid behind her mother, not daring to look at Julio and trying not to cry as she glared down at the ground. She clutched at her mother's shoulders tightly and pressed her forehead against her back, biting her lip. Imelda winced a little as her daughter's fingers dug into her skin, but she too was glaring at Julio. This would normally send the boy into a mild panic attack, but his focus was only on Coco.

"I am sorry, and I am an idiot! You're not too tall! You're not even tall in the first place! You are
the most perfect girl in the whole world! It's m-me…" He clenched a fist onto his throbbing head and pulled at a tuft of short cropped hair. "I'm too damn short! Too short to be even considered a real man! But I don't care if I was only a centimeter tall, my feelings for you would be the same amount that could fill a giant's heart! I am so madly, helplessly in love with you Coco!"

Coco lessened her grip on her mother and gasped, the tense pressure around her heart finally lessening after almost a week. She peeked from over Imelda's shoulder to look at Julio, seeing how sad and defeated he looked. The same as she had felt.

Julio sniffed and scrubbed a hand over his watering eyes. "I've been in love with you since I was five years old, when you danced at the plaza. Your Papá was playing for Día de los Santos Reyes at the gazebo. You were wearing a ruffled dress covered in bows that your Mamá had made you, and it was blue and yellow and green. And you just twirled and giggled and danced to the music, and you looked like a little butterfly. Una querubín…"

"And I hoped to one day dance with you too. So I practiced all the time for years, even when I knew you didn't like me, so I wouldn't screw it up. When you finally asked me to dance at your quince años I thought it was a dream come true! That you finally loved me as much as I loved you! And these last three years have been such bliss, I never wanted it to end…"

Coco listened as Julio spoke those sweet words to her, the tears finally falling but a small smile gracing her face. Then her glare returned. "If that's true, then… why did you say those things? Why invite me out to dance and then break my heart?"

Julio winced. "I didn't ask you out to break up with you, not at first when I invited you… I was going to ask you to-"

"Oye!"

The crowd turned towards a new loud voice, several of them backing away in fear as Ignacio came storming towards Julio with two of his manservants marching behind him. He glared at Julio with disgust and hatred as he bore down on him. "What are you doing, carpenter? Socorro is dating me now! You were supposed to stay away from her!"

"I-I can't!" Julio cried out. "I tried but I'm dying without her! I'm-" his broken face turned into a glare. "I'm not afraid of you! You can't stop me from being with the woman I love!" He raised a fist and nearly connected it with a cowering Ignacio's jaw, but it was caught by one of the manservants and crushed backwards. As Julio cried out in pain, Ignacio pulled himself upright and punched Julio hard across the face, sending him flying into the plaza fountain.

Coco screamed as Imelda held her protectively against her. "Julio!"

"I tried to talk sensibly with you, amigo." Ignacio said as Julio came spluttering up from the water. "We both agreed that you are not suited for someone as regal as Socorro. Think of what midget children you would produce! A man is not supposed to be eye to eye with his wife, he's supposed to look down at her and hold her in his large embrace. Protect her from harm and shield her from trash, like you." He nodded at his manservants and rolled up his sleeves. "Hold him up."

"Eye to eye?"

Ignacio and his manservants paused on their descent towards poor Julio, turning to see Coco looking at him with a smoldering fire in her eyes. "You said eye to eye… And look down… It was you? You told Julio to say those awful things to me?"
Knowing that he was caught, Ignacio tried to save face and pulled a simpering look at Coco. "Socorro, mi amor. It was for the best. Surely, you can see-

**WHACK!**

In one swift move Coco had knelt down, slipped off her elegant, calfskin, steel toed boot and slapped Ignacio hard across the face, sending him spinning and tumbling to the ground. Héctor was shocked at the violence coming from his little girl, Matty was impressed, Rosita cried out in alarm, and Imelda pumped her fist in the air with pride.

"*How dare you*!!" Coco screeched. "I don't care if Julio was a plague-infested flea, he would still be a million times better than a snot-nosed, preening peacock like you, Nacho!" She put her boot back on and walked past the groaning Ignacio. "And no one calls me Socorro, pinche cabrón." To everyone's shock and amusement Coco crawled over the edge of the fountain and waded into the water next to Julio, where she placed her hand on his bruised cheek and softly smiled at him. "Julio…"

Julio stared dazedly back at her, before grinning himself and tracing his finger on her cheek. "Mi Coco…"

"*Pequeña puta!*"

Coco was snapped out of her happiness when an enraged Ignacio took her by the arm and pulled her towards him. She gasped in horror when she saw his nose, bloodied, bent and crooked as her boot had broken it into a new angle.

"Get away from her!" Julio yelled out as he stumbled, trying to get out of the water.

"Go ahead and wallow in his filth, you little whore!" Ignacio said nasally as gripped Coco's arm tighter, causing her to cry out in pain. "But I'll teach you not to mess with the Cavalleros!"

*Strike three.* "Oye, chamaco."

Ignacio whipped around at whoever was intruding on him and was met with Matty's fist whipping his face to one side, and then Héctor's fist sending him plummeting to the ground again. This time he did not get back up, knocked out cold as his nose bled profusely, and now bent at the **opposite** angle. The crowd cheered as one of the most reviled men in Santa Cecilia had finally met his match with its most revered family. The two manservants were frozen in fear as they looked down at their fallen charge, at a loss of what to do until Héctor cleared his throat at them.

"Why don't you two take your master back home? I'll pay for whatever damage was done to his face, don't worry. I doubt he'll ever breathe normally out of that nose again, though." Héctor rubbed his knuckles and nodded proudly at his son, who beamed right back. As the two brutes hefted up the unconscious fop Héctor held up a hand. "One more thing."

Héctor made his way over to Facundo and placed an arm around his shoulder. "You make sure to tell his grandpa that his little reign over the city is coming to a close." Then he addressed the surrounding crowd. "As of today I am offering my full support to my friend and neighbor, Facundo Magallanes, for his campaign as the next mayor of Santa Cecilia!"

The crowd cheered even more exuberantly this time, coming over to pat the astonished Facundo on the back and give them their promises of votes and their congratulations. The manservants used this opportunity to sneak away, dragging Ignacio away like a sack of potatoes.
Facundo looked up at Héctor with gratitude. "Gracias, mi amigo! I promise I won't let you or the townspeople down!"

"No problema, Facundo." Héctor said. "And just so we're clear, you always had my support, even with our children fighting."

"Sí." Facundo nodded and turned glistening eyes at the fountain. "Looks like I not only gained a campaign sponsor, but also a new daughter."

"Eh? What are you?- Oh! Ew! C'mon!" Héctor retched in disgust as he saw his daughter back in the fountain with Julio, their fingers entwined in each other's hair and sloppily kissing for the entire world to see.

Rosita was standing next to the fountain, clutching and smothering an irritated Matty against her bosom as she sobbed with happiness at her brother and best friend. "You two are such idiots!" she wailed. "I love you both so much!"

"All right you two, break it up!" Héctor said as he splashed water onto the two lovebirds. "No one wants to see that!"
Coco unlocked her lips from Julio's, grinning at him as she got up and pulled him along. "Come on, mi amor. Let's go."

Julio nodded dreamily back at her. "Sí… Let's go."

"And where exactly are you two going?" Imelda finally said, her arms crossed and looking at them sternly. This time Julio had enough sense in him to fear her like usual.

"The church." Coco said as Julio hung onto her shoulder. "We're getting married."

"Getting’… marrrrried…" Julio slurred happily.

"I think not!" Imelda glared at the two. "No daughter of mine is getting married fully drenched to a man who is drunker than a skunk. No, we need to plan this out. There's the food, and the guest list, the cake, and you are going to wear the most beautiful dress in all of Mexico! But I'll need a few days to make all of this work."

"B-but Mamá!" Coco said as she glanced at her drooling fiancée worriedly. "What if he changes his mind again?"

Imelda smiled. "He won't mija, trust me. Now why don't you drag him over to that café and get some coffee into him. I want to see him ask you properly and sober." She watched as the two slowly made their way to the café and turned to Héctor smugly. "What did I tell you, mi amor? Everything went according to plan."

Héctor rolled his eyes. "Imelda, I had to punch a kid. Was that part of your plan?"

Imelda inspected his knuckles. "You're fine. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go plan the wedding I've been dreaming of for the last eighteen years!" She giggled in delight as she took Rosita and Facundo with her, already talking about the wedding party and what they would wear.

Héctor looked at his wife's retreating figure and shook his head, once again bewildered and amazed by her. Matty came up to him and sighed. "This family really is loco, isn't it Papá?"

"Hmm… Maybe just un Poco Loco?" He grinned at Matty, expecting him to laugh, only to be disappointed when the boy rolled his eyes and left his father by himself. "Hey, that was funny! Hey!"

Chapter End Notes

Héctor and Matty are just so done in that picture. They basically represent my entire mood for the past month. -.-
"Mamá, I'm… I'm scared."

Imelda and Rosita looked up from the embroidery they were working on to Coco, who was standing on a table getting fitted for her dress. It was a lovely snow white dress with red flowers and green leaves all across the bottom, and long lace sleeves currently being worked on by the town seamstress, Ceci. At first Coco had been thrilled when it was time to make her dress, but now that the big day was tomorrow her fears and doubts were beginning to make themselves known. Several times already Ceci had told Coco to stop shaking like a leaf, but it looked like the poor girl had finally reached her breaking point.

"Whatever for, mija?" Imelda asked as she worked on a large flower on the skirt. "This is the day you've been waiting for years to happen. You were excited just a few hours ago! If you're worried about the ceremony tomorrow, don't be. All the townswomen are cooking up a storm right now, your Papá has got an excellent band to play at the reception, and Padre Antonio can do wedding ceremonies in his sleep."

"It's not about the wedding, Mamá." Coco said shyly, her face starting to turn red. "It's about… after. You know… with Julio."

"Aah…" Imelda smiled in understanding.

It took Rosita a few seconds to get what Coco was saying, but when she did she gasped and dropped her needle in shock. Ceci merely raised an eyebrow and looked at Imelda. "Should we leave the room for this?"

Imelda shook her head. "No there's no need. Coco, as your wedding sponsor it is my job to guide and advise you in all matters of wedded life, including your first time with a man. Rosita you may stay as well, you should know this too for when you get married." Rosita looked mortified at this, but she nodded her head. "And Ceci, what I'm about to say wouldn't phase you in the slightest." Ceci smirked and went back to her sewing.

"Coco, tell me, what do you know about intercourse with a man?" Imelda asked.

Coco blushed even harder and mumbled out, "Well… I've heard that it hurts a lot. And that I'd have to just let it happen if I ever want to have children. That's what a few of my friends have said."

"Sí, but they didn't marry Julio." Imelda held Coco's hand and looked her in the eyes. "Julio is not some gruff caveman who will take you any time he wants. I can tell that you are going to marry a fine young man, because I can see a lot of your father in him. Both are sweet and gentle people who listen to the ones they love."

"I hate asking this but… what was your first time like with Papá?" Coco asked.

"Terrifying, for both of us." Imelda clarified when Coco's eyes widened. "We were both so in love but we didn't know what we were doing, or even how to start. So here's your lesson on lovemaking, Coco: Take things slow. Learn what each other likes and dislikes, be gentle with each other, experiment. Trust me, Julio will be just as nervous as you are. And yes, mija, it did hurt at first. It always does, but that pain is fleeting and soon it will start to feel good, I promise."
Coco released a shaky breath and nodded in gratitude. "Okay, nice and slow. Got it. Gracias, Mamá."

Imelda patted Coco's cheek. "Just remember your first time could lead to a baby in your near future, so be prepared. That's how we got you after all."

Coco smiled. "Aww, I was a wedding night baby?"

"No mija, you were the reason we had to get married."

"What?! OW!" Coco jerked her arm away when she was stabbed with a needle. "Ceci!"

"I told you to stop moving." Ceci said. "Now enough talking, ladies. We have to get this dress done by the end of tonight. Julio is going to be floored when he sees you walking down the aisle, and all of the townsfolk will see the masterpiece of Cecilia from Santa Cecilia!"

Héctor sat on the other side of the room playing absentmindedly on his guitar as he stared at Julio and Facundo getting dressed for the wedding. Julio was wearing a traditional wedding shirt with embroidered green and red beads and crisp black slacks. The poor boy was sweating up a storm and his father was patting his forehead with a towel to mop it up so it wouldn't stain his clothing.

Julio had his eyes closed as he practiced his lines. "I g-give these thirteen coins... to you, my wife Socorro. N-no, that's not right. I give these thirteen coins to you, my wife... Coco? Papá, should I say Socorro or Coco?"

"Just say what comes naturally to you mijo, you'll be fine. And stop sweating, for crying out loud! This is supposed to be the happiest day of your life!" Facundo stood Julio out in front of him and he gave a watery smile. "Look at you, mi niño pequeño. You look so handsome Julio! I just wish your Mamá was here to see this."

"Papá?" Julio said. "Coco and I decided that if our first child is a girl then... then we would name her after Mamá."

Héctor immediately stopped playing at the word child and glanced up at Julio. This boy was about to marry his daughter, he was fine with that. But after? Ay Dios mio! He hadn't even thought about that! This man was going to have intercourse with his baby Coco! The thought made him violently gag and he slapped a hand over his mouth. Thankfully the other two men in the room didn't seem to notice.

"Ay, chico precioso!" Facundo cried and grabbed his son into a crushing hug. Julio broke free to smooth out his shirt as Facundo cried to the heavens. "Did you hear that, Vicky?! Your name will live on through our future granddaughter! Oh, I've got to tell Rosita, she'll be so thrilled!" And with that he raced out of the room and left Julio alone with his future father-in-law.

The fact made itself known instantly when Julio nervously looked over at Héctor, who for his part just smiled sweetly back at the boy. Then he started to play again on his guitar, a soft lilting melody that wove through the air and soothed Julio's beating heart. Slowly he began to relax and just listened to the music, bobbing his head and closing his eyes. He always did enjoy Héctor's music, heck all of Mexico did. But it was an honor to get to hear his unpolished works that could be potential hits in the future.

"Do you like this song, miojito?" Héctor asked as he continued to play. "You don't mind if I call you miojito, do you?"
Julio's eyes opened and he grinned. "No, please do if you wish. And yes, I always like your songs… Papá Héctor."

"Ah, Papá Héctor. I like that!" Héctor continued to flutter his fingers over the strings to bring forth more beautiful notes. "You know why this song is pleasing to the ears, why all good songs are?" At Julio's head shake he continued, "It's because it's played gently and lovingly. When you softly brush the strings just right, and provide the right amount of pressure on the frets like so, you can make beautiful music mijo."

"See, I like to think of women as I do guitars. Just like guitars you can bring forth beautiful music from them as well. A happy guitar is a happy woman. But only when you are soft and gentle with them like this." He finished the little song with a gentle flourish and Julio nodded in agreement. "Now tell me Julio, which do you prefer: That song… or this one?"

TWANG!

CLANG!

BANG!

SNAP!

Héctor violently strummed the strings with such force that Julio jumped back against the wall, terrified and clutching at his ears. On the fourth assault on the poor strings three of them snapped in two and hung lifeless in shredded curls. As the horrible clash of butchered notes ended and the echoes of the nightmarish songs faded away Julio slowly dropped his hands down and stared at Héctor with a newfound fear and respect.

Héctor glanced at the three loose strings and shrugged. "Eh, I needed to restring it anyway. But I ask you again chamaco: Which song do you prefer?"

"Th-the first one! The first one!" Julio squeaked out.

"Excellente! You have good taste in music!" Héctor placed the guitar down and headed towards Julio. "Just remember what I said, treat your woman like a guitar if you want her to be happy. Show her love. Treasure her. Just don't ever let me see Coco with her strings broken, okay mijo?"

"Yes, Papá Héctor! I promise I will be gentle with her! In… all aspects." Julio whimpered out. "I never want to hurt her again. I'd rather die before I ever do that."

Héctor's shoulders relaxed and he wrapped an arm around Julio. "Aw, I know you're a good kid, Julio. It's just that Coco's my daughter, and… this is hard for me too. Especially since this is the only time I'll ever see my daughter… get married."

The mood turned from tense to somber and Julio patted Héctor on the shoulder in sympathy. "I know… And I should explain… We decided our daughter will be named Victoria Leticia."

Héctor sniffed and rubbed at his eyes before smiling down at Julio. It was true, the only thing that would have made this day more special is if Leti was with them now, getting dolled up with her sister and on the verge of becoming a woman herself.

"Gracias, mio… Ah, look at the time!" Héctor exclaimed as he looked at the clock. "Wipe that sweat off your brow, straighten your shirt out and look alive, because it's showtime, chamaco!"
The ceremony was a long, but beautiful affair. On Julio's side was Facundo and Matty, with Facundo wiping at the tears coming down his face as well as the sweat on his bald head with a handkerchief. On Coco's side was Rosita by herself except in her hands was the glamour shot of Leti. Julio had gasped and smiled when he first saw Coco walking down the aisle with Héctor and Imelda by her side, and she blushed and batted her eyelashes back at him.

Héctor placed Coco's hand in Julio's and then he and Imelda took a seat on the first row. When Imelda looked over she wasn't surprised to see a tear streak down Héctor's face and handed him a handkerchief. "Basta, this is a happy occasion, Héctor."

"I know diosa." Héctor said shakily as he dabbed at his face. "That's why I'm crying."

The ceremony concluded with Padre Antonio announcing Julio and Coco as man and wife. Julio gave a chaste kiss on Coco's lips, both of them physically holding themselves back from the rapturous kiss they wanted to plant on each other. Then they walked down the aisle hand in hand as the townsfolk cheered and gave their blessings as they passed. Now that the formalities were done with, it was time to get the party started!

Tables were filled with an assortment of foods and snacks for all to enjoy, as well as a table solely for numerous bottles of alcohol. One bottle had been from Señor Cavallero to honor the bride and groom, which was then promptly used to water the flowers growing near the dumpster. As everyone was seated and eating Héctor came up to the makeshift stage and started to clink his glass.

"Disculpe, señors y señoras. May I have everyone's attention, please?" With all eyes on him Héctor cleared his throat. "I would like to thank you all for coming to my daughter's wedding. This is a very happy occasion for our family, especially after the great loss that we suffered not so long ago. So we would like to take a moment to honor two women who mean the world to our families, but unfortunately could not be with us today. First of all to the mother of the groom, Victoria. You have a fine son señora, and I trust him with my daughter wholeheartedly. You should be proud."

The crowd politely applauded and Héctor continued. "And second, to the sister of the bride, and my youngest daughter, Leticia… Leti, our hearts ache every day for you, but always know that you inspire us to live our lives to the fullest. We love you, mija!" The crowd applauded again, Matty the loudest, and Héctor smiled. "And now, without further ado, here's the newly married couple!"

From behind the stage Julio and Coco raced out onto the dance floor, both of their hair a little messed up and Julio with lipstick smeared on his face. The crowd laughed at them and Coco nervously tried to wipe the lipstick off of him with her thumb but only managed it to smear it further.

"Someone get him a towel, por favor." Héctor joked, earning him a big laugh. "And now, to play the first song for the lovely couple, straight from Veracruz, it's Los Chacalacos!" He left the stage and a group of purple suited performers came from behind the curtain, all of them bouncing with glee at the privilege to perform at Héctor Rivera's daughter's wedding! Instead of their usual bombastic playing, however, they started off with a slow waltz that they had been practicing for days, and it was beautiful.

Julio guided Coco in the waltz masterfully, both of them gliding across the dance floor to the music, mesmerizing the audience and making their parents beam with pride. Privately they conversed amongst themselves.

"You are such a good dancer, señor." Coco playfully said.
Julio chuckled. "Years of practice, mi amor." Julio twirled Coco around before pulling her back to him. "I love your hair, by the way."

"Don't get used to it. It was a pain to do. I don't know how Mamá does it every day." Coco said. "What about the ribbons?"

"Oh, they're lovely too. Yellow, blue and... green." Julio's eyes widened. "Hey! Are those? -"

"The very same ribbons from my Santos Reyes dress. Mamá found it in an old chest. The dress I was wearing when you fell in love with me." Coco smiled lovingly at Julio. "Five years old, huh?"

"Well I didn't realize it was love at the time, I just thought 'I want to dance with that cute little girl too!' I soon figured out what it was eventually." Julio said.

Coco's smile faded and she looked at Julio guiltily. "Still, all that time... I'm sorry I didn't fall for you sooner than I did."

"Ay, mi Coco. Any man would tell you that you are most certainly worth the wait!" Both of them laughed at that and continued to twirl and dance to the music, lost in each other's eyes and happier than they had ever been.
The party continued long into the night, alcohol flowing like water down the newlyweds throats until both of the passed out into drunken stupors, flopped haphazardly onto the bed on their first night in the same bedroom. Both of them had to be dragged out and dressed appropriately for the midmorning brunch that followed, and then had to greet every well-wisher with pounding headaches.

Suddenly a bright red car drove up to the Rivera house and a teenage driver stepped out of it. He walked up to Héctor and tapped his shoulder. "Señor Rivera, I have a message addressed to your daughter."

"Ey?" Héctor looked down at the note in the young man's hand and immediately recognized the handwriting. "Oh no…"

"What is it Papá?" Coco asked as she walked up with Julio by her side. Héctor simply shook his head and pointed at the note for her to take. "Oh, it's from Tio Nesto!" At the mention of Ernesto's name several guests gasped in shock and crowded around the couple as Coco ripped open the letter and read it aloud.

*My Dearest Coco,*

*I would like to give my deepest congratulations to you on your wedding day. I hope you had a wonderful ceremony and that it was everything that you had dreamed of and more.*

*As much as I wished to have been there to see you, I did not want to detract any attention from you or your groom, being as huge a celebrity as I am. This was your day niña, and you deserved the spotlight for a change.*

*Still I did not want to leave you with nothing, so I present to you a wedding gift: Straight from Germany, a cherry red BMW 326, complete with four doors and a state of the art braking system. It's high time you start living like the princess you truly are!*

*Happy Driving!*

*Your Godfather and honorary Tio, Ernesto de la Cruz*

Coco and Julio gaped at each other, then the car outside, then each other again. Finally both of them let out the loudest gritos any of them had ever made and charged straight for the car. The other guests crowded around them as Julio hopped into the driver seat with Coco next to him. Oscar and Felipe raced to the front of the car with their cameras and snapped pictures of the beaming couple as Julio mimicked driving while Coco hung out the side window.

"Do either of them even know how to drive?" Imelda asked tiredly as she stood next to Héctor.

Héctor shrugged. "I guess they'll learn." He felt a tug on his shirt and saw that it was the teenage messenger asking for his attention.

"Can I get a ride back to the train station?"

Julio groaned and rolled off of Coco, both of them slick with sweat and panting heavily. That was it. They had actually done it. They had started off both shaking with fright, blushing horribly as each new bit of skin was exposed, and fumbling as they groped at places they had never dared touch before. But they took their time, made sure they told one another what was good and what was not so good, and in the end it worked out.
There was pain on Coco's part, but the knowledge that this was normal made her able to endure it long enough for the pain to meld into pleasure. And what pleasure it was! Never before had she felt such a building tension that left her groaning and asking for more, until in crashing waves she reached her peak and was left breathless and sated. Then it was over, and both of them finally felt connected as man and wife.

Julio turned towards her with worried eyes. "Coco… are you alright?" Coco nodded as she stared up at the ceiling with glazed eyes, then to his surprise she slapped a hand over her mouth and started giggling like mad. Julio smiled in confusion. He was glad he hadn't hurt her, but giggling? "What's so funny?"

Coco gasped through her laughing. "Those… Those weren't gritos! Ah ha ha ha!"

It took several moments for her to calm down, but at Julio's questioning Coco told him the story of the night her Papá had come home for good, and the song he and Mamá made that she never got to hear again.

Chapter End Notes

And did Coco confront her parents with that piece of newfound, embarrassing knowledge the next day?

No, of course not!

She saved that juicy tidbit for a rainy day. >:D
Despite Imelda’s words of caution and Coco’s own anticipation of it, a baby was not made on her and Julio’s wedding night. Nor the month after that. Nor the year after that. When it was approaching their second wedding anniversary, Coco finally came to her parents in tears. She was desperate for a child and terrified that there was something wrong with her, or Julio, or both of them. It was time to ask her family for help. She would soon come to regret it, as now her parents, Rosita and Facundo had taken it upon themselves to aid them in their fertility, and it was driving them crazy!

“Drink Coco, drink!” Imelda said as she tipped the tea cup into her daughter’s mouth, the poor girl nearly gagging on the tea inside. It wasn’t that bad actually. The raspberry tea leaves were actually very pleasant and herbal, brewed a little strongly but the honey added a nice sweetness to it. However having consumed about three pots of it in one day Coco had gone way past her limit and was starting to retch at the thought of even one more drop touching her tongue.

“Mamá, I can’t drink anymore!” Coco hiccupped. “My stomach hurts, this stuff is starting to taste terrible, and I’ve gone to the bathroom six times in two hours. Surely this is enough for now?”

“All right Coco, no more tea. Just take a spoonful of this.” Imelda said as she held up a spoon full of a mystery liquid. As Coco opened her mouth to question what it was Imelda shoved the spoon inside and then clamped a hand over her mouth as Coco thrashed around. “Swallow it, mija. It’ll just be worse if you keep it in your mouth for too long.” When Coco finally swallowed Imelda patted her on the back. “Good girl, Coco.”

“What…*hack*… What was that?!” Coco cried as she wiped her tongue off with her sleeve.

“Fish oil.” Imelda said matter-of-factly. “And don’t give me that look, this stuff works miracles. You’ll be taking a spoonful ever hour on the hour until you are pregnant.”

“Mamá, this is insane!” Coco stood up and paced the room in agitation. “It shouldn’t be this hard to have a baby! It was so easy for you and Papá, why isn’t it for me?!”

“Oh Coco…” Imelda hugged her daughter close and kissed her forehead. “I know that you’re frustrated and upset, but it is different for every couple when it comes to conceiving. It might happen tonight, years from now, or not at all. But I don’t want you to think that your life will be incomplete just because you can’t have children. You have the rest of your family here with you, and Julio who loves you with all his heart. You have plenty to be thankful for.”

“I know, but… I’m just so ready to become a Mamá.” Coco sniffled and leaned into her mother’s hold. “I want a baby.”

“Well if that’s the case, all you and Julio can do is keep trying.” Imelda said. “And take your fish oil as well.”

As Coco groaned at the thought of that disgusting liquid, Rosita came in with a pot of boiling water and herbs. “Okay, Mamá Imelda. It’s ready!”

“Ugh!” Coco recoiled at the stench and glared at Imelda. “Mamá, I am not going to drink that!”
“This isn’t for drinking, mija.” Imelda said. “Rosita place the pot on the floor please. Oh, with a placemat, I don’t want it to leave a mark on the floor.” Once Rosita had done that Imelda turned to her confused daughter. “Alright Coco, take off your underwear and stand over the pot. Let your dress form a tent and make sure that your skin doesn’t touch the metal.”

Coco stared at Imelda, then the pot, then Rosita, then Imelda again. “… What?”

“It’s a steam bath for your… nether regions.” Rosita said with nervous grin and a deep blush.

“The medicinal herbs will bathe your insides and make you more receptive to your husband. Now hurry up while it’s still steaming!” Imelda smiled as Coco took off her underwear in complete humiliation and straddled the pot. Then she eyed the unfinished raspberry tea and helped herself to a cup. *It would be a shame to let it go to waste, after all.*

Julio panted with exertion as he kicked a fútbol around the obstacle course that Matty had set up for him in the Rivera courtyard. Being the most well read in science Matty informed the other men in the group that healthy exercise was important for a man in order to boost his natural potency. So for the last few days Julio had jogged around town with Matty, had gone swimming upstream at the creek, had climbed up the jagged rock formations in the woods, and played fetch with Dante for hours. Now the poor dog lay collapsed in exhaustion, dully watching Julio kick the ball all over. Julio glared at the dog in envy. *Why did he get to rest?*

“Okay, stop!” Matty came over and handed Julio a huge glass of water. It was the only drink that Julio had consumed for days. How he had longed for a shot of tequila but Matty was adamant that he only drink water until his sister was pregnant. “Down this and we’ll take a break. It’s almost lunchtime anyway.”

“Lunch?” Julio moaned. “But I’m still full from breakfast!”

Julio was partly grateful for the exercise that Matty was forcing him to partake in, because without it he was sure that he would look like a balloon from all the food he was being given by Héctor and Facundo. And not just any food: Meat. All different types of meat. Chicken, sausages, beef, pork, fish, even lobsters that Héctor had shipped in from the coast. Never did Julio wish for a simple vegetable or a spoonful of rice so badly in his life.

“Meat makes a man strong!” Facundo had told him when Julio was moaning over his third plate of chorizo that morning. “Not only in daily activities but in the bedroom as well! One time I was in a barbacoa eating contest, mijo, and I won after eating twelve servings of this stuff! I won fifty pesos and that blue ribbon that still hangs above our mantle with pride. And that night, your mother and I were so excited about the win that we celebrated long and hard into the night. Nine months later your baby sister was born!”

Julio gagged. “Please… don’t talk about that while I’m eating.”

Sure enough Héctor and Facundo came over to them with steaming hot plates of meat and placed it on the table in front of Julio. He moaned at all the greasy products before him until he spotted something he had never seen before. “Papá Héctor… are those rocks?”

“Ah, no Julio, these are oysters!” Héctor said excitedly as he picked one up. “These things are not only tasty mijo, but they are also known as the ultimateaphrodisiac! Mira.” He took a knife and stuck it into the seam of the oyster, wiggling it until he was able to pry it open. Inside was what
Julio could only describe as congealed mucus that had rotted into a deathly gray pallor. “Just spritz it a little with some lemon juice, and then…” He brought the shell to his lips and noisily slurped up the disgusting blob and then chewed and swirled it around his mouth. “Mmm. Delicioso! Okay, now you try it.”

“No!” Julio jumped up from the table and backed away from his meddlesome family. “No, I draw the line at eating sea snot, Papá Héctor! Besides, I don’t have any need of an aphrodisiac. I do fine on my own.”

“Ah ah ah! Are you abstaining like we told you to, chamaco?” Héctor pointed at him with a glare. “You know you need to build up what you have, not waste every little bit on private times!”

“Think of yourself like a well, mio.” Facundo added. “The more storm water that comes in, the more you have to, uh… water your crops. Heh heh.”

Julio’s face reddened with embarrassment and he sagged in exhaustion. “Look I appreciate what you are all trying to do to help, but I am full to bursting and I feel like I need to go lie down for a year. So please can I take a little break?”

Thankfully Matty took sympathy on his brother-in-law. “Actually I think a nap is exactly what you need right now. Sleep is very important for the body when it comes to fertility.” Julio sighed in relief, nodded his thanks and turned to leave. “But when you wake up we’re going to do some uphill sprinting and then some more rock climbing!” Julio groaned and hung his head low as he made his way to the bedroom.

The three of them stayed at the table and decided to eat what Julio couldn’t finish, with Matty tossing pieces of sausages to Dante as the dog flipped happily in the air to catch the treats. Héctor polished off the whole tray of oysters himself. After all, I paid for them, and it would be a shame to let them go to waste.

That night Coco and Julio marched into their bedroom and immediately started to take their clothes off with grim determination and desperation.

“This is it, mi amor!” Coco said as she ripped off her blouse and flung it across the room.

“We are going to make a baby tonight!” Julio said as his suspenders nearly snapped in two at his frenzied attempt to pull down his pants.

“It has to be tonight!” Coco shoved Julio onto the bed and crawled on top of him. “Because I can’t take any more of this!”

Julio nodded. “I know they all mean well, but-” Coco smashed her lips against his, kissing long and hard to get their blood boiling. When they broke apart the cried out in unison:

“They are trying to kill us!”

It was another month and a half of enduring gallons of tea and meat, exhausting exercises and steam baths before one day Coco and Julio came running into the shoe workshop in euphoric elation.
“Mamá! Papá!” Coco yelled at the top of her lungs. Héctor jerked awake from his midday doze in the courtyard while Matty and Imelda looked up from their shoe orders. The entire work staff stopped to also look at the exuberant couple. “Mamá, it worked! It finally worked. All that disgusting tea and oil and meat finally worked! We just got back from the doctor’s, and… I’m with child!”

“Eso!” Héctor ran into the room and grabbed Coco in tight hug, twirling her around as she laughed. “I’m so happy for you, mija!” Matty came over to hug his sister tightly as well, and the entire staff applauded at the happy couple. “I told you that all that stuff would work! This calls for a celebration! A celebratory feast to honor my new grandchild!”

“Gracias, Papá Héctor!” Julio said. “Just make sure that there’s plenty of vegetables and tequila on the menu!”

Héctor laughed and patted Julio heartily on the back, and while he was already discussing refurbishing their house for a nursery, no one noticed Imelda standing against the back wall in a daze, trying valiantly to hold back tears.

“I’m glad that Coco and Julio are finally having a baby, but…” Héctor pondered while looking at himself in the bedroom mirror. “I think we’re just too young to be grandparents.”

Imelda looked up from the baby blanket she had been knitting while she sat in the bed. “Why do you think that?”

“Well, when I think of grandpas I think of hunched over viejos with knobby canes, who yell at children when they pass by them for being too loud, have gout and are just plain crabby. But look at us, were in the prime of our lives!” Héctor ran a finger over his silver temples and then lifted up a few crow’s feet to smooth them out. “Okay, yes, we are a little bit more wrinkled, and my knees hurt when it rains, so does your back. But I still think we’re quite the catch.”

Imelda sighed and put her knitting down, frowning deeply. “Héctor-”

“I guess we’re going to have to start acting the parts though, eh diosa?” Héctor grinned. “We are not as young as we used to be, and it’s only going to get worse from here on out. Heh, maybe I’ll install a bar above the bathtub, and we can start eating high fiber breakfasts with prune juice. We can’t even act young anymore, not with the baby coming. No, it’s time we started to act like true, elderly patriarchs of the family. I will be lovable old grandpa who always gives those nasty hard candies out to the kiddies, and you’ll be the stern, matronly grandma who is always baking pies and cakes for no reason. And we’ll pass down all of our old stories from ancient times-”

It was at that moment when Imelda finally couldn’t stand it anymore and she broke down into heartwrenching tears. She flung the knitting against the wall and collapsed onto her side as sobs wracked her body. Héctor whipped around and gaped at his wife as she cried like she hadn’t done since their daughter died, and he jumped onto the bed and rubbed her shoulders soothingly.

“Imelda!” Héctor called out as he tried to pry her hands away from her face. “Imelda, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. You are not old, Imelda!”

“Yes I am!” Imelda sobbed and collapsed against the bed again, burying her face into the sheets. “I’m too damn old!”

Héctor shook his head firmly. “No, you are not! You are still the vibrant, beautiful girl I fell in love
with at the creek all those years- *Uh*, I mean a few years ago. Not long ago. Could have been yesterday, that’s how long ago it feels! Imelda please stop crying…”

“Oh, Héctor! It’s true! I *am* too old! Too old to be doing this!” Imelda cried.

Héctor was confused. “Too old to become a grandmother? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Imelda shook her head bitterly. “No, idiota! I’ve been trying to tell you for days but I’ve been too scared to tell you that… I’m pregnant!”

Héctor felt all of the air crush itself out of his lungs as he stumbled off the bed and tumbled to the floor. He lay there, simply starting at the ceiling for who knew how long. It must have been a while because he suddenly found himself sitting up with his back against the bed with Imelda lightly slapping at his face. His reflexes were still too slow and muddied to register that Imelda had grabbed a glass of water until he felt a splash of cold hit his face and tried to cough and sneeze droplets out of his nose. With a gasp he finally started to breathe normally and Imelda sighed with relief.

“Héctor, are you alright?” Imelda asked. “You scared me!”

“I s-s-scared you?!” Héctor choked out and brought a hand to his forehead. “What?! How?! When did this happen Imelda?! We’ve been so careful until now!”

Imelda sniffed and helped Héctor stand shakily to his feet. “It had to have been that last time over a month ago. You know, after we had set up the kids for their own date, and sort of… helped ourselves to their fertility treatments…”

*Imelda sighed as she looked out the window to where Coco and Julio lived across the street. Now that Facundo had become mayor of Santa Cecilia, Julio had been left in charge of the carpenter shop and had taken Coco with him to his house. Of course Héctor had expanded upon it so that the two of them would have some luxury for themselves in their first home together, but it was still away from the shoe shop, and a part of Imelda was glad at that. Shoe making wasn’t a passion for Coco like it was for Imelda, her brothers and Matty, and she was happy that Coco had the luxury of choosing her own path in life. Right now the first step in her chosen path was to become a mother, and Imelda hoped that all of their home remedies would end up doing the trick.*

“You know you’d think I’d be exhausted from running in the woods all day with Matty and Julio, but I’m not.” Héctor said as he sat on their bed. “I’m actually a little pumped up! All that exercise and fresh air really does a body good.”

“Mmm.” Imelda hummed as she sipped at more of the raspberry tea. This stuff was good, she didn’t care what Coco said.

"I think I’m a little too wired though." Héctor said as he pulled off his shirt. “I don’t know how I’m going to sleep tonight.“ As he reached into his drawer for a pajama top he paused and let a blush creep across his cheeks when a thought crossed his mind. Then he let a slow, sultry smile cross his lips as he glanced over at Imelda standing by the window. “What to do, what to do…”

“Well, we should still have some sleeping tonic left in the bathroom. Or you should try this tea, it’s very soothing. I can get you a cup-ah!” Imelda gasped as she felt strong warm arms wrap around her waist and a pointy chin coming to rest on her head. Then those big, calloused hands collected the tea cup from her hands and placed it along the window sill. “What are you doing Héctor?”
“Oh nothing.” Héctor said into her hair, inhaling the scent deeply. “Just giving my lovely wife a hug.” He swayed with her in his arms and hummed against her ear. “Ay Imelda, you smell so good.”

“C-Coco and I were trying out different fragrances at the marketplace today.” Imelda said. “Ones that were supposed to lighten the mood in the bedroom. Mostly lavender, cinnamon and… vanilla.”

“Well it’s working on me, diosa…” Héctor gently turned her towards him and let her hungrily gaze at his bare chest. “You know, it’s been a while since you and I had some alone time. And Matty is over at Barto’s tonight for a study session…”

It wasn’t that true. It had been only a week since Imelda and he had last made love, but the prospect of being totally alone in the house for once and both of them quickly getting into the mood was growing too much for either of them to bear. Without warning Imelda jumped up into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist, planting such a hug kiss on him that he reared back and fell onto the bed. Both of them giggled and felt like teenagers again, and spent the whole night filled with passionate ecstasy.
“Oooohhhh…” Héctor paled as he remembered that wonderful night. He sat down on the bed in a slump and stared out dazedly, absolutely dumbstruck about what was happening. He was going to be a Papá again. And a grandpa. At the same time. *Ay Dios mio… Those damn oysters!*

“Héctor, I’m scared.” Imelda whimpered. The distress in his wife’s voice broke him out of his own thoughts and he looked over at Imelda. “I’m thirty-nine years old, Héctor. When this baby is born I’ll be forty. Women my age should not be having babies. What if something terrible happens to it? Dios, I already love it so much, Héctor. I can’t… I can’t lose another child. I just can’t!” She brokenly wept into her hands at the thought, shuddering in fear and curling in on herself.

Héctor pulled her into his embrace and held her close as she sobbed. “It’s okay, Imelda. It’ll be alright. I won’t let anything happen to you or the baby. Cálmese, mi amor. I’m here. Shhhh…”

He pressed a hand gently to Imelda’s stomach and sighed deeply. When the shock had finally passed Héctor realized that he felt the same as Imelda. He already loved this baby with all of his heart and he would do all in his power to protect it from harm. He had to. He couldn’t bear to lose another child either.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't drawn a nice, happy smiling Héctor in a while. Pobrecito, he deserves to smile more.
The next morning Héctor and Imelda had sat Coco, Matty and Julio down on the couch and, after much hemming and hawing in the next room, finally made their way in to sit across from them. Any little confidence they felt was immediately lost at the three pairs of eyes boring into them, and an awkward silence hung in the air for a few minutes. It was Matty who managed to break the uncomfortableness.

“If you two are just going to sit there sweating, I’m going to go study for my English test.” Matty said in a bored tone.

Héctor jumped up. “No! No, we’re sorry. We’ll talk.” When Matty sat back down Héctor took a deep breath and smiled widely. “So… How are all of you doing this morning?”

Julio and Matty looked confused before they both mumbled out that they were doing fine. Coco spoke up, “Actually, I am a little nauseous this morning. But I guess that’s one of the drawbacks to having a baby.”

“Ah yes, the baby!” Héctor smiled even more unnaturally wide, with Imelda mimicking him. “Yes… Baby, baby, baby… Congratulations for your baby, again. Having a baby is truly wonderful, baby. Baby girl, baby boy, who cares? As long as the baby is healthy and the baby is happy, then the baby can just be a baby in the only baby way a baby can be.”

“Papá, if you say baby one more time I’ll get Coco to puke on you.”

“What your father is trying to say,” Imelda interjected. “Is that we are just very excited about your baby, Coco. After you tried so hard to get one, and now your dream is coming true… But you know is better than one baby? Two babies!”

“You mean like twins?” Coco asked, looking at Matty with concern. Sure enough the teen’s face darkened at that thought, so it was time to change course.

“No, not exactly, mija.” Imelda said. “Though I would say, another different baby from a different mother. Who would be born around the same time as your little one. Two babies who would grow up close to one another…”

“Oh, you mean the Herrera’s?” Julio asked. “Sí, they came into the shop yesterday and told me that they were also expecting. Looks like I’ll be building two new luxury cribs these next few months.”

“Or three?” Héctor shrugged. “Three would be nice. Especially if this baby was really, really close to our family… As in blood related… As in being your baby’s tio or tia.”

There was a few seconds pause before Matty shot up with a gasp and glared down at them. “No mames! Mamá, you’re… You’re having a baby too?!?”

“Mateo, watch your language!” Imelda snapped. “And… yes. Yes I am.”

“No mames! No mames!” Matty strode out of the living room and marched across the courtyard to his bedroom. Everyone jerked as the door was slammed shut, leaving them all in silence again. Coco and Julio stared at them with wide eyes and mouths agape before Coco managed to snap out
of it. She leapt from the sofa and knelt down in front of her mother, gingerly holding her hand.

“I can’t believe it! Mamá… are you sure?”

Imelda nodded. “I missed my monthly and I’ve been feeling sick and tired as well, so I went to the doctor a few days ago just to make sure. And the tests confirmed it.”

“Oh Mamá.” Coco stood up and hugged Imelda tightly, and some of the tension melted from Imelda’s shoulders. “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

“I’m okay for now, thank you Coco.” Imelda sighed. “I just want you to know that this was not planned. I would never have dreamed of trying to take this excitement away from you—”

“Don’t think that, Mamá. I don’t care about that! I just want you and I to be healthy. Besides,” Coco smiled, “It might be fun, the two of us being pregnant together. We can help each other out, eat a bunch of food together, and make sure we’re wearing the right shoes on our feet.” Imelda broke down into happy tears and hugged her daughter back, and soon Coco was crying as well.

Julio stood up and made his way over to Héctor, patting him on the back. “Congratulations, Papá Héctor. Looks like you and I are in for quite the ride.”

“Sí…” Héctor said, glaring out the window to Matty’s bedroom. “If you all will excuse me, I have to go talk to my son.” He left the three of them and marched across the courtyard, and as he got closer he could hear the sound of Matty’s trumpet playing loud and hard, with Dante howling along with the notes from the other side. The boy always did that when he was angry, and these last few years that had been a lot. Sometimes to be extra spiteful he would play one of Héctor’s songs, like what he was doing right now. But now was not the time for teenage temper tantrums. His family needed him now more than ever.

Héctor knocked on the wood harshly. “Mateo, open the door.” The ranchera song blew even louder to drown out his pounding. “No matter how hard you blow I know you can still hear me!… Matty, if you don’t open this door right now I’m going to kick it down, make you drive me to the hospital and then make you pay for my broken foot!”

The door opened abruptly to let Dante in and left ajar for Héctor. When he stepped inside Matty had flopped down onto his bed, glaring up at the ceiling with his trumpet still in his hands and rapidly fingering the valves. Dante jumped up onto the bed and lay across his lap, but that did little to calm the boy’s ire. Héctor walked to the other side of the room and gingerly sat down on Leti’s bed, careful not to knock over any of the stuffed animals or mess up the sheets too much. “I know what you’re thinking, mijo.”

Matty scoffed. “Do you now?”

“Yes, I do. I’m a lot sharper than I look.” Héctor sighed and rubbed his face. “You think that this was planned. That we set out to have another baby to… replace the one we lost.” He reached behind him and picked up a stuffed elephant. He smiled at the beaded eyes and fingered the dark juice stain that Leti had spilled on it when she was three. “Come on now, if that was the case than we would have tried immediately after Leti died. But we would never do something as callous as that. Besides, nothing could ever replace her, Matty… I still wake up every day thinking that my family is whole, and then I feel that pain when I realize that it isn’t. Every day.”

“But just because a piece of our family is gone doesn’t mean we can’t still grow. This new baby is not going to be Leti. It’s not going to be anything remotely like her. It’s going to be his or her own person. I know it’s hard to let someone into your heart again after it’s been broken, but we can’t
just shut ourselves off from ever experiencing love again.”

“I know.” Matty sighed, finally looking at his father. “It’s still scary though.”

Héctor put the elephant back in its proper place and smoothed out Leti’s sheets. “It’s scary for all of us, mijo. But the one who is most scared is your Mamá. She was terrified when she found out, and she cried in my arms all night until she fell asleep.”

Matty looked concerned as he sat up. “She did? Why?”

Héctor nodded at his son’s question, sat at the foot of Matty’s bed and began to pet Dante. “Well, you have to admit it is a little surreal: Being a new Mamá and a grandma at the same time. She was also afraid of what her family would think of it.” He glared at his son, who had the decency to look ashamed as he averted his eyes. “It’s also dangerous, mijo. There are a lot of complications with pregnancy, and the older you get the more those complications increase. She’s afraid that something might happen and she’d lose it.”

Matty’s eyes widened. “Lose it? Oh…”

Héctor crossed his arms. “This is going to be especially tough on her, Matty. The last thing she needs right now is stress, which is why I want her to have our full support and give her anything she might need. And that means no more of these outbursts of yours. You think you can handle that?”

Matty nodded his head solemnly. “Sí, I understand. And… I’m sorry, Papá.”

Héctor shook his head. “I’m not the one you need to say sorry to. First you are going to apologize profusely to your Mamá. Then you are going to make it up to her by making dinner for the whole family. I think your famous chilaquiles will do the trick.”

“You mean the only thing I know how to make? Sure, I can do that.” Matty grinned and gave Héctor a hug, both of them a little more at peace with the odd situation at hand. When they pulled away he still had to ask, “So… You’re sure this wasn’t planned?”

Héctor patted Matty on the shoulder. “Ay, mi niño precioso… None of you were planned.”

Héctor gasped and wheezed as he doubled over with laughter, his face turning red and tears flowing down his face.

“It’s not funny Héctor.” Ernesto grumbled.

“Oh, but it is! HA ha ha ha!” He trailed off into tittering giggles that he tried to suppress with his hand but to no avail. There was the great Ernesto de la Cruz, the most famous singer in all of Mexico, dressed up like a priest of all things and dangling from a wire in front of a cloudy backdrop. The wire twisted and untwisted itself and Ernesto was helpless as he slowly turned to and fro while clutching his golden guitar. “Ernesto de la Cruz, the world’s first flying penguin! BAH HA HA!”

“It’s supposed to be majestic!” Ernesto tried to say with pride, though whatever dignity he had was lost as the wire twisted him with his back to Héctor. “The music convinces the landowner to keep the orphanage from being turned into a tavern, the children are saved from going to work in the mines, and then I metaphorically soar amongst the heavens in triumph!”
“Of course, of course!” Héctor wiped away his tears. “Tell me hermano, did those priest robes burn your skin when you put them on?! Ha!”

“I don’t have to take this. Juan! Lower me down!” Ernesto glared with menace at Héctor as he squeakily came close to the ground. “I’ll teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget.” Once his feet touched the ground Ernesto continued his descent until he was lying flat on his face, making Héctor only laugh harder. “…My legs are asleep.”

“Here, I’ll lower myself to your standards.” Héctor said as he sat down on the ground while Ernesto struggled to sit up.

“What are you doing here anyway?” Ernesto asked. “Shouldn’t you be at home with your expecting wife?”

Héctor gave Ernesto the box he had been holding. “Imelda wanted me to give you these personally. She said that these were too important to entrust to some acne-riddled courier. Not after last time when all the shoes for your last movie ended up at a brothel across town.”

“Hey we got the shoes back in the end, after some, heh, negotiations.” Ernesto opened the box and marveled at the bright red, jewel encrusted boots with golden toes. “Ha, bonita! Imelda has really
“I’m glad you like them.” Héctor said. “Though if you’re planning for a Mexican remake of *The Wizard of Oz*, I’ve gotta say that you’d make an ugly Dorothy.”

Ernesto huffed in exasperation. “Is there a celebrity roast going on that I’ve not been made aware of?! Madre de Dios!... And no, pendejo. These boots are for my upcoming Navidad Spectacular. The one that you won’t be coming to.”

“Well I’m sorry, amigo, but I can’t go. The babies are going to be due in December and I need to be there. Especially for Imelda.” Héctor sighed. “Things haven’t been going easy for her.”

Compared to her last two pregnancies, Imelda had been having a rough go at it this time. Her nausea still hadn’t dissipated despite being in her sixth month, leading to her becoming severely dehydrated and having to take water intravenously a few times at the hospital.

The only thing she had been able to eat and keep down was discovered purely by accident. Matty had been attempting to cook something delicious for his mother and sister, still trying to make up for his earlier outburst. The end result had been tomatoes being burnt to a crisp and pozole having the consistency of wet cement. While Coco had fled the kitchen at the terrible smell of the food, Imelda was entranced by it. Then they all stared in awe as Imelda finished the whole pot of pozole herself and knocked back all of the crispy tomatoes in deep satisfaction, finally scratching an itch that no one would ever had thought she would be craving. Matty then became Imelda’s own personal chef, feeding her all the overcooked meals she could eat.

Coco on the other hand had been going through pregnancy swimmingly. Her nausea had only been slight at the beginning, and after that she had been able to eat almost anything put in front of her, and a lot of it at that. The weird part was that no matter what she was eating, sweet or savory, she always had to have a heaping bowl of guacamole to go along with it. If no guacamole was available at the time then she would simply peel an avocado and bite into it as if it were an apple. Also at every meal she would always have to have a Coke or two. The drink had replaced all other liquids in Coco’s life to the point where Julio had to buy another refrigerator just for her beverages. And heaven help you if you even tried to sneak one Coke out of the fridge. Those were *Coco’s* Cokes and no one else’s!

But while Coco had gained a little weight during her pregnancy, Imelda had lost weight. No matter how much overcooked food she managed to eat, all that nourishment had gone straight to the baby and not her. Her face had become gaunt, her arms bony and she was too tired to work in the shoe shop anymore. The doctor had grown quite worried about it as well and had put Imelda on strict bedrest, with nothing but a radio in her bedroom to keep her company. Her worst fears were slowly becoming realized: That this pregnancy was dangerous for not only her, but for her beloved child as well.

“I shouldn’t even be here!” Héctor sighed. “I know I just got here Ernesto, but I have to catch the next train back. Imelda needs me. She’s so bored being stuck in bed all day, but she’s also scared. I need to be there for her.”

Ernesto patted Héctor on the back. “Ah, my friend. You are a much better man than me.”

Héctor smiled. “Oh, Ernesto. How can I be better than a man of the cloth?”

“I’m serious!” Ernesto growled. “It takes guts for *any* man to be a father. But you? After everything that has happened... I respect you a great deal, amigo.”
“Gracias, Ernesto.” Héctor said. “And hey, you’re still young… ish. You could be a great father some day!”

Ernesto paled at that thought, and then barked out a laugh. “Who, me? Pffft! Don’t be ridiculous! Me a father. I have no need to raise a family, amigo. The world is my family! Besides, I am far too free-spirited to be tied down to one woman and a child. Too wild. Too worldly!” He smiled big as a little voice echoed in his brain. Too haunted. Too damaged. Too awful. No one could ever love me, not if they knew what I was capable of. What I almost did…

“Well before I go,” Héctor said, interrupting Ernesto from his dark thoughts as he pulled out a few pages. “I wanted to show you a song I had written on the train ride over here. It just sprung to my mind and I had to put it on paper.”

“You wrote a song off the top of your head on a bumpy train? Amigo, you are indeed a maestro.” Ernesto flipped through the pages and hummed out the notes to himself, a grin slowly spreading on his face and his eyes lighting up with glee. “Héctor… This is perfect!”

“Perfect for what?”

“Perfect for this movie! This is the song the priest should sing to the landowner! This is the song of my dreams! Oye, Anton!” Ernesto called over the director of the movie and flapped the pages in his face. “Change of plans amigo! This is the song that we’ll play in the movie, not Cambiar el Mundo. The new song will be this gem by my songwriter, La Oración de los Niños!”

The director paled and his eyes bugged out before he chuckled nervously and spoke slowly. “Ernesto… we’ve already shot the scenes where you play Cambiar el Mundo. Filming has almost wrapped up, the orchestra has already recorded the score, hell the actor you play it to in the movie is already back home in Guadalajara!”

Ernesto rolled his eyes. “Well then bring him back! What am I paying you all for if I can’t have the privilege of changing things at the last minute? Pull me back up Juan! We’re going to re-shoot all of the music scenes, including the sky scenes!” As he rose back up above their heads Ernesto pointed at Héctor. “My friend, this is all thanks to you. You should be proud! Everyone, give your thanks to Héctor Rivera for making this all possible!”

As the director and all of the production staff glared at Héctor with tired eyes, Héctor shrunk back and smiled sheepishly. “Uh… I apologize for that.”

Chapter End Notes

This is it. This is my favorite illustration. I didn't think I could top insomniac Héctor, but there you go.
Coco guided her bow expertly across the violin's strings, producing soft and delicate notes that flowed through the air gracefully. Her audience was only her mother as she lay in bed listening to the sweet music playing with a soft smile on her pale face. The gentle music was soothing to the soul, but her insides squirmed in discomfort and her head was pounding. Still she kept her complaints to herself. It was Dia de Muertos after all, and now was not the time to worry her family over an upset stomach when there was celebrating to be done.

The song gently finished and Coco spoke in a soft radio voice. "And that was Sérénade Mélancolique by the great Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, performed by the lovely young Socorro Rivera de Magallanes. We hope you enjoyed this program, as always sponsored by Coca-Cola."

She picked up a bottle from the bedside table and took a long drink from it as Imelda chuckled. "You played so beautifully Coco. Gracias." Imelda said tiredly.

Coco rubbed a hand over her stomach and smiled. "The baby kept kicking and rolling the whole time I was playing. I bet it's going to be a dancer just like her parents."

"Hmm..." Imelda sighed and closed her eyes. "Coco, you should go on outside with the rest of the family and enjoy yourself. I'm going to turn in early tonight... I can barely keep my eyes open..."

"Are you sure Mamá?" At Imelda's weak nod Coco leant over to give her mother a kiss and rubbed a hand over the bump protruding from under the bed sheets. "Alright then, you rest. One of us will check on you after the concert. It shouldn't be more than an hour. Goodnight Mamá."

And with that Coco heaved herself out of the chair and walked out of the bedroom. Unbeknownst to her Imelda was not alone as three glowing spirits stood around her bedside and looked down on the slumbering woman.

Mirasol sat in the chair that had been previously been occupied by her granddaughter and placed her hand on Imelda's cheek. "Pobrecita..." She whispered worriedly. "She looks so tired. So thin."

"She'll be alright." Gaspar reassured both his wife and Leti. "If there's one thing we know about Imelda is that she's strong. She'll pull through this and come next year we'll have a new grandchild to fawn over and you Leticia will have a new brother or sister."

"I always wanted a little brother or sister." Leti said as she looked down at her mother. "I mean technically Matty is my little brother but five minutes doesn't really count, you know? And you can bet that it's going to learn to play an instrument too! I wonder what it'll be... Maybe a tuba! That would be pretty funny. Or the clarinet. Oboe?"

"Speaking of instruments," Gaspar interrupted his granddaughter's prattling. "I think that your Papá and Mateo are about to head out to Mariachi Plaza for their little concert. We'd best get going!"

"If you don't mind Gaspar I think I'm going to stay here with Imelda." Mirasol said with concern. "I know it's not every day I get to see my grandson perform but... I want to stay here with my daughter. It doesn't matter that there's nothing that I can do for her, I don't want her to be alone..."

Gaspar's brow furrowed and looked down at Leti. "Maybe we should stay as well..." The little girl nodded in agreement.

"No no, there's no need. You two go have fun and you can tell me how it went when you come..."
back. I'll be right here, so don't worry." Mirasol smiled at the two of them in reassurance.

"Well if you're sure... Okay we'll go." Gaspar bent down and kissed his daughter on the cheek, and Leti followed suit. "We'll be back soon. C'mon Leticia."

Mirasol watched the two of them exit the room before turning her attention back to her sleeping daughter. She placed a hand on Imelda's large stomach and another on her face, worried at the heat she felt. "It's alright cielita. Mamá is here. Don't you worry..."

Leti skipped over to where her brother and Barto were conversing in their charro suits near the courtyard entrance. It was surreal to see how Matty had grown to look exactly like their father, only with slightly more muscle mass and softer features. And the height! Only seventeen years old and he was already a good inch and a half taller than Papá! As she craned her neck back to look at the two teenagers she caught the tail-end of their conversation.

"... so lucky, amigo!" Barto exclaimed as he hefted the giant bass drum over his large gut. "All those nights studying away while the rest of us were out partying have finally paid off. It's not enough being the first person in Santa Cecilia to go to university, but going to an Ivy League school in America! I tell you, Yalé won't know what hit 'em!"
Matty rolled his eyes. "It's Yale Barto, not Yalé. There's no accent… Besides, just because I applied there doesn't mean I'm going to get in. I doubt such a prestigious white school is going to let in some ratty little brown kid from the middle of Nowhere, Mexico."

Barto shoved Matty on the shoulder. "Don't talk like that! You are the son of Héctor Rivera and the godson of Ernesto de la Cruz! I'm sure once they're done shoving money down those pendejo's throats then they'll be begging you to study there!"

"That's just it… I haven't told my parents I applied there yet." Matty looked down to the ground and nervously fingered the valves of his trumpet. "What with Mamá being so sick I didn't want to upset her with the prospect of leaving, especially out of the country. But I want to help expand Rivera Shoes to America, and I can't think of a better way of doing that than by getting a business degree in one of the best schools they have. Once the baby is born and everything settles down I'll tell them, so let's just keep this a secret for now."

Barto placed a hand on his chest. "You're entrusting me to keep this life-altering decision a secret? Amigo, I'm touched."

"Alright chamacos, its showtime!" Héctor said as walked up to the two boys carrying his white guitar. "We got to hurry over to Mariachi Plaza, perform and then head straight back. I don't want to leave your Mamá alone for too long, but she's sleeping right now so it should be alright. Vamanos!"

As the group exited the courtyard and walked down the street, Gaspar couldn't help but beam with pride. "Did you hear that mija? My grandson going to university, and one of the top schools in America to boot! Ay, I can't wait to brag to all mis amigos at the cantina tomorrow!"

"But Abuelito, isn't it far away from Santa Cecilia?" Leti asked with worry. "What if we don't get to see him again next year because he'll be too far away? I don't think it's a very good idea…"

"Leticia, I'm sure that Mateo will put your foto on his own ofrenda in America. Yes it'll be a pain to visit two ofrendas in one night, but after tangling with the Department of Family Reunions it will be a breeze… Ooh, actually it'll be three ofrendas for you. I forgot about Oscar and Felipe." Gaspar shook his head. "The point is that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for your brother. When I was his age I didn't even know how to read, let alone go to university. We should welcome any chance to better ourselves, mija."

"Hmm." Leti slowly nodded and let the subject drop. She still wasn't too keen on the idea, but if it was what Matty really wanted and it would help out the family business than who was she to judge? It wasn't like she had any say in it anyways. As the family, living and dead, continued their trek down to Mariachi Plaza a frantic voice pierced through the air.

"Gaspar! Leticia!" At the sound of their names the two of them whipped around to see Mirasol barreling towards them. She took her husband's hand and began to pull frantically. "It's Imelda! Something's wrong! I think the baby is coming!"

"What?!" Gaspar cried out and Leti gasped in fear. The three of them sprinted back towards the house at break neck speed. "No no no! It's too soon for it to be time! I heard that she's only seven and a half months along!"

They all raced through the doors and made their way into Imelda's bedroom, where they found her weakly tossing her head and moaning loudly, her face pale and covered with sweat. Mirasol went back to her side and helplessly tried to soothe her child but to no avail. They all jumped when Imelda suddenly shouted out in agony and Leti grabbed Gaspar's hand and shook it hard.
"Abuelito! We need to go back to the family! We need to make them come back so they can help Mamá!" Leti cried out.

Gaspar ran a hand through his hair as he frantically looked back and forth between Leti and Imelda. "Leticia, there's nothing we can do! They can't see or hear us, it'd be pointless to even-"

Suddenly Imelda let out a long, keening wail and weakly managed to fling the thick blankets off of her body. The three spirits gasped in horror at what they saw: the front of Imelda's white nightshirt was stained red with blood. Imelda looked down and moaned at the sight of the blood, and then softly began to cry. "H-Héctor…"

Gaspar stiffened at the sound of his little girl crying and glared hard. "Screw it, we have to try! Mirasol, stay with Imelda! Leticia, vamanos!"

Leticia took one last look at her mother before running back out into the streets with her grandfather beside her. Her ribs heaved with exertion and fright as she rounded the corner and managed to catch up with her family. She grabbed onto Coco's wrist and pulled back hard as her older sister continued to walk obliviously. "Coco! Coco, stop! You all need to come back! Mamá's in trouble! Coco, please- ah!" Leti flew back and crashed to the ground, having pulled so hard that her arms had popped off at the shoulders and left her body. With a groan she sat up and watched as Coco continued forward with her hands still clutching at her wrist.

"Héctor! Go back!" Gaspar waved his hands in front of his son-in-law's face, but Héctor continued to stare blankly ahead. "Imelda's having the baby, yerno! It's bad! C'mon, you must have some sort of spiritual connection with her! You must sense that your wife is hurt, pendejo!" Héctor didn't even blink. "Ay, carajo! I swear that when you die cabrón I am going to kick your skull into the deepest, darkest sinkhole that I can find!"

"Spiritual connection… That's it!" Leti went to her brother and took hold of his hand as he walked. "Matty, escúchame por favor! I know you can't hear me, but I've always known that you've been able to at least sense me in the past! We've got a bond that can never be broken. So please sense me! Mamá is hurt. She and the baby could be dying! Please go back! Please!"

It was almost miraculous the way Matty suddenly stopped in his tracks with a thoughtful expression on his face. Leti gasped in surprise and hope while Gaspar gaped in astonishment. The rest of the family stopped as well as they turned to look at Matty, who looked up at Héctor with a strange look. "Hey, Papá. I've been thinking…"

"What is it, mijo?" Héctor asked, while Gaspar and Leti waited with baited breath.

"… Do you think I could play some Louis Armstrong on stage?" Matty asked with a grin. "You know, try something new?" And with that he started playing When the Saints Go Marching In with gusto, not hearing two furious screams erupt from behind.

Héctor laughed. "You need to know your audience, chamaco."

"Pinche idiota!" Leti screamed as her kicks phased though Matty's legs. "I'm going to knock your skull off too!"

"It's no use, mija." Gaspar said softly in defeat. "We tried. C'mon, let's hurry back!"

As they ran back to the house Leti prayed that maybe her Mamá would end up pulling through, that this was just a scary symptom of pregnancy that would soon fade and she would be back to normal. When they entered the bedroom her hopes were shattered. Imelda had managed to stumble out of
the bed and was slumped onto the floor, rocking back and forth and moaning in pain. Mirasol looked up at the two of them, daring to hope that the living family had followed, only to sag in defeat. "They aren't coming."

Gaspar sank to his knees beside his daughter, his face crumpled in agony as he stared at his baby girl. He had failed her in life, and now he had failed her in death too. He wrapped his arms around Imelda and a dry sob burst out of him. "I'm sorry mija... I tried... I tried..."

As Leti watched her grandparents embrace her mother she too collapsed in grief. For years she had wanted to be with her living family again. She had wanted them to be able to see and hear her. To be able to talk to them and be loved them. She knew one day they would be reunited and couldn't wait for the day. But not like this. Not in a way that would surely rip a giant gaping hole in her family's hearts. Papá would be destroyed if anything were to happen to Mamá. She couldn't let this happen. There had to be a way. Any way! Please!

"Aroo?"

Three skeletal heads shot up and looked towards the intruding sound at the doorway, and their jawbones nearly dropped off of their skulls at what they saw. Standing there, having finished gorging himself on the leftover food and covered in mole sauce and beans, was...

"DANTE!"

Dante yipped happily and came forward to lick Leti on the cheekbone. It was a shock and an absolute delight to the little skeleton when during one past Dia de Muertos she had discovered that Dante had been able to see and interact with her and her grandparents. Abuelita had said that this was because Dante was a Xolo dog and in ancient times they were known as guiders of wandering spirits. Over the years Dante had been one of the highlights of Leti's visits, but it seemed that this time he was going to be her savior.

"Dante, come over here!" Leti said as she guided the dog over to Imelda. "Dante, Mamá is hurting! We need your help, boy!"

Dante's goofy expression turned serious as he saw Imelda weakly moaning on the floor next to the bed. He sniffed the air and snorted as the metallic scent of blood flooded his nostrils, following the trail until he came up right next to her. He sniffed at her gray face and then started to lick her urgently, his slobbery tongue bringing some alertness back to Imelda. She cracked open her eyes and stared blearily at the dog and grunted in pain. "Dante... Héctor... Go get Héctor... Please."

Suddenly she lurched forward and screamed sharply, causing poor Dante to jump back and cower. When he felt a skeletal hand on his hand he turned to Leti. "Follow me boy! We gotta get the family back!"

As Leti and Dante raced back out the door, Gaspar and Mirasol cradled their daughter close to them. "Don't you worry now, mija." Gaspar whispered as hope flowed back into his bones. "Help is on the way!"
Chapter Notes

A word of warning: There are some graphic parts in this chapter, so if you're squeamish then read with caution.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leti huffed and puffed, running as fast as she could with Dante hot on her heels. This is ridiculous, how can a skeleton be so out of shape? She thought. No more candied pumpkins for me! Rounding a corner she gasped with relief as she saw her family hadn't gotten that much farther from the house. "Let's bring 'em back, Dante!"

Dante let out a bark and charged for Matty first. He took a mouthful of Matty's charro pants and yanked back hard, nearly tripping his young master. "Woah! What the-… Dante?" Matty tried to shake the dog off his pants. "Dante, basta! You're going to tear my suit!"

"Either that or pants you!" Barto laughed.

"Dante, let go of him." Héctor said as he took hold of the growling dog and pulled him off. "If you can't be a good dog then go back home. Vete!"

Dante whined and looked at Leti for help as the family continued down towards the plaza. Leti was on the verge of a mental collapse, desperately clutching at her hair until a flash of golden light shined in her eyes. Blinking it away she looked at what caught her attention: Matty's trumpet. A grin split her face and she gestured wildly at the dog. "Dante, the trumpet. Let's play keep away, boy! Keep away!"

Determination set in Dante's eyes and Leti was sure she saw him give her an affirmative nod. Then he charged again, took a flying leap, and snatched the trumpet out of Matty's hand.

"Hey!" Matty yelled in shock and stared at Dante in surprise and anger as the dog darted a few yards away from the group, wagging his tail and drooling all over the trumpet in his mouth. "Give that back, Dante! Bad dog!"

"Don't listen to him boy! Good dog! Vámanos!" Leti took off with Dante following close by, the shouts of her angry family coming in not too far behind. "Don't look back Dante! Keep on going! Back to the house!"
"Mateo?! What's going on?!"

Leti looked up and gasped when she saw Señor Valdez, the butcher, standing between them and the house. Matty yelled out, "Señor Valdez, stop that dog!"

"Leticia?! What's going on?!" To the right of Señor Valdez was another glowing skeleton standing close by.

"Señor Valdez padre! Stop your son from stopping that dog!"

The elderly skeleton stood in front of his son, offered a quick apology towards him, and crouched down with his hands held out. Dante jumped out onto the ghost's hands and was then sprung up and over the shocked butcher before landing on the other side to continue his mad sprint.

"Muchas gracias, Señor Valdez!" Leti chirped as she slapped the confused spirit a high five when she passed him.

"Good luck niña with… whatever that was."

They ran as fast as they could, edging closer and closer to the house. And just when they were about to reach the green double doors Héctor came from out of nowhere and tackled Dante to the ground. The poor dog whined and struggled to break free but Héctor was too strong and managed to pry the trumpet from his mouth. "What in the world has gotten into you?!" Héctor growled. "I ought to sell you to a street vendor for what you just did! Bad dog! Bad-"

"HÉCTOR!"
Héctor's head whipped up when he heard his name called out in such agony that he had never heard before. Another piercing scream had him stumbling back up and bolting towards the bedroom. "Imelda?!” When he reached it he gasped in utter terror when he saw his wife collapsed on the floor next to their bed, a patch of blood trailing from the mattress to the front of her gown. For a second he found himself back all those years ago when he saw his little girl in a similar state. One that had ultimately lead to her death. Imelda cried out again and reached out for him, snapping him out of his daze. "Imelda!"

"Héctor…” Imelda moaned out and grasped his hand when he knelt down beside her. "Gracias a Dios…”

"Papá?” Matty called out as he came into the room. "Papá, what's going- Ay, Dios mio! Mamá!” Matty came to a halt and was nearly overcome with terror at the sight of all the blood.

"Matty, go back and get Julio!” Héctor said as he wrapped Imelda's arm around his shoulder. "Tell him to get the car and park it as close to the entrance as he can! We need to go to the hospital-"

"No, Héctor!” Imelda pulled away from Héctor and collapsed back onto the floor. "The baby…”

"Sí, I know Imelda. Dr. Alviso will help you and the baby when we get-"

"The baby is coming now!”

"What?! No, it's far too soon!” Héctor pulled Imelda's skirt up and out of the way, and sure enough a tiny head was forcing its way out of her. It and Imelda's entire pelvic region were covered in fresh blood. "Dios… Dios mio…” Hearing a moan behind him he turned to see that Matty was still there, covering his mouth and looking more pale by the second. "Matty! Go get clean towels and a large bowl of water! Hurry!” The boy gratefully sprinted away from the gory scene and Héctor was alone to comfort his wife. "It's okay Imelda. You're going to be alright. Both of you will."

"Héctor… It hurts… Something's wrong. Aah!"

To his horror Héctor saw the baby slide out even further. There was no other option left: He would have to deliver his own child. "Okay Imelda, let's push you back against the wall to brace yourself.” He pulled some pillows off of the bed and placed them behind Imelda. "I know it hurts but you need to give it all you got."

"Mamá!” Héctor looked up to see Coco making her way towards Imelda and trying to lower herself to the ground. "Julio is getting the car now. It's okay Mamita!”

Barto was next to come in. "I've got the towels Matty said you asked for, what's going- Ay, Santa Mariaa…” He fell backwards with a loud thud and a cloud of dust, overwhelmed at the grisly site before him.

Héctor managed to snag a clean towel from the boy's inert form and held it underneath the protruding baby. "It's almost here Imelda. Keep going! Almost!”

The baby came out fast with only a few pained pushes, covered in blood and skinnier than any of their other children had been when they were born. And it was still. He was still.

"It's a boy!” Coco said with awe while Imelda collapsed in her arms with exhaustion. Matty came in that moment with a bowl of water and placed it on the floor in front of Héctor. When the baby was placed into the water it made a jerking motion to the relief of everyone else, but it was still quiet.
"C'mon mi hijo…" Héctor whispered as he stuck a long finger into the baby's mouth to clear any fluid. "C'mon, c'mon!" After wiping the baby as quickly as he could he then wrapped him in a towel and started briskly rubbing against his back. "Give me a cry, niño. One good cry! Let me hear you sing!" As if on command the baby let out a thin, creaky whine and jerked around some more. Héctor smiled as he finally saw some life come into his child. "That a boy! Yes!"

"Héctor…" Imelda mumbled out, her head rocking slowly back and forth and her face growing paler by the second. "The baby… My baby." Héctor leant over towards Imelda and cupped her face with his hand. Her skin was cool and clammy, and her eyes were not focusing on anything. The blood continued to flow heavily between her legs. "My baby…"

"Joder… Coco, take your brother now and carry him to the car!" Héctor said urgently as he handed over the baby. "Matty, help me carry your Mamá! We have to go to the hospital now!"

Héctor and Matty lifted up Imelda with ease and hurried as fast as they could go to the running BMW with Julio at the wheel. Coco managed to open the car door for them as they crammed into the back seat while she held the baby close to her and took the front seat. As soon as the door slammed close Julio stomped the gas pedal to the floor and careened down the street towards the hospital as fast as he could.

With a groan Barto heaved himself off the ground and dizzyly swayed against the doorway. He didn't know what had happened since he had passed out, just that he was alone now and there was still a whole lot of blood on the floor and sheets. The least he could do was to clean it up for the family when they got back. Hearing a panting noise he turned to see Dante sitting in the middle of the courtyard, a wide smile on his face and his eyes closed in contentment. 'What was he so happy about?' Barto wondered before going off to do his self-appointed chore.

"Good boy Dante!" Leti exclaimed as she rubbed the dog's jowls together and peppered kisses all over his face. "You did it! You're the most amazing, most wonderful dog in the whole world and I love you so much!"

"Gracias Dante!" Mirasol wept as she too gave him a hug. "None of this would have happened if it wasn't for you! You saved my little girl! Gracias!"

"Not just Dante. It's also because of you, Leticia." Gaspar said. "You are the one who inspired us all to try and help. Even after it seemed hopeless, you didn't give up!"

Leti smiled brightly. "A Rivera never gives up on anything! This means Mamá and my little brother are going to be okay now, right?"

Gaspar and Mirasol looked at each other with worry. This was no time to sugar coat it. "I don't know mija. The family came back and helped them, but… We won't know for sure until later."

Leti's grin slowly faded as fear set in. "Later?... You mean… Mamá and my little brother might still come to the Land of the Dead?!"

They all shuddered at the thought. Imelda dying and reuniting with them would be heartbreaking, but at the same time wonderful and a dream come true. But a dead newborn? That was nothing short of tragic and horrifying. They did not envy any family who had a baby with them in the Land of the Dead.

"Let's not think that just yet Leticia." Mirasol said, sweeping Leti's bangs off her forehead in a comforting motion. "All we can do now is hope. Your Mamá is strong. We must have faith."
The streets of Santa Cecilia were still short and narrow, despite years of progress and prosperity, but Julio still managed to swerve through them with expertise as he raced towards the hospital. It was quite ironic that the most timid and panicky member of the whole family was the most calm at the moment, his steely attention on the road and firm hands on the wheel. Still he diverted his eyes to the rear view mirror to check on his mother-in-law and to his right to see Coco rubbing her baby brother vigorously to try and produce a sound. "We're almost there, Mamá Imelda! Don't worry!"

Imelda moaned out loud with her head leaning back over the seat. "Hurts…"

"I know it hurts, Imelda." Héctor said, his hand clutching hers tightly with Matty holding the other one. "But it'll be alright!"

"Baby… My baby…"

Just then a sharp wail came from the front seat, shocking them all before relief set in. Finally the baby had produced a full-bodied cry and continued to do so again and again. "You hear that Imelda?!" Héctor smiled tenderly. "That's our baby. That's our son! He's okay!"

Despite her cold white face pouring sweat and smeared with blood, Imelda smiled so beautifully it set Héctor's heart a flutter. "My baby…" Suddenly her eyes rolled over white and her head tilted violently onto Héctor's shoulder.

"Imelda? Imelda?!" Héctor shook her shoulder violently, desperately, but to no avail. "IMELDA, NO!"

The car screeched to a halt in front of the hospital, and the men wasted no time in hauling Imelda's unconscious form from the back seat, blood saturating the once pristine leather cushions. The staff was scared out of their wits when Héctor Rivera came barreling through the doors with his bloodied wife in his arms. "TOMAS! Someone, get Tomas Alviso! Ayudame!"

A stretcher was wheeled in front of Héctor and he had barely managed to lay Imelda down before she was rushed away from him, leaving his arms reaching out for her as she disappeared behind the doors. From the corner of his eye he saw another nurse take away his baby from Coco and he too was abruptly gone from his view. They stood there for who knew how long, before Héctor looked down at his arms and clothes.

All covered with blood.

Imelda's blood.

With his wife and son's life hanging by a thread, Héctor curled in on himself and cried. It was only his family's support that kept him from collapsing in a heap on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm... There's a lot of negative space in this picture. What should I do?.......... *snaps fingers* Anime speed lines!
Coco had taken it upon herself to act as the head of the family while Imelda was in surgery. She practically ordered Matty and Julio to drive back home to change into clean clothes and to bring some back for her and Héctor. She also instructed Matty to telegraph Oscar and Felipe about their sister. As they left to do as instructed Coco winced and suddenly felt bad about the harsh, urgent tones she used. She wasn't used to being so authoritative towards other.

But she was left with no choice. Her father had been rendered completely useless.

Héctor stared blankly at the ground with his elbows resting on his knees. His fingers twitched and rubbed at the dried, sticky blood that still coated them and he hummed in a vain attempt to calm himself. Coco made her way over to him, sat down and took his hand. "Julio is going to bring you some clean clothes so you'll be more comfortable Papá. But why don't you go to the bathroom and wash your hands?"

Héctor faintly shook his head. "No, I need to be here in case they come with news."

"I'll be here, Papá. I'll come get you if they have any word-"

"No! I need to be here! I wasn't there for them before, so I'll be here for them now!" Héctor ran his dirty hands through his hair and yanked hard. "I never should have left them alone! I knew Imelda was feeling poorly, I should have just cancelled the stupid performance and stayed with her and the baby."

Coco shook her head as her heart broke for her father. "You couldn't have known. None of us did. And the end result would have still been the same."

"But she wouldn't have been alone when it happened... She must have been so scared." He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and sniffled. "She was so terrified about this happening the night she told me. And I promised her I wouldn't let anything happen to her or the baby... And now-!" The rest of his words choked off into a sob and his shoulders shook as he tried to suppress them.

"Oh Papá..." Coco pulled Héctor in and let him lean on her shoulder as he cried out his fears.

Unbeknownst to Héctor his other daughter was hugging him as well, resting her cheekbone on his shoulder and sniffing herself. It took a while to make it on foot, but Leti and her grandparents had made it to the hospital and were now waiting for any news to come for the short time they were allowed. Time that was just about to run out.

"Leticia?" Leti looked up to see Mirasol's sad expression. "We have to go now mija. Sunrise is in an hour. We have to make it back to the cemetery to cross the bridge."

Leti sighed. "I know... I just wished we had more time! I wish the doctors weren't taking so long! What if Mamá and the baby die?"

"Then we will greet them in The Land of the Dead with open arms." Gaspar said, holding out his hand for Leti to take. "You did everything you possible could. Don't worry."
Leti nodded solemnly and kissed her father and sister on the cheeks. "Goodbye Papá. Goodbye Coco. See you next year..." Then she took her grandfather's hand and they left the hospital with heavy hearts.

It took a while to make their way back to the bridge, but any relief they might have felt at making it in time was lost to them. This was not the most joyous visit to the Land of the Living they had experienced. Far from it. All three walked hand in hand and in silence, physically and emotionally drained from the turbulent evening.

As they reached the gate Leti let out a gasp. "Oh no!"

Gaspar and Mirasol flinched violently in surprise. "What?! What?!"

"Tio Oscar and Tio Felipe!" Leti said with dismay. "I had completely forgotten about them! I didn't get their offerings for you from their ofrenda!" Given that there was only one surviving photograph of their parents, Oscar and Felipe didn't have one to put up on their own ofrenda. But they still left out offerings for them, and over the years Leti would visit them by herself and retrieve the offerings for her grandparents.

Gaspar clutched at his chest and sighed in relief as the rush of fear fled them. "Por Dios... It's okay mija. Honestly with all the excitement we forgot about them too."

Leti shook her head. "But you haven't seen them in three years! I was supposed to let you know how they were both doing. All I did was waste our time at the hospital. I'm sorry..."

Mirasol bent down to kiss her little forehead and smiled tenderly. "Leticia, you have such a big heart. If we had more time of course we would have stayed longer. Anything to give you some closure. And I promise you that you did not waste it. Don't ever think that."

Leti gave a watery smile before hugging her grandmother, and then her grandfather bent down to join them. They stayed like that for a while until Leti let out a giggle. "Besides Abuelita, even if I didn't get to go see them, I bet my left fibula that both of them are still not married."

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Dr. Alviso held the tiny baby gingerly as it squirmed around and whined. "Being born premature he is underweight, Héctor. Only two and one quarter kilograms. He's also having trouble keeping a normal body temperature so we need to either keep him wrapped in warm blankets or, better yet, give him skin to skin contact."

"That's why you had me take off my shirt." Héctor said as he sat in the nursery on an old rocking chair. He had just changed out of his ruined charro suit and into clean clothes when Dr. Alviso called him in to discuss his son and then made him take it off again.

"Sí." Dr. Alviso handed Héctor the baby and smiled as he watched him place his son flush against his bare chest. The baby whined a little and curled in closer, savoring the heat. "I want to keep him here long enough for him to put on some weight and develop further. That being said his lungs are fully developed, his reflexes are good, and he was able to suckle some water so he should have no trouble eating. You and Imelda did well, Héctor."

At the mention of his wife's name Héctor tore his loving gaze away from the baby to Dr. Alviso. "Imelda... How is she? It's been so long Tomas and I haven't heard a word! What happened to her?"

"I'm not sure yet." Dr. Alviso sighed before pulling up a chair and sitting down next to Héctor. "They're working on her right now."
"Why aren't you?"

Dr. Alviso snorted and held up his knobby hands. "I haven't operated in two years. Damn arthritis. It won't be long before I retire completely. But don't worry, Imelda is in good hands. My grandson is a fine surgeon and will do everything he can to-

"Wait wait wait wait… Your gr-grandson?! Some kid is operating on my wife?!!"

Dr. Alviso held out a hand. "He's not a kid, Héctor. He's thirty three now, graduated top of his class in Mexico City and has performed hundreds of surgeries since then. He just recently transferred to Santa Cecilia to take over my practice."

"A doctor trained in Mexico City?" Héctor sneered. "Forgive me if that doesn't fill me with confidence."

"Just have faith, Héctor… I'll leave you alone with your son for a few moments. Just holler if you both need anything." And with that he left the despondent father with his new baby to bond.

Héctor looked over his son, grimacing a little at the waxy, almost yellowish skin the baby had instead of the healthy tan his other children did. Fine hair covered all over his face, but Dr. Alviso claimed that was normal with premature babies and that it would fade with time. The baby's chin started to wobble a little in a shiver and Héctor held him closer and wrapped both arms close around the little body. When the boy let out a small sigh Héctor finally smiled.
"You're alright…" Héctor cooed and snuggled against the soft dark hair, breathing in his scent. "You'll be just fine, don't you worry. I'll keep you nice and warm until your Mamá can hold you. Just you wait mijo, she's better than even a hot water bottle."

"Papá?"

Héctor looked up to see Matty poking his head through the open doorway. With a roll of his head he beckoned the teen to come in. Matty looked at the baby with wide eyes. "How is he?"

Héctor smiled down at the baby. "A little small. A little cold. But other than that he's a fighter, just like all of my children."

Matty nodded his head and with a hesitant hand he reached out to trace a finger over his brother's cheek. The little boy grunted at the touch and turned to try and suckle at the digit, making Matty smile. "What's his name? You name the boys, right?"

"I do. And I was going to name him Álvaro, but… Looking at him now I'm just not sure. It doesn't fit him, you know?" Héctor shrugged. "I'll figure out something…"

Matty nodded. "I got a telegram back from Tio Oscar and Tio Felipe. They're boarding the next
train here. They should be here in a few hours, and they're going to stay for a while to help out with whatever happens." Then he sighed and stood up straight. "And I'm going to help too. With everything. I'll run the store while you are with Mamá and the baby. I'll also cook, clean and run errands so you don't have to worry about a thing. I will be here for my family!"

"Well that is very thoughtful, mijo." Héctor smiled with a quirked brow. "But what about Yale?"

"That doesn't matter, family is more importaaaaaa… What?" Matty stared at Héctor with a dumbstruck expression as his father beamed back. "What the- how did?- When?! Papá, how do you know I applied to Yale?!"

"I heard you talking to Barto about it from across the courtyard earlier. How many times do I have to tell you kids?" Héctor pointed at his ears. "These things aren't for show!"

"Ay, Dios mio…" Matty wiped a hand across his face. "Well, like I said it doesn't matter. I need to be here for my family, not in America."

"Mateo." At his father's stern voice Matty looked down at Héctor. "Your Mamá and I want you to be whatever you want to be. And if that's the head of Rivera Shoes in America then I am all for it. I would be more than happy to finally use my money and influence to give you a bright future, and I'm lucky to be able to do that! Yes we'll be far apart, but as long as you love and remember us I'll always hold you in… my… heart."

Matty smirked a little. "Was that Remember Me, Papá?"

"Mierda, it might have been. I never thought I would use that song again." Héctor looked down at his baby and smiled. "I guess Ernesto was right, after all…"

"Señor Rivera?"

Both Héctor and Matty looked up to see a doctor that neither of them recognized. He was very young and baby-faced, but his eyes held a sage wisdom that only years of surgical procedures could bring. He held out his hand and shook Héctor's. "I'm Dr. Morales. Tomas Alviso is my abuelo, and I have just finished the operation on your wife."

"Imelda!" Héctor stood up gingerly as to not wake the baby and tried to keep his voice low. "How is she? What happened to her? Will she be alright?"

Dr. Morales frowned deeply. "Señor Rivera, your wife suffered from a hemorrhage in her uterus. I can't say for sure what caused it, seeing that she was on bedrest, but I guess that this pregnancy just put too much strain on her body. Luckily she was still able to have strong enough contractions to birth the baby, but I'm afraid that the damage was too severe to repair. I was forced to perform an emergency hysterectomy on your wife."

Héctor turned when he heard Matty gasp behind him, but still shook his head in confusion. "Hysterectomy? What's that?"

"It's the removal of the female reproductive system, señor. The womb to be precise. I was able to leave her ovaries though, so she shouldn't go through premature menopause."

"You mean?-" Héctor's throat clenched tightly and he choked. "You cut out her… She can survive without that?!"

Dr. Morales nodded. "Si, señor. The womb is not necessary for living like the heart and lungs are. They can be removed."
Héctor shook his head and felt sick. This man had cut open and removed a part of his wife, never to be returned or healed. He fought down the desire to grab the man by the collar to shake him and asked in a choked voice. "Are you sure there was no other way? Why didn't you ask me if it was alright?"

"Señor, there was no time to consider any other course of action. And I am not legally allowed to ask you for your consent. It is the patient themselves who has to give it."

Héctor's face paled and his heart fluttered a little when he was able to register what the doctor was telling him. He looked at Dr. Morales with watery eyes and whispered, "She—... She said it was okay? She woke up?"

Dr. Morales nodded again. "We gave her an emergency blood transfusion to replace what she lost and we were able to rouse her enough to coherency. I needed her consent to do the procedure since it is a very personal operation. I explained to her what would happen and how it would affect her and she gave me her permission to do so." Then he smiled. "Actually she called me an idiota for needing permission to save her life."

Héctor barked out a short, manic laugh and grabbed the doctor by the shoulder. "She said that?! So she'll be okay right? She's going to live?! Both my wife and my baby are going to live?!"

The doctor smiled. "She went through the operation beautifully with no complications. She'll need to stay in the hospital for a few weeks to recover some and watch for any infection, but I think she'll pull through."

Héctor smothered the need to scream out to the heavens that his wife would live, his mouth painfully clenched into a gritting smile as he handed his baby over to Matty. Once the equally joyful teen had a good hold on him Héctor flung his arms around the surprised doctor and twirled him around in large circles. "GRACIAS! Ay, Gracias a Dios! Imelda, mi diosa! Ay, gracias gracias gracias! I can't believe it!" He set the doctor down and shook him firmly by the hand. "Oh, thank you! Thank you Dr. Whatever-Your-Name-Was! N-no, I need to remember your name. The man who saved my wife's life deserves to be remembered for all time! Chamaco, please tell me your name again!"

The doctor shook his head dizzily before smiling. "Morales. Dr. Miguel Morales."

Héctor's smile faded and his eyes took on a strange, glazed look. He looked over at the baby in Matty's arms, then at the doctor whose hand he still held. He glanced back and forth between the two for a few more seconds before a twinkle shined in his eyes.

"Huh..."

A month had passed and it was time again for Los Posadas. The Riveras, the Magallanes family and Ernesto were all gathered under one roof, preparing the feast for the night as the first hosts for the holidays. Héctor held up a slab of cooked meat in front of the men and watched as they all drooled over it.

"Mira. Look at this beautiful bistec, mi familia. Perfectly marbled with enough fat to make it tender, flavorful and juicy. Slowly roasted for hours and seasoned with quality herbs and spices from our dear Rosita's garden. Nice and charred on the outside, pink and supple on the inside. Gentlemen, you will not find a finer cut of meat in this whole town." He placed the steaming chunk onto a plate. "And this delicious carne shall be bestowed upon... Dante!"
The men groaned out loud as Héctor placed the steak onto the floor in front of the ravenous dog. The pup happily started ripping into the meat as Héctor laughed and rubbed his back. "Dig in boy!"

"Cuñado, that's not fair!" Oscar pouted.

"You always give Dante the best cuts of meat!" Felipe whined.

"At least for the last month!"

"When are you going to stop?!"

"Stop?!" Héctor looked offended on Dante's behalf and hugged the dog closely as he continued to chow down on the meat. "This is a hero dog, hermanitos! I will give him nothing but the best for the rest of his doggy days! All of us should, as a matter of fact!"

Matty folded his arms across his chest. "I don't want you to fatten up my dog while I'm away at school, Papá."

"Oh?" Héctor stood up and ruffled his son's hair, grinning widely as the boy growled and swiped his hand away. "Think you can order me around just because you're going off to Yalé, college boy?"

Matty glared as he fixed his hair. "Yale, not Yalé! I hate when people call it that!" Then he sighed wearily as all the men started to chant out the mispronunciation. "Whatever…"

"What is going on out here?"

Héctor whipped around and smiled warmly as Imelda was wheeled out to the courtyard by Coco in her wheelchair, with her baby snuggled in a warm blanket and in her arms. Today was her first day out of the hospital and finally back home with her family, and everyone couldn't have been happier that she had made it in time for Los Posadas. She glared at all the men for their foolish behavior. "Are you all making fun of my son?"

"Sí, Mamá Imelda…" all the men said sheepishly.

"Well I won't have it! You should all be proud of Matty! He's smarter than all of you put together." Imelda's mouth twitched up into a smile. "Besides, it's not every day that you get to attend Yalé."

"Mamá!" Matty whined as everyone laughed, but even he couldn't help but smile at his mother's joke.

The baby in Imelda's arms whined and squirmed. "Here Héctor. He wants his Papá."

"Aww, come here Miguelito!" Héctor picked up the baby and held him close to his face. His eyes brightened when he saw his father and his lips curled into a little smile, accentuating the dimple in his left cheek. "You want your Papá, or do you want a song?" At Miguel's chirp Héctor grinned. "Do I know you or what? A song it is!"

"Better let me sing it, hermanito!" Ernesto grinned. "After all I had to cut my Navidad Spectacular for you and for little Miguel here. My vocal chords are screaming to be used!"

"No, we want to eat first!"

"No, the piñata!"

"The children aren't even here yet, payaso!"
"W-we could go back to the hospital?"

At Coco's quiet voice everyone turned towards her as she grinned nervously. Héctor scratched his goatee and frowned. "Why mija? Did we forget something?"

"N-no… It's just that, um…” She stepped to the side and gestured down. There everyone saw a patch of soiled dirt next to her feet. "My water just broke."

As the children of Santa Cecilia gathered around the green double doors of the Rivera complex with their parents nearby, they all trembled with excitement. The Riveras always threw the best parties, made the most delicious food, and were the kindest hosts in town. This was going to be the best night of Los Posadas this year, just like it had been every year when they hosted. It wasn't really fair to the other hosts during the holiday. With their candles held in their hands the children lined up and started to sing.

*En el nombre del cielo*

*os pido posada*

*pues no puede andar*

*mi esposa amada -*

The doors were suddenly kicked open and Héctor Rivera burst through them, scaring the children out of their wits and their parents as well. *"OUT OF THE WAY, CHAMACOS!"

"Make space, amigos!" Oscar shouted.

"Pregnant lady, coming through!" Felipe cried.

"It's alright, mi amor!" Julio said as he hurried Coco towards the car. "Everything is going to be all right! There's no need to panic. Don't panic! *Stop panicking!*"

"I'm not panicking- wah!" Coco was none to gently shoved into the back of the BMW and the door slammed shut on her confused face.

"I'm fine Rosita! I can walk!" Imelda said as she held a crying Miguel close.

"No can do, Mamá Imelda! I will be your legs!" Rosita roared as she heaved Imelda into Facundo's truck. "Papá, let's follow them to the hospital!"

"Si, mija!"

"Héctor, what's going on?! Where are you all going?!" One of the neighbors asked as he pulled Héctor to the side.

Héctor stared at him with a wild expression and glanced back and forth between the house and the BMW. "Uh… Sorry amigos! Change of plans! We have important family affairs to deal with, so we need to get going now! Mary and Joseph, we have room! Come on in! Feel free to break open the food and eat the piñata, but we've gotta go! Bye!"

"But what about the performance from Ernesto de la Cruz?!"

Ernesto's eyes bugged and gave a short, nervous laugh. "Ah right! Of course! *Remember me,*
though I have to say goodbye. Okay, goodbye!" Then he and Héctor hopped into the back of Oscar and Felipe's truck and slapped at the side. "Vámanos!"

And with that the two trucks and the BMW sped down the dusty roads towards the hospital, leaving the townspeople in the dirt and bewildered at what they just witnessed.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, I updated this on Labor Day. And Coco's going into labor! J-just as I had planned?
Rosita squealed as the cork popped off the bottle of champagne and shot across the train compartment. "Ay, Dios mio! Whew… More champagne, Coco?"

Coco giggled, her face already red as she lounged against the bench. "Oh no, please. Anymore and I won't be able to walk off the train!"

"This is your big moment, Coco." Imelda smiled as she accepted a glass. "Mi hija pequeña, the next big movie star of Mexico! And your first premier! We are all so excited for you, mija."

The cause for the celebration had happened almost five months ago, when Ernesto had come to Santa Cecilia with an idea for a new movie. While it would, of course, star him in the leading role, there was another role that Ernesto thought was perfect for his goddaughter. For the last two years Coco had been trying to pursue a career in dancing, her one true passion, and Ernesto was able to persuade her that the role of his dancing, violin-playing daughter in the movie would be perfect exposure for her. With her family's encouragement Coco had signed a contract with Rivera de la Cruz productions then and there, and her path to stardom had begun.

"The first premier of many, I assure you." A stern looking woman sitting next to Coco said. Theresa Delgado was Coco's manager from the moment she had set foot on the soundstage and had overseen her every movement career-wise. She set up photo shoots, interviews, meetings, dinners and much more for the new star. Behind the scenes, unbeknownst to the family, she also staged spots for the paparazzi to follow Coco, told personal stories to publishers for the highest bid, and anything else to cash in on her. Theresa Delgado had found herself a prize, and she was not going to let it go any time soon.

"Still, it'll be nice to rest after the premier and go home." Coco sighed. "I've missed Julio and mi hija so much."

Theresa scoffed. "Home? No no no, there will be no time for that. You have a publicity tour all across Mexico to promote the film with Ernesto. Then I'll shop around for your next movie."

Coco sat up, her brow creased with worry. "Another movie? So soon? But I've been away from my daughter for four months!"

"You are new to this, Coco." Theresa said soothingly, as if talking to a child. "You've got to keep yourself fresh in the public's mind. Fame is fleeting, and if you rest now then your career will fizzle out. Trust me on this, Chiquita."

"B-but-"

"Let's not worry about this right now!" Rosita said, looking between a distraught Coco and an increasingly annoyed Imelda. "Let's just enjoy the train ride, drink some more champagne and dine on this delectable fruit basket Ernesto got for us. Just us girls all chatting away… Oh, and Matty too."

Matty snorted as he flipped through his newspaper. "Don't mind me. I'll just read my paper while
you hens keep on clucking." His brow creased and a dark shadow fell over his face at what he read. "Mierda. The Soviets lost to Germany again…"

"Mateo, stop reading that basura and talk with us." Imelda said sternly. "Tell us about school! How are your studies going?"

Matty stiffened at his mother's question and folded his paper up. He shrugged a little and averted his eyes. "Its fine, no complaints. I aced all my finals, said goodbye to mis amigos, and now I'm here to enjoy my summer vacation with mi familia. You know… Same as last year."

Imelda squinted slightly at her son. "Are you sure? There's nothing else you want to tell me?"

"Mamá, I swear it's fine. I'm at the top of my class and beating all those preppy Americans at their own version of football," he said with air quotes, "So you don't need to worry." Then he smirked. "What you do need to worry about is if Coco just starred in the biggest flop of the year."

"Oh, thank you for the vote of confidence hermanito!" Coco laughed as she decided to help herself to another glass of champagne after all.

As the rest of the ladies started talking amongst themselves again Matty sighed in relief and opened his newspaper back up. Frowning at the news from across the world and relishing the company of his long missed family, Matty found himself wavering yet again on the decision he had made for himself before leaving school. One that could spell his life or death.

The train pulled into the station of Mexico City, and the ladies and Matty walked out to stretch after a long journey. "Ay, what a relaxing trip!" Rosita said. "Just us adults, no bebés running around. It was so nice of Papá Héctor and Julio to watch the niños for us! I hope they had a nice time as well."

"We didn't."
Everyone turned to see a very haggard looking Héctor and Julio trudge up next to them, each holding a kicking and screaming two year old child in one arm. Miguel was trying to swipe at a crying Victoria's face, and when he couldn't reach he then sent spit-filled raspberries at her. Oscar and Felipe soon walked up carrying the luggage, looking shell-shocked as well and their arms covered in suspicious looking bite marks.

As soon as Victoria set her eyes on Coco she reached for her desperately and wailed harder. "Mamá!"

"Oh, cielita!" Coco said as she scooped Victoria into her arms. She sighed as the little girl clung to her tightly and buried her face in her shoulder as she cried. "Estas bien, mija." She gave her daughter a kiss and turned towards her husband. "They weren't good?"

Julio smiled wearily. "Oh they were… For the first hour at least."

"Then they got bored and started screaming and crying." Héctor said.

"And they wouldn't take a nap because the train was too loud and bumpy."

"Victoria got motion sickness and threw up on the floor."
"Then before we could clean it up Miguel jumped into it and then he threw up."

"They wouldn't eat any of their food and instead smeared it on all the windows."

Felipe interjected. "But then I had the bright idea to give them paper to color on, and then all was peaceful… Until Miguel shoved Victoria's crayons up his nose."

"Then the fighting started and it hasn't stopped since." Héctor held up Miguel and pressed him towards Imelda. "Ayudeme…"

Imelda took her son and looked him in the eyes. "Miguelito, were you bad?"

Miguel smiled sweetly up at his mother. "No, Mamá. I'm a good boy."

"Of course you are, mi angelito!" Imelda smothered her baby with kisses as Miguel giggled and gave a toothy grin towards Héctor.

Héctor smothered some curses and wiped a heavy hand across his face. "Ay, whatever! Let's just get tonight over with. I want to put the most embarrassing event of my career far behind me and as soon as possible…"

"Señor Molina is the real culprit?! He's is the one who murdered poor Eduardo?!"

"Arrest that scoundrel at once!"

"You'll never take me, pendejos!" Señor Molina shouted as he fled the courtroom and past all the astonished onlookers, making his dastardly escape.

"Quickly! Get those handcuffs off of poor Cipriano!"

"No need!" With a mighty heave Ernesto's character pulled his wrists apart and managed to snap the handcuffs off of himself like tissue paper. The courtroom gasped in astonishment and awe, but Ernesto payed them no heed. "I'll stop that bastardo myself!" And with that he took off after the villain.

A dramatic chase scene ensued throughout the crowded streets of the town before the two made their way towards the derelict parts, covered in shadows and grime with the homeless watching the two men wrestle with each other. Suddenly Señor Molina pulled out a knife and with a quick swipe managed to cut Ernesto on the forearm. Ernesto pulled back with a cry while the evil man laughed maniacally.

"End of the line, cabrón!" Molina sneered.

"It may be for both of us, amigo." Ernesto gasped while holding his bleeding arm. "But just tell me why! Why did you kill mi yerno and them frame me for it?"

"Lupita was mine, damnit! She should have never married that lowly baker when I could have provided her with everything she could ever want! And when I found out she was going to have his cursed child I couldn't take it! With Eduardo gone Lupita and her bastard child would finally be mine. You were perfect to take the fall! You never cared for Eduardo either, at least not for your precious daughter!"

Ernesto growled out, "I preferred him over you even before then. Especially now. Now that I realize that their love was true. You could have never given her that!"
“Well now you won’t live to see her or her brat! Prepare to die, cabrón-”

**TWANG! SMASH!**

From out of nowhere a scraggly, patched up guitar swung out from behind Molina and shattered over his head, knocking the man out cold onto the pavement. Ernesto gaped in shock as out of the shadows a homeless man stepped out and into the light. A tall, scrawny man with dark shades covering his blind eyes, a large nose and even larger ears.

"Montenegro!" Ernesto exclaimed. "How did you?-"

Montenegro cracked a smile and helped his friend to his feet. "It seems like justice really isn’t blind, eh amigo?"

"Ugh!"

Héctor hid his face in his hands and groaned in embarrassment as he watched his character on screen spout such hammy drivel. It was awkward to perform it time after time in front of the camera back then, but now it was painful to just watch it. He heard Ernesto laugh as he playfully shoved his shoulder and Imelda chuckle next to him, but he could find no humor in this. This was humiliating! Just go back to Coco already!

"I'll watch over this pendejo until the police come. You just go home to your daughter, Cipriano."

Ernesto clasped his hand into Héctor's and shook it in gratitude. "You have my thanks, mi amigo! I promise you I'll buy you a new guitar to replace that one. The finest in all of Mexico!"

"I'll hold you to it. Now go my friend, go! Back home to your daughter where you belong!"

Ernesto raced down the street, running as fast as he could towards his modest home. As he broke through the door he sagged in relief to find Coco in bed with the midwife and nurses surrounding her, and a tiny baby in her arms.

"Papá!"

"Ay, mi hija!" Ernesto collapsed next to the bed and hugged Coco tightly.

"Oh Papá! I heard what happened! That wicked devil killed my poor husband! I knew you could never do such a terrible thing, no matter how much you disliked him… Papá, you're bleeding!"

"Never mind that, mija. Just knowing that you and the baby are alright makes me so happy." Ernesto looked down at the baby and smiled. "It's beautiful."

"Here Papá." Coco said as she handed him the baby. "I named him Eduardo, after his father."

Ernesto stood and lifted the baby up towards his face as the orchestra swelled in joyous symphony. "My grandson!… I will show you everything the world has to offer. And even beyond that! Just you wait! Because…"

**Time will tell our story**

**If our hearts are bold!**

**And I will be there by your side**
Adventurers young and oooooold!...

FIN

"Ay, at last!" Héctor moaned to himself underneath the rapturous applause from the audience. Still he stood up and put on a cheesy, forced smile as he waved to the adoring crowd below him and let Ernesto hold his hand up in the air. Same as all the other movie premiers he had been too, except now he could officially add actor to his resume. It had been hard to be away from his wife and youngest son for so long during the shoot, but working alongside Coco had made it more bearable than when he had toured alone with Ernesto all those years ago.

He looked to his right and saw Imelda holding Miguel as the little boy cheered, his smile turning slightly sad as Imelda met his gaze and then averted hers. He waved more enthusiastically towards the crowd to hide his hurt. These last few years with Imelda had been… strained to say the least. Ever since Miguel had been born she had seemed distant and closed off towards him. At first he let her be as she slowly healed from her invasive surgery, but those long months turned into long years of closed mouth pecks on the cheeks and nothing else. They slept in the same bed still but she always had her back towards him, never letting him touch her.

How he had longed to hold her and kiss her like he used to when they were both so passionately in love. Dios, he was still passionately in love with Imelda! But it seemed her love for him had cooled with time. When he had signed on to take a role in this movie part of him wished that Imelda would be angry with him for it, pleading with him to stay home with her and Miguel like she had done when Coco was a baby. But no, she had agreed that now was a good time for him to go off and gain new exposure as an artist. She had given him her blessing to go, and a small part of his heart had broken.

After a long session of interviews and photographs the family made their way back to Ernesto's mansion to rest, and Héctor finally found himself alone with his wife and son. He bent down to ruffle the little boy's hair. "So Miguel, what did you think of Papá's movie?" His smile faded when he saw Miguel glaring angrily up at him. "What's wrong? You didn't like it?"

Miguel crossed his arms in front of his chest and glowered. "You broke a guitar, Papá. I don't like that! That was bad, Papá!"

Héctor sighed in relief and laughed. He wasn't surprised that that part had irked Miguel. While all of his children had been musically talented, it was more like a fun hobby rather than a passion for them. Miguel, however, was the true embodiment of Héctor's love for music. Even at a young age Miguel had a fascination with all things music, and every time his father would play for him it was like the notes and lyrics flowed through him and gave him life. Music was sacred to him, so of course the destruction of something so pure and magnificent to the little boy was inexcusable.

"Ay, no Miguel! Don't worry, that wasn't a real guitar. It was a fake one made out of cardboard, the same stuff that's used to make Mamá's shoe boxes. Trust me mijo, I would never destroy a real guitar."

Miguel's eyes widened at that. "Really?" At his father's nod Miguel let out a big, one dimpled grin. "Good! I'm glad. I like the movie now. Make some more?"

Héctor chuckled and kissed his forehead. "Maybe some other time down the road, but if you want me to I will. Can't disappoint my biggest fan now can I?"

"I'm Tio Nesto's biggest fan!" Miguel happily said and made his way out of the bedroom, calling for Ernesto to come tuck him in and not noticing Héctor sag in disappointment.
"Of course you are..." Héctor straightened up and looked over to where Imelda was standing at her vanity table, taking off her pearls and earrings. Shyly he made his way over to her and cleared his throat to get her attention. "So... What did you think of the movie, mi amor?"

Imelda turned towards him and smiled. "It was very good. Coco was born to be a star. This is going to make her a bona fide celebrity of her own right, instead of being related to one."

"Si, you're right." Héctor rubbed the back of his neck. "Um... What did you think of my performance?"

Imelda paused for a second and turned her back towards him, pulling off the remainder of her jewelry and her fur stole. "You were very good as well, Héctor. And you looked... muy guapo on screen."

Héctor perked up and smiled at the praise. "Really? W-well if you want I can tell you all about the production while we go to bed-"

"It's been a long night Héctor, and I'm really tired. We can talk about it with the whole family tomorrow at breakfast, alright?" She walked over and pecked him quickly on the cheek. "I've got to go put Miguel in his night clothes. But you can go ahead and go to bed. Buenas noches, Héctor."

She left the room quickly, not noticing how desperately Héctor had leaned into the kiss and how his hand had reached out towards her as she left. He stood there for a few minutes before finally retracting his hand and placing it over his heart as he let out a sad sigh. A persistent ache settled behind his eyes and he rubbed his head tiredly. His head hung low he slowly made his way over to his suitcase to grab some pajamas, ready to spend another lonely night.

"Buenas noches, diosa..."

As everyone settled around the breakfast table, Ernesto was busy chatting away with Héctor. "I'm telling you people could not get enough of Coco last night! She is going to go to big places, I'm telling you. Theresa has already booked her for another movie! It's going to start shooting at the beginning of June. Ay, I'd be jealous if I wasn't getting a cut of her profits for having discovered her. Heh, getting paid for discovering my own goddaughter!"

"June?" Julio asked with some exasperation. "That's less than two weeks away! She's been gone for so long already. Victoria misses her Mamá so much!"

"Well then she can see her on the big screen." Theresa said flippantly, not looking up from her ever present clipboard as she jotted down notes. "She is providing for her family, Señor Magallanes. Providing much more than a carpenter's salary can provide."

"Theresa!" Coco said as she looked apologetically at her husband. "There's no call for-"

"Matty?" At Imelda's question everyone looked to see Matty enter the dining room, a newspaper held limply in his hands as he stared off into space. He leaned against a marble pillar and let the paper drop, his face pale and his eyes filled with unshed tears. "Matty, what's the matter-MATEO!"

Everyone sans Theresa leapt from the table when Matty collapsed to his knees with a broken cry. They crowded around him as he began to sob in grief, with Héctor holding his son in support. "Mijo! What is it, what's wrong?!"

With a shuddering whimper Matty picked up the paper and held it towards his father. "La
Doncella Feliz! Barto's ship! Sunk by the Germans! There were… There were no survivors! Barto’s gone, Papá! He's dead!” He again collapsed into Héctor's arms, sobbing hysterically. "There's not even a body! His parents won't get to bury him! Aaah!" He curled onto the floor and repeatedly pounded the tiles as he screamed in extreme grief and rage. "BARTO!"

As the family circled over and tried to comfort their hysterical son, Héctor looked down at the headline of the page:

**MEXICO DECLARES WAR ON NAZI GERMANY**

Chapter End Notes

Ernesto: Coco will be in the movie too! And of course she'll play my-
Héctor: (thinking) Please don't say love interest, please don't say love interest, please don't say love interest...
Ernesto: -daughter!
Héctor: Ay, gracias!
Barto was dead.

Inquiries had been made in Jalisco just to be sure, with faint hope that it was not the case. Maybe he had missed the ship the day it set off, after all it wouldn't have been the first time it had happened. Whether he had slept in, been too sick or too hungover to work that day, any reason would have brought such joy and relief to his family and to Matty as well. But no, his name had been written into the sign-in register for the ship the day it set off, and he did not stay behind in Florida to rest. Bartolomeo Rosales had perished along with the other fifteen crewman of the Doncella Feliz, and his body was now lost in the vast Gulf of Mexico.

The Riveras hurried back to Santa Cecilia to pay their respects to the grieving family, save for Coco. Theresa would not let her out of her commitments to her movie and to her adoring fans. In the end Coco, Julio and Victoria had parted ways yet again, and from the way Victoria had fussed and cried and the way Julio sulked while looking out of the train window it had not had been on the most pleasant terms.

Barto's family was not as well-known as the Riveras, nor anywhere near as wealthy. The traditional vigil for their son was small and humble, a simple picture of his grinning face in place of a body surrounded by flowers and candles. Rosita and Julio talked amongst Barto's many little sisters, Imelda and Héctor spoke quietly to his grieving mother, and Matty slowly made his way over to his distraught father. Señor Rosales sat slumped into a chair as he stared at the floor, his whole face and mustache drooping in sadness. He looked so much like his son that Matty was sure Barto would have grown up to be indistinguishable to him, white hair and all. Now, however, that would never come to pass.

"Señor Rosales?" Matty asked quietly as not to startle the man.

He looked up and smiled weakly at Matty. "Ah, Mateo! Come, sit." He gestured for the young man to take a seat next to him. Once he had done that Señor Morales patted him heartily on the knee. "I'm so glad you were able to come pay your respects, chico. And thank you for offering to pay for Bartolomeo's headstone for the cemetery. He might not be buried here, but it will be nice to have something grand to put his offerings on when he comes to visit."

"I'm glad I could help in some way." Matty said.

"I'm sorry you had to cut your vacation short, though. I know you must not get much time off from school."

Matty shook his head vehemently. "No, I don't care about that! Barto was my best friend, I'd do anything for him!"

Señor Rosales' mouth drew into a quivering line and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Your friend… Sí …" Wiping a rough hand across his face he coughed loudly before he continued.

"I must be honest with you chico, I… Didn't care much for Barto when he was a boy. Not that I didn't love him, no, he was my only and beloved son! But… I did not approve his attitude and of
some of his decisions. He got caught up with that mocosó Sergio and acted in a way that shamed both his Mamá and myself. His grades were poor, he was disrespectful towards his family and was always getting into trouble… I was certain that he would end up in jail or worse…"

"And then you became his friend and turned him around. Gracias a Dios that you did! You turned him into a good-hearted, hard-working, honorable man that I was proud to call my son. When he got the job in Jalisco he was so thrilled, chico, and he was so excited to tell you first! Because you inspired him to be better than he ever thought he was."

"But now he's dead." Matty said stiffly as his fingers dug into his knees. "Killed by those damn Germans… If it wasn't for me he wouldn't have been on that boat."

"Don't think that Mateo!" Señor Rasales said as he tried to calm down the boy's ire. "He was a good man and proud to have gotten such a good job. I shudder to think what he would have become if he was still with that Sergio-

"Aww, did someone mention my name?"

Both looked up to see the man in question lazily leaning against the wall as he smirked. Sergio was only twenty-two, but the last few years of excess drinking and other vices had aged him an extra ten years. His hair had thinned on top, he had put on extra weight over the years, and he was missing some teeth that Matty was sure he had punched out himself in the past. With their attention now on him he sauntered over and picked up Barto's picture.

"What are you doing here, cabron?" Señor Rosales growled, his eyes never leaving the picture in case Sergio decided to do something malicious to it. "You weren't invited."

"I thought the whole town always comes to funerals? Though with no body I guess you could just call this a depressing dinner party." He turned the picture around to face them. "Besides, why wouldn't I come to mourn the loss of an old friend?"

"You were never his friend, Sergio." Matty said as he stood up. "He was just a lackey to you. You didn't give a damn about him, or anyone except yourself."

"Oh sí sí, I know you both became real tight amigos." Sergio placed the photo back down between the candles, Matty and Señor Rosales sighing a little in relief. "You know that's probably what killed him, don't you? Everyone close to you ends up a corpse, don't they? You're cursed."

Matty slowly inhaled and exhaled the flash of anger away. "How many times do I have to knock you on your ass before you realize that you shouldn't mess with me?" At this point it seemed unfair for Matty to punch Sergio, being a good foot taller than the bully who seemed to have stopped growing all those years ago from their first fight.

Sergio ignored the question. "What are you going to do now, though? Now that you know who killed Barto? You gonna go kill some Nazis? I'd really like to see you with a gun, do you even know how to fire one? Maybe you should just go over there and befriend them, that'll be a sure-fire way to drop them like flies."

His fists and jaw clenching, Matty hissed. "Why don't you go back to the cantina, Sergio? Your seat is getting cold and lonesome."

"Ha, I knew it!" Sergio let out a wheezy laugh and pointed at Matty. By now everyone had crowded around the two, wondering if another brawl would occur between the town drunk and the prestigious Rivera boy. "You talk like you care about Barto, but you won't even try to avenge his
death! Coward! Go back to your snotty little school house in America with all your rich friends! Puto! Pinche puto!"

"Callate!" Matty screamed and bore down on Sergio. "I loved Barto! And I will avenge him! I'm going to Africa next week for training and I will be fighting while you sit here wasting away and doing nothing for your old friend, puto!"

"You're what?!"

With that sudden sharp question Matty suddenly realized he had an audience surrounding him, including his parents. Imelda held her hand over her mouth in horror as she and Héctor both stared at him in wide-eyed disbelief. Matty sighed as he felt an immense weight lift from his chest, but he didn't feel any better. He just looked at his parents sadly and nodded. "I enlisted in the war effort." Then he closed his eyes in shame as Imelda started to glare at him, only to open them when he heard a snicker.

Sergio smiled a nasty, gap-toothed grin at him. "Well well, I guess that the cat's out of the ba-"

Sergio's head whipped around as Matty's fist crashed into his jaw and he crumpled like tissue paper to the floor. The audience gasped in shock, but Matty paid no mind to them as he shook his knuckles loose and gazed towards his dumbfounded parents.

"Mierda…"

Miguel sat on the edge of the bed as he watched his older brother pack up his suitcase in silence. Dante laid his head across his lap and he softly petted it, the old dog's eyes distantly watching his master move around. The soft cloudiness across the pupils showed the beginnings of cataracts, and the skin had grown even more wrinkled than a paper bag. Still the dog was beloved and cared for by the family, and at nearly twelve years old had lived much longer than all the other dogs out on the streets. He still whimpered when Matty placed another folded shirt into the suitcase: Another piece of him going. Going to a place where he couldn't follow him. To a place where he might never return from.

"Are you gonna fly a plane in the war?" Miguel asked with a hushed tone of wonder. Wars and battles were only stuff he had heard about in bible lessons and tales from old veterans of the Revolution. Now his brother was going to fight in one too!

Matty laughed a little. "Maybe but probably not, I'm pretty sure they want someone with good eyesight to fly a plane." He said as he tapped the edge of his glasses.

"Oh…" Miguel sagged a little in disappointment before perking up. "Well, are you going to shoot a gun?"

This caused Matty to pause with a shirt still in hands. He looked over at his baby brother, looking up at him with a dimpled grin and wide, shining eyes. A little brother that he loved very much yet barely got to see because of school. The flights across the United States and the long train rides towards Santa Cecilia were long, draining and a real pain in the neck. But he had been determined to come see his family every chance he got, and quite frankly it wasn't like they couldn't afford it. He wanted to leave a good impression on Miguel in his early years and be a good brother. Would this be the last memory of himself he would impact on the him? A barely grown man off towards his uncertain fate, with a little boy's awe and admiration clouding what was otherwise a very reckless choice of action on his part?
He placed the shirt in the suitcase with a cough. "Sí gordito, I know for a fact that I will."

"Whoa…"

A light knock drew their attention to the open doorway to see their father standing there with grim determination on his face. Héctor stared hard at his eldest son before turning towards his youngest. "Miguel, I need you to go so your brother and I can talk. Why don't you go play with Victoria?"

"Aww, but Papá-"

"Now Miguel."

The little boy stiffened at the sudden sternness in his father's otherwise playful voice. Feeling the sudden tension in the room Miguel hopped off the bed and walked out of the room with old Dante trailing next to him. With one last look at the two of them he sprinted across the courtyard in search for his supposed sobrina but his definite prima.

Matty stared at his father for a few long seconds before turning back to his suitcase."So… I guess you drew the short straw."

Héctor shook his head. "No, your Mamá… didn't want to say or do something that she might… regret."

The conversation between him and Imelda had been rushed and in harsh, frantic whispers as they argued back and forth about what to say to their son. Imelda had been willing to go in there and hogtie Matty to the bed or try to beat some sense into him. When Héctor tried to calm her, her ire turned towards him.

"Then you go talk to him if you know what to say! I'm tired of being the disciplinarian in this family! It's your turn! Try acting like an actual father rather than an amigo!"

That had hurt. He knew he was always the more easy-going parent out of the two of them, but did she really think that less of him? He stood there for a few shocked moments to calm himself and maybe, just maybe, let her realize what she had just said and try to apologize. When she just continued to glare at him he nodded sadly and had made his way over to Matty's room.

"Well there's nothing to say, Papá. Mexico has declared war on Germany. I am a young, strong and able-bodied citizen. It is my duty to fight for my country in order to prevent more death from reaching here."

"You don't have to do this mijo." Héctor said softly. "There are other ways you can help with the war. I could send money, supplies even, to help support the troops. Rivera Shoes will make the best combat boots for the soldiers. You can go back to school, continue on with your dream. No one would think less of you for not going out to fight."

Matty scoffed. "What, you expect me to hide away from the fight in the church attic like you did?"

Héctor's eyes widened and again he was shocked into silence. Slowly the icy hurt began to thaw and a slowly simmering rage started to boil in his chest. "I… I-I was twelve years old, Mateo… They were ripping children away from their homes to fight in war that they should have had no part in! I told you all that story to warn you kids about the dangers that your Mamá and I faced when we were young, and all this time you thought of me as a coward?!"

Matty closed the suitcase with a sigh. "No, Papá. But I'm not a child anymore. I'm a grown man. I'm going of my own volition. Nothing you can say will stop that."
"What about your studies?!"

"They'll be waiting for me when I get back. You think I'm the only student to go off fighting?"

"When you get back? If you get back, you mean!"

"Papá…"

"Can't we at least wait on it for a while?" Héctor pleaded. "Think this through? This is a very sudden decision and you're not thinking straight-"

"I enlisted two months ago Papá."

Héctor reeled back at what his son had just told him. Shaking his head in disbelief he tried to rack his brain over what he was just told. "Two… Two months ago?... And you never told us?! What, you were just going to sneak off to Europe and make us think that you were still safe in New Haven? Why didn't you tell us?!"

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

"But…" Héctor shook his head again. "Wait a minute! Mexico just declared war! How could you have already enlisted?!"

Matty sighed as he rummaged through his bedside drawer. "The United States is letting any Hispanics staying in the country enlist. They need the men."

Héctor laughed bitterly and started to pace across the room. "Of course they do! And you know why? Because they are putting all of their boys through a meat grinder and are running out of them. So of course they would try to snatch up any kid they can find! Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans! I bet they're also taking in Africans and Asians! All the people that they have exploited, abused and cast out in the past! Remember all those years ago when they kicked all of the Mexicans out of their country? And now they want us back?!"

Héctor stepped forward and grabbed his son by the shoulders and shook him hard. "Don't you see?! They are going to use you as fodder! They think of you as expendable! But… You are not to me. Not to our family. You are priceless! Por favor, Matty… Por favor…"

Matty looked at his father, his lips a thin line that Héctor saw tremble a little bit. They stared at each other for a few long moments before Matty finally broke eye contact and looked down. When Héctor looked as well he saw what his son had been looking for in his bedside drawer: A white linen handkerchief cradling a golden, jewel-encrusted pocket-watch. A gift from his godfather all those years ago. When they had all been so happy and carefree. And across the watch Ernesto's immortal words were etched: Seize your Moment. Héctor's heart clenched at the sight and then dropped in despair when Matty's fingers clenched around it and shoved it into his pocket.

"I have to do this Papá." Matty said with resolve. "I'm not changing my mind. You don't know what it was like back in America. How shaken everyone was when they bombed Pearl Harbor. I saw families ripped apart, grown men sobbing hysterically over their lost loved ones. They've only sunk a few oil tankers here. What happens when they come for the major cities? Mexico City. What about Coco and Tio Nesto?... No, I've got to do this. I've got to seize-"

"Don't!" Héctor hissed, his anger returning. "Don't you dare finish that phrase! I've always hated it and it doesn't suit you! You talk about families ripping apart. What do you think you're doing just now?!"
Matty growled and shoved his father's hands away. "I'm going Papá!"

"I forbid you to go!"

"You can't do that! I'm a grown man! I don't have to do what you tell me to do anymore!"

"I will not just sit here and let you die!"

"Why not?! You let Leti die-"

Matty instantly regretted the words as soon as they had left his mouth. Just like Héctor had instantly regretted the moment his fist struck out and punched his son off of his feet and sent him to the ground. The air stood still as both men panted, one in pain and one in rage. Matty finally managed to look up at his father with watering eyes and a trail of spitty blood drooling out of his mouth from where his cheek had torn against his teeth. Several emotions raged through them: anger, sorrow, guilt, fear. They both glared at each other until Héctor finally broke the silence.

"There… See?... If you can't stand a punch from an old man… What makes you think you can take on Hitler's war dogs?"

Matty's glare deepened and his face flushed red as he wiped the spittle off of his face. Shakily he lifted himself off the ground, never breaking eye contact, and he finally shouted back with a voice crackling with emotions and unshed tears.

"I'm going Papá! Hate me if you want, but my mind is made up!"

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Time stopped.

Time reversed.

Héctor saw the past. His past. When he was a young man, not much older than his son standing before him, walking away from his best friend and their chance of success, their dreams of wealth and stardom. To go back to where he belonged. Back to his family. His heart had led him, not his common sense telling him he needed to make money for his family. Not his childish dream of cheering crowds, elaborate stages and beautiful music. Not his sense of loyalty towards Ernesto. No, he had followed his heart. And he had never regretted it. Not for a moment.

His son was doing the same right now. Héctor didn't know he would later achieve fame and success with Ernesto when he had left at the time. It had just happened. Just like Matty didn't know if he would triumph against the forces trying to claim their world, or that he would perish so far from home.

It wasn't the same. Not by a long shot. But his son had made up his mind about where he was going with his life, just like he had. Who was he to change it?

His deep thoughts were broken when Matty roughly pushed past his shoulder, suitcase in hand, and started his way out of the complex. With a gasp Héctor whipped around and chased after him, calling out.
"Mateo! Wait!... Stop!... Please wait!"

To his great relief Matty did stop with his back ramrod straight before turning to glare at him again. 'What could you possibly have to say now?' he seemed to say. Héctor panted a little, trying to swallow down the lump in his throat. A faint tickling sensation down his cheeks startled him. He was crying. Matty must have seen the tears too as his shoulders dropped a little and he seemed more willing to listen.

"I-" Héctor croaked out, sniffling. "I could never hate you… I couldn't… begin to fathom how I could even start to hate you… You're my son, Mateo… I love you more than life itself. But you have to understand that there is no going back from this. Do you?"

Matty stared at him a little longer before he sadly nodded. "I know the risks… But I have to do this..."

Héctor nodded back, rubbing his face harshly before stepping up towards his son. Matty eyed him wearily, obviously anticipating another strike from his father, and Héctor felt sick at the sight. Instead he held out a hand towards him, an offering of peace and love, and was immensely relieve when Matty put down his suitcase to clasp it back.

"Then I wish you luck." Héctor said with a watery smile. "And you have my blessing to go."

Matty's eyes widened in shock for a moment before he sighed deeply, a weight off of his chest. "Gracias, Papá."

"Your blessing?"

Both of them turned to see Imelda standing there, her fists clutching against her dress and her face a mixture of disbelief, sadness and anger. She marched up to her husband and glared daggers at him. "I told you to go talk him out of this nonsense and instead you give him your blessing to go?!"

Héctor cringed back from his wife's glare. "Imelda, I tried. But his mind is made up."

"What kind of a man sends his son off to his certain death with a blessing?! Estas loco?! Ay, Héctor how could you?!" Imelda hung her head with a dry sob and turned away from the both of them. "How could you?!"

Héctor reached out towards his wife. "Imelda, it might not-"

To his great surprise Imelda whipped back and slapped his hand away before he could even touch her. Héctor recoiled and held his stinging hand to himself as she let into him.

"Don't you dare touch me! Not after what you did! I feel like I could strangle you right now!" She pointed a finger into Héctor's face and growled, "Hear this now, Héctor Rivera: If our son dies in this stupid war, then his blood will be on your hands." As Héctor gaped at her words she turned her blistering ire towards Matty. "And you! Don't think that if you die that I will mourn you. You know that I don't suffer fools lightly, and right now you are perhaps the stupidest person I have ever come across!"

Matty sighed, "Mamá, please-"

Imelda continued to scream, tears running down her face. "No no, just get out! Get out of here! Go on your little crusade, go away from your family! Just leave! That's all this family does nowadays anyway! You too Héctor!"
"I want you to leave!"

And at that moment all the years of tension, distance and loneliness turned into a sharp blade. A blade that swiftly and merclessly struck down and sliced his heart into pieces. She wanted him gone. She didn't want him. Didn't love him anymore. This was what finally brought it all out in the open. He had finally lost her. Feeling the tears returning, he still had to ask. "Imelda… why?"

"Because I can't stand the sight of you! Of either if you!" Imelda screeched, her tears now turning into sobs. "So go inside and p-pack your things and say goodbye to Miguel! I want nothing to do with you, Héctor Rivera! So just go!"

And with that she ran back into the house, crying all the while, and slammed the door shut behind her, leaving two heartbroken men in her midst. And from the window on the other side of the complex Miguel watched in fear and anguish as his mother cast his father out from their home. If going to fight a war brought this much sadness to his family then maybe fighting wasn't so cool after all.

It was awkward.

Very awkward.

Matty sat on the train station bench in a defeated slouch, looking at his father out of the corner of his eye. Héctor's suitcase was bulging with haphazardly folded clothing, some of it sticking out of the case, and Héctor looked the picture of absolute misery. Wearing a wrinkled traveling coat and a hat smashed against his messy hair, Héctor simply leaned back over the bench to stare up at the sky in dejection, his throat bobbing up and down painfully.

Matty decided to break the silence. "I can't believe Mamá did that."

Héctor snorted. "I can't believe she took this long. This has been a long time coming…"

"Really? Why?"

"… I wish I knew."

Matty stared at the ground, his heart aching for his father. "I'm sorry Papá…"

Héctor groaned and leant forward, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes to ease the ever increasing tension headaches that he had been getting recently. "I know you're sorry. You're always sorry. When are you going to realize that simply saying sorry isn't going to cut it?!"

"Fine! I'm s-… Whatever…" The awkward silence continued for a little while longer before he had to ask. "Where will you go?"

"Back to Ernesto's." Héctor mumbled. "Promised Miguel I would do another movie for him, might as well pass the time doing exactly that. He wants it to have lots of music and animals. And Coco will be there too, so it'll be fine. I'll be fine. Juuust fine…"

Matty nodded. Coco being there would help, as well as Tio Nesto. His Papá wouldn't be deprived of all of his family. Not like himself. But no, he had made his decision. He would do his duty to protect his country and his family.
A sharp whistle caught both of their attention and they saw a billowing engine coming towards the station. Checking his pocket watch Matty sighed and cleared his throat. "That's my train… Heh, I-I am not looking forward to it!" he said as he cracked a weak smile. "I have to travel to Texas, then I have to fly to Florida. Three stops in between, by the way. Ugh, and I dread going over the ocean to Africa. It's going to be hell, I can tell already-AH!"

Matty was suddenly pulled from his seat into a standing position and enveloped into a crushing hug. Héctor held on tightly to him as he memorized his warmth, his smell, his sense of being, his son for what he knew could be the last time ever. He squeezed even tighter, burying his face into Matty's shoulder and shuddering in fear and sorrow.

"Papá!"

"Promise me miyo! Promise me that whatever happens that you return home. Whether that is alive and well, hurt, missing parts or d-… dead… that you will come back home to your family. Don't become a nameless face in a ditch. Come-back-home! Promise me! Please!… Promise me…"

Matty wilted into his father’s embrace and returned it, tears running down his face as he nodded. "I promise Papá… I promise… I love you Papá…"

Héctor finally let out a sob. "I love you too, Mateo Rivera!... I love you so much!..." Both men clung to each other, their cries drowned out as the train pulled into the station with a loud screech and a piercing whistle.

The train soon left after that, carrying Mateo Rivera off to face his destiny. And across the town an old Xolo dog shook himself loose from an afternoon nap in the sun and trotted out of the Rivera complex. Down the winding roads he traveled, passing all the other citizens going about their daily lives towards his destination: Pantéon Santa Cecilia. Weaving between all of the headstones he finally reached the one belonging to one Leticia Rivera.

The aging dog went around to the backside of the tombstone and, with no one there to witness it, disappeared on the other side. Leaving behind only a flurry of orange flower petals.
Chapter End Notes

Yes! I'm finally caught up with FF.Net! Feels good.
"Quiet on the set!"

"Días de la Revolución, scene fourteen, take twenty."

"Bueno, roll camera… and… action!"

As the canned music swelled to glorious heights Ernesto turned towards the cameras with a gleaming smile, a rifle in hand and covered in smudges of dirt. He gestured to all of his fellow soldiers with a hearty laugh. "Come amigos! The enemy is on the run! Now is our chance to be rid of Huerta and his regime once in for all!"

A child, no older than ten years old and clearly haunted by the horrors of war, sniffled up at Ernesto. "Ay, but Estaban! The soldiers have been fighting for days non-stop! We are too tired to move on!"

Ernesto smiled sympathetically at the young boy. "I understand, chico. Despite my triumphant appearance, my soul and my bones are as weary as yours and everyone else's. But we must not think of that now. We must think of our wives and our children who are depending on us to keep them safe and ensure a brighter future for them." When all of the soldiers still murmured in their despair and exhaustion, Ernesto snapped his fingers. "There's only one way to bolster a tired spirit, and that is with a song. Elias, mi hermanito, play for us and instill new life into our hearts!"

…..

"Ahem… Elias, mi hermanito, play for us and instill new life into our hearts!"

All eyes turned towards Elias' actor and then they scoffed in irritation and disgust. There he was, slouched against the trench wall with his sombrero slipping onto his face and his guitar loosely held in his hands, snoring loudly and oblivious to the world around him.

"Héctor!"

"Qué?!!" Héctor jumped up towards his feet in wild terror, blinking away the sleep and seeing the furious glares of the cast and crew bearing down on him. "Oh, right. Uh… Wake up, mi hijos, the time has come."

"CUT!"

The child actor ripped his hat off of his head slammed it to the ground. "Madre de Dios, Rivera! How many times do you have to screw up before we can finish this damn movie?!"

Héctor huffed and glared down at the kid. "Well, why do we have to do this scene so many damn times, anyway?! We had a perfect take hours ago! Enough is enough!"

"Now now." Ernesto placed himself between the two and smiled sweetly. "There's no need to fight. We are all tired, sí, but it won't be long and soon we can go on to the next scene-"
"Vete a la chingada!" the boy screamed as he furiously marched off the set. "I turned down a very lucrative offer to be in your movie Ernesto, but now I'm regretting it immensely! Until he gets his act together I'll be in my trailer!"

Ernesto sighed as he watched the little brat walk away. "That's what I get for hiring the cute amorcito of Mexico. More like the mierdito of Mexico, eh Héctor?" He turned towards Héctor with a grin that faded into concern when he saw his friend sighing with his fingers rubbing into his eyes. "Amigo, are you okay?"

"I'm tired Ernesto." Héctor mumbled. "We've been at this all day with no breaks. I just want to go to my trailer too and… drink some water."

"Ah, before you go Héctor look who's here!" Ernesto dragged a reluctant Héctor past all the cameras towards two figures standing off to the side. A middle-aged man and a young woman, both wearing impeccable business attire and grinning as the two approached. "Héctor, this is Señor Andres Dominguez and his lovely wife Florencia. They are the producers for this movie as well as several of my others. We go way back!"

"Neto!" Florencia kissed both of Ernesto's cheeks and smiled gracefully. "It's always so exciting to see you perform, whether it's behind the camera or on stage. But it's even better now that you got Teto here to finally come from out of the shadows to truly show off his own stage presence!"

Héctor's eyebrow quirked a little. "Teto?" He hadn't been called that since he was five!

"Ah, my wife is a bit of the nick-namer. Aren't you Flor?" Andres tapped his wife's button nose and she giggled loudly. Too loudly for Héctor's taste as he winced. "I must say Ernesto this movie couldn't have come at a better time. Not only is it a historical piece and a musical, but it also parallels with the current war! Young, valiant men fighting for what's right to protect their country!"

Florencia nodded. "Sí and it's sure to sell well once people know that a good portion of the sales will be sent to support our troops." She sighed and pouted a little. "It's a terrible time though. The thought of any of our children being sent off to fight is terrifying! And so far from home!" She prattled on, not noticing Ernesto silently but forcefully shake his hands and head at her.

"You are right Flor." Andres smiled and turned his attention towards Héctor. "I was eighteen when the revolutionaries came knocking on our doors, looking for recruits. My Mamá was wise enough to squirrel me away until they left though. After all it's a parent's responsibility to protect their children... Say, you've got a son fighting overseas right now, don't you Teto? What was his name again? Maxímo?"

Héctor simply stared at Andres, an empty feeling forming in his chest and spreading throughout his body. Blinking rapidly, he looked away towards the direction of his trailer, towards a source of security. "Yes, that's right... Nice to have met you both, but if you'll excuse me..." He trailed off and started to hurry to his destination. Dios, he needed some water. He had only just cleared the soundstage doors when Ernesto had managed to catch up to him and grab his arm.

"Héctor, wait!" Ernesto placed his hand on Héctor's shoulder and looked appropriately chagrined. "I'm sorry about that. I should have known that would happen. For all of their many virtues when it comes to business and entertainment, tact is not on the list."

Héctor sighed. "It's fine Ernesto. It's not like it's a secret that Matty is off fighting."

"I'll spread the word around that that subject is taboo. You won't hear about it again. And you go
ahead and take a few hours to rest, hermanito." Ernesto smiled. "After all, your happiness is my happiness."

Laughing bitterly Héctor looked at Ernesto and grinned. "Is that right? Well then I feel sorry for you."

"Héctor..."

Turning on his heel Héctor left a despondent Ernesto his wake, his only goal being to get to his trailer and to get some water. Or rather, what looked like water. These days it's whatever was clear enough to pass as water to the unsuspecting passerby. Tequila, mezcal, vodka, gin, anything that would make the ache in his chest and the unrelenting headaches go away for a short period of time. Not that he was fooling anyone at this point. His sloppy performances and his tendencies to fall asleep on set were enough to give away that he spent very little of his working hours sober. All of this would be enough to have him fired on the spot and easily replaced if he were just a lowly actor with a disposable contract. But no, he was co-owner of this very studio that employed all who worked there. He was the reason that they were well-paid and able to provide for their families. So yes, Héctor Rivera just drank water and was just easily tired all the time. End of story.

Turning the corner towards salvation Héctor bit back a groan as he saw his personal assistant, Vicente, leaning against the trailer while writing in a personal log book. Vicente was a good kid with a level head on his shoulders and a keen sense of business. He was well on his way to rising up in the company and Héctor would have been happy to help him along the way, if he didn't have to be such a mother hen about Héctor's well-being. Just like he expected Vicente looked up at him from his book and his brow furrowed with concern. Here we go again.

"Finished already, Señor Rivera?"

Héctor shrugged. "They can film scenes without me. I'm tired and I want some water."

Vicente sighed and snapped his book closed. "Well, I have actual water in there waiting for you. As well as some food. I suggest you eat something and hydrate yourself, Señor. You don't look well."

"I'm fine, Vicente." Héctor growled. "What I need is some alcohol. Alcohol! There, I said it. Are you happy now?"

"Hardly." Vicente snapped back. "It's my job as your assistant to make sure that you are at your best, not be your mother. That being said we are all worried about you. You've lost too much weight and the alcohol is not helping your headaches, no matter what you say. It would be a load off my shoulders if you would let the on-set doctor see to you."

"No, I'm fine, seriously Chente." Héctor sighed and clapped a hand on Vicente's shoulder, putting on his best charming smile. Just tell him what he wants to hear and get him off your back. "You are a good kid. Thank you. I'll eat something, I promise. You don't have to worry about me anymore."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive."

Vicente still looked unsure at his boss but nodded. "Bueno. I also took the liberty of stopping by the mansion and picking up your mail."

"Ah, gracias amigo. What would I do without you?" And with that he walked into his trailer and slammed the door shut, blocking out the list that Vicente prattled on about exactly what things
Héctor couldn't do without him.

The trailer was spacious enough for a queen-sized bed, a sofa and a makeup table with room to spare for any make-up artists and costumers to come in and make Héctor look movie-ready. Sure enough on the table Vicente had laid out a basket full of ripe fruit and pan dulce as well as a pitcher filled with half-melted ice water. Héctor scowled at it, knowing that he had a secret bottle of mezcal hidden inside his pillow case just waiting to be drank, before sighing and pouring himself a glass of water. Might as well make Vicente happy. Ignoring the food he grabbed the stack of mail and flopped down onto the sofa to flip through them.

_Fan mail, fan mail, bill, monthly bar tab, fan mail... Wait._ Looking at the letter again Héctor's brow furrowed in confusion. Several stamps were plastered on it as well as a note saying it had been forwarded from America. Looking at the return address perplexed him even more. Who did he know from Egypt? It took a few moments for him to remember exactly where Egypt was. _Egypt... Africa!_ With a startled gasp he ripped open the envelope and sure enough he was met with Matty's clean handwriting. Huffing out a relieved sigh he began to read.

_Papá,

Sorry it has been a while since I have last written to you. I'm no longer in the training camp so I won't have a solid mailing address for quite the foreseeable future. I'm afraid that our correspondence will be one sided from now on, but I'll always make sure to write enough to let you know that I am all right.

As much as I hate to admit it you were right about some things. The Americans might appreciate the help that the Mexicans, Asians and Africans are providing but that doesn't mean that they like us as people, to put it lightly. All of the friends I made at camp have been split up and sent to other troops. It's not fair to the men who are unable to speak English without a decent translator, but I truly pity the ones who were sent to aid the French. Though I think a language barrier is the least of our worries right now.

I have been sent to Egypt to assist the British myself and I must say that they are much more welcoming to our help. I play the trumpet for them regularly to improve morale and they call me the Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy. Better than the stuff the Americans called me at least.

I was lucky enough to be stationed with Martín. I think he was the only reason I was able to get through training with a light heart. Unfortunately, that dreadful nurse at our training camp has been stationed here as well. As much as I try to get along with her, she is a harpy in a pretty package.

Despite the poor company and the dreadful rations that I have to choke down I do not regret my decision Papá. I see the destroyed buildings around me, the hurt citizens and the crying children and I can only hope that my presence here and my assistance will in some way keep this dreadful war far away from Santa Cecilia.

All my love to you and our family,

_Mateo Rivera- October 1 st , 1942_

Héctor pressed the letter to his forehead and shakily exhaled. Despite his hectic shooting schedule and normally passing his time in an alcoholic haze he had kept up to date with the latest news from across the world. Now that Matty was no longer in the safety of the training barracks and now into the folds of war his worries had quadrupled in size. Praying silently that his boy would remain safe he folded the letter in half and moved to stuff it back into the envelope before he noticed an extra
bit of writing on the back. Lifting it back up he read it, and what it said made his insides turn to ice.

*P.S. Mamá sent me a care package while I was at camp. She even sent me a new pair of combat boots and a picture of her, Miguel and Rosita. She says I'm still an idiota but I think she has made peace with my decision. I should have known she wouldn't have stayed mad for too long, and I hope she has forgiven you too.*

......

Imelda had sent Matty boots.

......

What?

**WHAT?!**

What had she said when Matty was leaving?! That he was stupid for risking his life, that she would never forgive him, that she wouldn't mourn over his dead body! And yet here she was sending him boots with every stitch and tack filled with love, ensuring that her boy would march throughout the arid African deserts without even the beginnings of a blister! She had forgiven her wayward child, but him?! Over four months of no contact from her! All phone calls to the shop ignored, all letters returned without being opened, not even giving him the chance to talk to his Miguelito! She had forgiven Matty for leaving the family to risk his life overseas, but she wanted nothing to do with her husband who would do anything in the world for her?!

*Why?! WHY ?!*

With an angry growl he flung the letter away and leapt off the sofa and towards the bottle in his pillowcase. He couldn't take it anymore! To hell with Imelda, with Matty, this damn war and this stupid movie!

*To hell with all of it!*

"Señorita! Espera! Who are you with?!"

"Señorita Rivera! Who is that man and that child?! Are they family?"

Coco held her daughter close to her chest to shield her from the flashing lights of the cameras and the loud, persistent questions of the reporters as they followed her down the pathway towards Ernesto's mansion. On one side her beloved Julio was trying to cover them both from the bright flashes with his suitcase, and on the other Theresa was tightly gripping her arm and briskly leading them to the door. Despite Theresa's harsh whispers that she not say anything to the reporters, Coco was irritated. Not only were they invading her privacy in the very house she resided in but they were also calling her señorita. She had to set the record straight.

"This is my husband Julio and my daughter Victoria."

Coco winced at both the increase of flashing cameras and the feeling of sharp fingernails digging into her arm. The four of them hurried down the driveway as reporters began questioning about them in earnest.

"Husband?! How long have you been married?!!"
"Was it a secret marriage?! Are you ashamed?!"

Coco glared at the reporters. "No! I have never been ashamed of my family! I love Julio more than-"

"Callate!" Theresa hissed and shoved the small family through the doors and slammed them shut, muffling the cries of the mob outside. "Perfecto. How many times have I told you to just keep on walking, maybe pose a little for pictures, and keep your mouth shut?"

"I had to let them know that I'm married Theresa!" Coco snapped. "What's wrong with that?"

"It takes away from your mystery." Theresa explained. "The less people know about your personal life, the more they give into their imaginations and idolize you. Desire you."

"I don't want that, Theresa. All I want to do is dance and be with my family!"

That was why Julio and Victoria were here. Tired of being apart all of the time Julio finally sold his shop and decided to move himself and Victoria into the mansion with Coco. Any happiness he and his daughter had felt at finally seeing Coco was dashed when they were swarmed by reporters the moment they had stepped out of the car. How had they known that they would be there? Were they following Coco's every move? Victoria took her face out from Coco's shoulder, biting her lip and trying not to cry.

"Estas bien, cielita." Coco cooed at her daughter. "They're noisy but they won't hurt you."

Victoria shook her head and tilted her chin up proudly. "I wasn't scared Mamá. I'm fine."

Julio leant forward to whisper in Coco's ear. "Miguel has been calling her a cry baby lately, so she's trying to act strong like Mamá Imelda. Her words, not mine."

"Ah."

"Coco!" Julio looked up and saw a man coming down the stairs towards them. A tall young man. A handsome man coming towards Coco and putting an arm around her. A strong arm from a tall, young, handsome man. Who was also looking at her with sweet concern. "Are you alright Coco?"

"Sí Vicente, I'm alright. Gracias."

"Theresa!" Vicente growled. "Why are there Papárazzi outside of the mansion? Where are the security guards?"

"I gave them the day off." Theresa shrugged arrogantly. "How was I supposed to know that they would choose today to swarm the place."

"It's called common sense, Theresa!" Vicente stood in front of Coco and puffed his chest out in intimidation, but Theresa merely raised a brow and Julio had to hold back a growl. "Especially since you know that there would be a child coming here today!... Unless you wanted them to take some photos of Coco's family."

"Nonsense! I would never do anything to endanger my client... Speaking of which shouldn't you be babysitting your employer?"

Vicente huffed. "I am the assistant to Héctor Rivera! To demean him in such a way is an insult to us both. It is an honor and a privilege to assist him in any way that I-"
"Hoooolaaaa!"

"...Mierda..."

All five of them looked up to see Héctor waving from the top of the staircase wearing the gaudiest serape they had ever seen and grinning broadly at them. "Hola mi familia! Long time no see!"

"Señor Rivera..." Vicente laughed nervously. "I thought you were having a meeting with Ernesto and the producers of the next stage show?"

Héctor snorted a laugh. "Sí sí I was. But you know how boooring I find them. 'Sides... Gotta greet mi yerno y mi nieta... What kinda host would I be if I didn't?"

"Ay... Alright fine, just don't slide down the bannister NO!"

Héctor let out a loud grito as he slid down the bannister on one hip. Despite everyone holding out their hands in apprehension and fear Héctor managed to windmill his arms enough to slide gracefully down to the bottom and land with a triumphant leap. Standing straight up he proudly made his way towards them. "See? You worry too much Chente. I'm just fi-AAH!" A flash of fur shot out in front of his feet and he toppled over into a clumsy sprawl, groaning as four little chihuahuas licked at his face and pulled at the serape. "Pinche perros! Vete!"

Victoria scrambled out of her mother's hold and raced over to pick one of the dogs off of Héctor's face. "Abuelito, are you alright?"

Héctor blinked up at the little girl, his eyes glazed and watery, before smiling and pushing himself up into a sitting position. "Ay, Victoria. Just seeing you makes me feel like I'm on top of the world. Give Abuelito a hooorrrp!—Give Abuelito a hug!" He crushed Victoria to his chest and squeezed tightly, everyone wincing as the poor girl's eyes started to bug out. "Ooohhh, let me take a look at you! Qué niña tan bonita! You look just like your Mamá Imelda."

Victoria's nose crinkled. "Abuelito you smell funny."

"Ppppfft! HA! Ay mija, you hurt my feelings! Again, just like your Mamá Imelda... Ooh, here's a magic trick for you! What's that behind your ear?" Flicking his wrist clumsily three pesos shot out his sleeve and rolled out onto the floor, one of the chihuahuas yapping as he chased after it. "Ay, joder! No, doooon't repeat that mija!"

"Come here Victoria." Coco said as she picked up her daughter away from Héctor. "Ay Papá, maybe you should go to bed. You are in no condition to be around a child right now." She then turned her attention towards Vicente. "I'm so sorry that he's running you ragged."

Vicente sighed. "No no. Like I said it's... a privilege."

"Fine then go." Héctor grumbled with his arms crossed. "I'm not a child. I can take care of myself. I just... need a hand getting up."

"Here Papá Héctor, I'll take you to your room." Julio grasped Héctor's hand and grunted with exertion trying to lift his limp, dead-weight father-in-law off of the floor.

"Gracias, Señor Magallanes." Vicente said gratefully. "I could use a break actually. In the meantime, I'll see to it that your daughter is settled into her room comfortably. I can also use this opportunity to talk to you, Coco, about some ideas I have about the stage show coming up."

"Not without me, you're not." Theresa added.
Julio watched as the four of them walked away into the grand meeting room, taking careful note how Vicente had placed his hand on his wife's back. Her lower back. Perfecto, he had just reunited with his wife and not five minutes after arriving another young, strapping tall man was putting his large, masculine hands on her! "Wait! Coco- Ay! Ugh, Papá Héctor you are heavier than you look."

"Heh heh... I'm dense... And I'm going down."

Julio managed to slow Héctor's descent until he was sitting propped up on the lowest step of the staircase, the four chihuahuas hopping into their laps and snuggling close. Julio sighed as he pet one of the dogs before looking at his father-in-law. "I've never seen you like this before, Papá Héctor."

"No no." Héctor swatted at Julio's shoulder and shook his head. "None of that. I don't want to hear it. I get enough of it from Chente and Coco. You should be like Ernesto. He doesn't care what I do as long as I write him pretty little songs... Although that won't last long." Héctor sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "You know how many songs I've written since I moved in here?... Cero. Not one song. Not even a little ditty. I can't even hum anymore. Pretty soon Ernesto will see that the well has dried up and I'll be out of a home... Again..."

Julio frowned deeply at that. "Héctor..."

"Ah! That reminds me!" Héctor smiled and gestured widely, startling the two dozing pups in his lap. "You must tell me what's been going on in Santa Cecilia! I heard you closed the shop. I'm sorry about that."

Julio shrugged. "It was really my father's shop, but he's mayor now so he didn't care what happened to it. It was never a passion of ours, not like what you and your family do for a living. Just a profession. And it's worth it if it means I can stay with Coco and Victoria gets to be with her Mamá... I also sold the car Ernesto gave us for scrap metal. Don't get me wrong we loved that car but I just didn't think it was appropriate anymore, you know, what with it being... German."

Héctor tittered at that. "Sí maybe they'll melt it down into a bomb... Just as long as it doesn't hit my son... How is Miguel? I haven't talked to him in months, Dios knows I've tried..."

"He's fine. He misses you though. He asks about you every day."

Héctor smiled and scratched under one of the dog's chin. "I miss him too. So much... How's Imelda? Is she... happy that I'm not there anymore?"

"Well she's quiet most of the time. Unless Miguel is around she doesn't smile often."

Héctor stared off into space, seeming to process this new information, and then sagged slightly. "I see... You'd think I'd be satisfied that she's unhappy but... I actually can't stand the thought of it. Not even my absence is helping. Nothing I'm doing is helping..."

Julio brow wrinkled in sympathy and he moved to touch Héctor's shoulder, but suddenly Héctor slumped forward suddenly. Startling the dogs off his lap he buried his face in his hands and started to shake. "Papá Héctor!"

"It's all ruined Julio!" Héctor cried out as large tears rolled down his cheeks. "My family is ruined! My wife hates me and won't let me come home and see my baby boy... I barely see Coco anymore... Matty is going to die on the other side of the world and I'll never see him again!... Ay my chest hurts! I'm so sick with worry about him I can't stand it!"

"Héctor-"
"Leti... Why did you have to go?"

Julio was shocked into silence as Héctor moaned out her name. Sighing sadly and casting his gaze downward, his own chest started to hurt. Risking any embarrassment this might have caused the both of them in any other situation, Julio pulled Héctor into a half hug as the older man leaned his head tiredly on his shoulder.

"It was all going so well... Until she died... I think their eighth birthday was the last time we were all truly happy... But now she's dead, and my son is trying his damnedest to join her." Taking a shuddering breath, he slumped further onto Julio's shoulder.

"Leti-ti-ti-ticia, with flowers in her hair... Where are you off to in such a hurry, and can you take me there?... I wanna go there..."

Julio couldn't take anymore. Gathering himself up he reached down to pull Héctor into a full stand. "Papá Héctor, let's just get you to bed and get some rest, sí?"

Héctor moaned and swayed as he pressed a hand into his eye. "My head hurts..."

"Sleep will help."

Blinking the tears out of his eyes, Héctor sniffed and gave Julio a watery smile. "Gracias Julio. I don't think you've been told this enough, but... You're a good man... Wonderful father... Would do anything... fer family."

Julio grinned and looped Héctor's arm around his shoulder again, ready to make the long trek up the stairs to Héctor's bedroom. "Gracias, Papá Héctor."

Héctor hummed a drunken laugh and stumbled as Julio led the way. "And I'm so... proud that you're my son-in-law. I'm so glad Matty married you."

"...Wrong kid, Papá Héctor."

"And your mustache... It's magnífico..."

"Gracias."

"... I wish I could grow one..."

"To our friendship! I would move Heaven and Earth for you, mi amigo! Salud!"

No... No no! Don't drink it. Say what you said before! Change my mind!

*But no matter how much Ernesto tried to swat the shot glass out of Héctor's hand, his arm remained still and he calmly sipped at his own drink. Inside he was screaming. Struggling. But he felt his own brow furrowing in contempt as he watched as Héctor downed his poisoned tequila. It was like he was watching a film of himself. While his outside remained cool and collected, inside he was pounding on an invisible barrier in his mind.*

Spit it out! PLEASE!

*Héctor set the glass down with a smile and picked his suitcase back up. "It's time. I must go."

Ernesto could feel his face stretch into a smile. "I'll walk to the train station with you."
What am I saying?! I can't control myself! I can't control anything! What is going on?!

Walking down the narrow, barely lit streets of Mexico City, Ernesto and Héctor made their way towards a billowing train just waiting to be boarded at the station. But this wasn't how it happened. Héctor left on his own, leaving him in the hotel room alone with his anguish. Alone with his newfound horror of what his thirst for fame and fortune had nearly driven him to do. Yet here he was, jauntily strutting next to his little brother as they laughed and joked about stories of their past youth.

Why am I so happy? Don't you know what you've done, cabrón?!

Suddenly it happened. Héctor let out a startled, pained gasp and curled in on himself, digging his fists into his stomach. Ernesto screamed and clawed his way harder against the barrier in his mind, desperate for control over his traitorous body. But still, his hand—no, not my hand! It's not me! This is not my body! I didn't do this!—mockingly patted Héctor on the back while the other swiftly managed to pry the guitar case from Héctor's trembling grasp.

"Perhaps it was that chorizo, my friend?"

BASTARDO!

Ernesto watched in horror as Héctor made a few weak, trembling steps towards the train. He fell to his knees, gazing blindly for a few agonizing seconds, before collapsing hard onto the ground. His face smacked the cobblestone street hard enough for it to bounce back up, a small white piece of matter flying out of his mouth and plinking against the ground. A tooth. The body heaved a few more pained and strangled gasps, and then with one last gargle it was over. Héctor was dead. He killed him.

You killed him

No, I couldn't have. He's alive! Héctor!

As Ernesto cried and pleaded for Héctor to get back up, the Ernesto clone that he was trapped in placed a foot onto Héctor's shoulder and coldly flipped him over onto his back. The eyes were glazed over and unseeing, the lips stained with blood with a trail slowly dripping down his face. Kneeling down, the Ernesto body placed a finger onto Héctor's neck to check for a pulse. Nothing. Ernesto wept in anguish, screaming for it not to be true, for Héctor to get up. But the Ernesto body simply shook his head, stood up and said:

"Look what you made me do."

No! This isn't what happened! Héctor's alive! I didn't do this! I couldn't have done this. I couldn't! I couldn't!

….

BUT YOU WOULD HAVE

With a choking scream Ernesto shot up from his bed, tears running down his face and a cold icy sweat pouring out of his body. Shaking with terror his eyes adjusted to the dark room and he gasped as his heart pounded hard inside his chest. Running a shaking hand through his hair and swallowing back bile only one thought was on his mind.

Héctor!
A hand snaked over his chest and he jumped with fright, looking down at the person in his bed. Florencia moaned and wrapped an arm around Ernesto's trembling form. "Mmmm... Neto? What's wrong?"

"Get off of me!" Ernesto roared and flung the woman out of his way, ignoring her startled yelp as he leapt from the bed and raced towards the door. Having enough sense of decency to grab a robe to throw onto his naked form, he flung the doors opened and raced down the hallway towards what he knew was Héctor's room. Héctor was in there! Had been for the last four months! It was just a dream! Héctor was alive! Please! Reaching the room Ernesto nearly ripped the door off of its hinges and ran inside. "HÉCTOR!"

Héctor snorted from a deep sleep and sat straight up on the bed, swaying in bewilderment and blinking in confusion. Blurrily he gazed around the room until his eyes landed on Ernesto. "...Leg."

Ernesto had sagged with relief the moment he had laid eyes on Héctor, panting as the adrenaline left his bloodstream and his heart returned to a normal rhythm. When what Héctor had slurred out registered into his brain, however, his brow creased in confusion. "What?"

"Leg... I found your-… your leg. Your cork leg... The 'Mericans had it... I found it, presidente..."

Ernesto gaped in confusion before slapping his forehead with a groan. "Dios mio, what is it with you and Santa Anna?! Go to sleep, pendejo!"

Héctor hummed out a laugh. "Sleep, sí. Gracias, presidente." Flopping back down onto the mattress he immediately erupted into large, deafening snores as Ernesto pulled the bedroom door closed again.

Slowly walking back down the hallway Ernesto let his body shake with the leftover terror from his dream. It was so real! He had honestly thought he was back in that hotel room all those years ago when he and Héctor had been young. And mixed in with all the fear, desperation and self-loathing he could also feel the clone's own feelings. Rage, greed, desperate hunger and a complete lack of care when Héctor drank that poison. The complete lack of empathy that he felt over murdering his best friend shook him to his core and made him feel sick. That wasn't him.

It could have been.

But I didn't do it.

 Doesn't matter. You thought about doing it. Had it all planned out. A contingency plan in case Héctor tried to leave you and take away your dream.

And you were going to do it.

Damn the consequences.

When you see your moment, you mustn't let it pass you by. You must seize it!

You're a monster.

How could you live with yourself?

You should have just gone through with it all those years ago. Save yourself some sleepless nights.

Ernesto let out a shuddering sigh as he traced the raised scars on the underside of his wrists, remembering that night all too well. Too much to drink, too many voices in his head, his insides
cramping so painfully with guilt guilt guilt GUILTY GUILTY! How could he have wanted to do that to his sweet little brother?! He was the one who needed to die. He was too dangerous to be around Héctor. What if he tried to do it again?! But the razor stung so much more than he thought it would, there was so much blood that it made him violently ill, and he was so frightened that he had ran out into the streets screaming and covered with blood. The next thing he remembered was waking up in a hospital room with bandages covering his wrists. Condemning himself to even more guilt and a lifetime of long sleeves and thick leather wrist bands.

Quite the fashion statement though, no? Everyone started wearing wrist bands after the great Ernesto de la Cruz started wearing them.

Bet they'd stop if they knew what you were hiding.

Such a coward. Can't even kill himself good and proper. Wouldn't want to deprive the world of his golden voice, would he?

The world is mi familia!

No, pendejo. Your familia is in a shoe shop in Santa Cecilia.

Or it was...

MONSTER
Pushing open his bedroom door he was greeted to Florencia sitting up in his bed. She had turned the lamps on and was lighting a cigarette, glaring at him as he came in. Blowing out a cloud of smoke she questioned, "What was that about Neto? What kind of man tosses a woman aside like basura?"

Ernesto gazed dully back at her, his face pale and his stomach flipping in on itself. He felt so sick. "Lo siento, Flor. I had... a very bad dream."

"Aww, Neto had a bad dream?" Arms snaked his way around Ernesto's sides and wrapped around his chest. Ernesto didn't even react as Andres leaned into the curve of his neck and hummed a laugh. "I would have thought we worked you out so much that you'd be too tired to dream."

Ernesto closed his eyes and sighed brokenly. He felt so cold, so empty, so *unworthy* of love that he simply leaned back into Andres' embrace and accepted the other man's touch. Anything to get his mind off of his demons. "I'm ready for more if you two are game."

"Oh you know we're always ready for anything," Florencia giggled as she rummaged through a leather satchel on the bed. Pulling out two baggies, one bleach white and one a tannish brown, she laid them out on the blankets in front on Ernesto. "What'll it be, Neto? Siesta or fiesta?"
Flicking between the two with an empty gaze Ernesto settled on the white bag. Picking up the brown bag he tossed it back to her. "Put that one away. I... don't want to sleep."

"Fiesta it is then!" Florencia squealed and dipped a pinky into the white powder to snort up quickly.

Ernesto was too tired to flinch when he felt Andres kiss him against the neck and push him over to the bed into Florencia's waiting arms. As he settled in for another night of depraved, mindless sinning, his thoughts turned to that family in Santa Cecilia. With hot tamales, beautiful music, the smell of leather and laughing children.

*Despite my triumphant appearance, my soul and my bones are as weary as yours and everyone else's.*

Truer words had never been spoken.

Chapter End Notes

Héctor: Did... Did I give you a kiss goodnight last night?
Julio: ... Sí.
Héctor: Ah... W-well, family members give goodnight kisses all the time!
Julio: Not to their son-in-laws... On the lips.
Héctor: (covers face) AY!....
Victoria meticulously sprinkled the orange cempazuchitl petals onto the floor leading up to the mini ofrenda her abuelito had set up on the makeup table in his dressing room. Looking over her work her little brow furrowed in agitation as she saw a few petals drifting away from the straight edges she had made. Placing her basket aside she picked up her small wooden ruler and scooted the petals over towards the others, nodding in satisfaction at the perfect triangle she had made from the door to the ofrenda. “I’m finished Abuelito!”

Héctor lifted the arm covering his eyes and looked blearily at the flower petals. “Uh... wow. I’ve never seen a flower path look so pristine before.”

Victoria quirked her head. “Pris-tine?”

“It means beautiful. Perfect.” Héctor smiled as the little girl beamed up at him. He knew that his granddaughter loved being praised almost as much as she loved learning new words. Groaning as he sat up from the sofa, the change in movement set off a short burst of hacking coughs that he tried to smother with his fist. The act left him gasping for breath and a deep ache in his chest. His eyes opened when he felt a little hand on his arm and he looked down to see Victoria staring at him worriedly. “Estoy bien, mija. It’s just a cough. Don’t worry.”

Picking up his granddaughter and settling her into his lap, the two of them looked at the ofrenda. It looked so different from the one at home. Smaller and with garish lightbulbs circling it instead of soft candlelight. But there were flowers, candies, a glass of water and of course a bowl of chocolate covered strawberries in front of a foto of Leti. His favorite picture of her, dressed in a traditional Oaxacan dress and holding a radish with her name carved in it as she beamed for the camera, was one of the few items he had managed to snag before he had left his home in Santa Cecilia behind. Sighing sadly, he rested his cheek atop Victoria’s head and held her tightly as they drank in the view.

“Abuelito?”

“Hmm?”

“What was Tia Leti like? Was she like me?”

Héctor snorted out a laugh. “Like you? Oh, no no no. You, mija, are a gentle, prim and proper little lady. Leti was like a hurricane. Couldn’t keep her room clean for more than an hour, ran all across the town with everyone scrambling to try and find her, and she was the loudest, craziest little girl ever.” His smile turned wistful as looked at Leti’s foto. “But she was also so clever. So funny. And she loved her family so so much. Anytime she entered the room everything became so much more brighter and fun. She was perfect.”

Victoria looked up at him. “Pristine.”

Héctor nodded. "Sí... She was pristine.”

“Why did she die?”
With a soft sigh Héctor twisted Victoria around so he could face her. “Well, she got very sick. So sick that she couldn’t get better.”

Victoria’s eyes widened and placed her hands on his chest. “You’re sick! I don’t want you to die!”

“Oh, oooohhh...” Héctor cradled Victoria’s close to him and rocked her gently. “I just have a chest cold. Your Tia Leti was a different kind of sick. Don’t you worry, I’m not going to die for a very long time.”

Victoria snuggled up close to her grandfather. “I’d miss you if you died. Do you miss Tia Leti?”

“... Every day.”

A soft knock at the door drew their attention away from the ofrenda to see Coco standing in the doorway. Héctor smiled warmly as he looked at his daughter decked out in a beautiful, shimmering folklórico dress and her hair done up with braids and flowers. Her expression however was crinkled with apprehension and doubt. “Papá, I need to talk to you-”

“No, Mamá!” Victoria cried out. “Not my pristine flowers!”

“Huh?... Oh!” Coco hiked up her flowing skirts and tiptoed around the petals into the room with a smile. “Perdon, mija. Papá I have some concerns about the show tonight. About the final number?”

“What about it?”

Coco played with the end of one of her braids, and for a moment Héctor wasn’t staring at the most vibrant new star of Mexico, but his little girl coming to him with a problem. “It’s just... You know how we all agreed that I would sing Remember Me with Tio Nesto? How Theresa encouraged it? I just... don’t feel right singing it. Not that version. That was our song Papá from when I was a baby. It’s very special to me. I like Tio Nesto’s version just fine, but... I feel like it would cheapen my memories of it. Do you understand?”

Héctor hummed a little to himself and cuddled Victoria closer. “Well it’s a little short notice, isn’t it mija? I mean the show will be starting soon.” Seeing Coco’s distressed look he smiled warmly at her. “But I’ll talk to Ernesto about it. He’s a born performer, he can handle last minute changes and be able to wing it.”

Coco visibly relaxed with a smile and came over to hug the both of them. “Gracias Papá!” Scooping up her daughter from his arms and settling her on her hip, she placed her hand on his shoulder. “Just make sure not to tell Theresa, okay?”

Héctor chuckled. “Oh, I would never. I’d like to see the look on her face when one of her brilliant ideas gets rejected without her say so.” While he had acknowledged Theresa as a brilliant manager with a sound business mindset, her personality was bristly and hollow and he pushed his daughter into doing things she wasn’t comfortable with far too often. He was happy that Coco was starting to find her own footing as a celebrity without being told what to do all the time by that bruja.

“Also get some rest before the show, Papá.” Coco said softly. “You’re sick and need lots of sleep.”

Héctor waved her off. “It’s just a cold! You worry too much, mija.”

“Uh-huh. Sure. You forget I’m a mamá now. It’s my job to worry.”

“Mamá?” Victoria asked sweetly as she fingered the elaborate beads of Coco’s necklace. “Can
you sing me your song? The one you’re going to sing tonight?”

Coco melted at her daughter’s big eyes and sighed. “Of course, mi angelita. Let’s go so your abuelito can get some sleep, si?” A she left, daintily stepping over the flower petals again, Héctor could hear her softly singing to Victoria. “Hear the bells ring, calling you hooome... Calling your souls to retuurn...”

Héctor’s smile faded and he once again looked towards the ofrenda. A short cough came up unexpectedly from his chest, but he managed to keep his lips shut to suppress it. Uncapping his hip flask, he took a giant swig of... What is it today?... Ah, whiskey. Smooth. Licking his lips, he looked at Leti’s picture and ran a finger across her cheek.

“Hola, mi amor.” Héctor whispered. “I, uh... know this a little unorthodox: Having an ofrenda in a dressing room and not at home... But y-you always said you wanted to see one of your Tio Nesto’s stage shows. You were always too young to go... Never got the chance to... But you’re twenty years old now! Definitely old enough!... So, I want you to enjoy yourself tonight, mija. Dios knows you deserve it and more.” He held up his flask at her picture and clinked it against the glass of water. “Salud, Leticia.”

A soft knock at the door interrupted Héctor’s toast. Turning he saw Vicente in the doorway, wearing a fine tuxedo and a stern look on his face when he saw the flask in Héctor’s hand. Choosing to ignore it he stepped though the petals on the floor, making Héctor cringe as his granddaughter’s work was sullied. “Are you ready, Señor Rivera?”

Héctor blinked at him several times. “Ready?... What time is it?”

“It’s 4:30.”

Héctor snorted and raised the flask to his lips. “Please Chente, now you’re really starting to become a worrywart. The show doesn’t start for another hour and a half. No need to start babying me so soon.”

Vicente sighed tiredly. “Not that, Señor. I’m asking if you’re ready for your visit with your wife and son?”

“PPPPPPPPPTTTTT!”
Héctor spat a mouthful of whiskey all over the make-up table and yelped as the candles briefly blew up at the exposure of alcohol. Vincente leapt over to the ofrenda and managed to pat out the ends of the slightly singed flowers and Héctor frantically tried to wiped off the splatter on Leti’s picture.

"Joder! Mierda! Wh-wh-WHAT?!" Héctor turned wild eyes at Vicente as he brought the picture frame down with a loud bang. Grabbing Vicente by his coat jacket he roughly shook him. "Imelda is here?! And Miguel?! Why-wh... Why didn’t you tell me before now?!"

With a huff Vicente pried off Héctor’s hands and brushed his jacket down indignantly. “I did tell you. Several times this past week. You were probably too drunk to remember.”

“Well then you should have told me when I wasn’t drunk!” Héctor growled out as he wiped the mirror of the spat-out whiskey.

“Which would have been when?”

“Ay, callate! Don’t give me that- AAH!”

Vicente jumped as Héctor let out a small shriek. “What now?!”

“Dios mio! Look at me!” Héctor cried out as he looked at his reflection for the first time, and actually cared what he saw, in who knew how long. “I look like a corpse! These bags under my
eyes, this stubble! *Am I broken out?*” His panicked rambling let out another burst of coughing and he bent over painfully as he endured the fit.

Vicente patted Héctor on the back harshly until he was able to take in a deep enough breath. “Señor, you should just sit down and-”

“Make-up!” Héctor croaked out and pushed Vicente out of the way. “Get the make-up girls in here pronto! I need them to work their magic on me before they get here!”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Señor. They *are* here”

“QUE?!”

“PAPÁ!”

Suddenly all of Héctor’s fears and anxieties melted away as he saw his little boy in the doorway jumping with excitement. Miguel was dressed up in the most adorable toddler-sized tuxedo and his hair was brushed back to look like a little gentleman, but his sweet face and gapped baby teeth made Héctor’s face split into the first real smile that he had in months. “Miguelito!”

“Papá, Papá, Papá!” Miguel squealed and tore through Victoria’s flower petals and into the waiting arms of his father. “I missed you Papá!”

Héctor pressed a kiss into Miguel’s soft hair and held him close. “Oh, mijo... You don’t know how much I missed you too!” He pressed more kisses on the boy’s plump cheeks, then held him out at arm’s length to get a good look at him. “Feliz Cupleaños, mi hijo! I’m so happy that I get to say that to you! Do you know how old you are today?”

“I’m this many!” Miguel said as he held up three fingers.

"Sí! Not long now and you’ll be a whole hand! You’ve gotten so big, Miguel! Pretty soon I won’t be able to lift you up.”

Miguel nodded proudly. “Uh huh! Mamá says I had a growth spit!”

“Growth *spurt*, Miguel.”

A gentle voice drew a gasp from Héctor. *Oh, that voice.* Turning towards the door his insides melted at the sight of his beloved wife, standing there in a stunning black dinner dress and a white fur stole draped across her shoulders. In one hand she held a sparkling clutch against her waist and in the other she held a picnic basket stuffed with what he could tell was offerings for the ofrenda. Her hair was done up in a tight high bun and Héctor could see the beginnings of silver start to creep from the corner of her forehead, but she still looked as lovely as the day he had married her. How much he loved her. How much he missed her! He was so entranced by her beauty that he almost forgot he held their son in his arms.

“Papá!” Miguel said, jolting Héctor’s attention back to him. “Mamá says I can’t see the show. I’m not too little! It’s my birthday, I’m big now. She says it’s a black-tie party, but I’m wearing a black tie. See?”

Still too gob smacked by the sudden appearance of his wife, Héctor’s fried mind tried to come up with something to placate the boy. “I-uh... W-well... You... uh...”

Imeldea took the little boy from his father’s flustered hands and set him down, looking him in the eyes with a stern look. “Miguel, black-tie parties are for adults only. There’s going to be drinking
and smoking there. It’s not for children.”

“Awww...”

“Ah, fear not Miguel!” Vicente stepped in and placed a hand on the little boy's shoulder. “We have a room in the back prepared to celebrate your birthday. We have candy, galletas, party games and much more just for you!”

Miguel hopped up and down in excited glee. “YEAH!”

“And your sobrina Victoria is there too!”

“...Oh. Okay...”

Vicente hummed a laughed and looked up to see his boss staring at his wife like she was a priceless treasure, and she looking at him with a guarded expression. Awkward. “I’ll uh... leave you two alone. C’mon Miguelito, let’s go have a real party. Say goodbye to your parents.”

“Okay. Bye Papá! Bye Mamá!”

“Bye...” Héctor whispered, still not tearing his gaze from Imelda as Vicente and Miguel left the room. They stared at each other for a few long, agonizing seconds before Héctor finally managed to crack a smile at her. “Imelda.”

Imelda’s head dipped a little, as if trying to draw in strength herself, and met his gaze stiffly. “Héctor...”

Say something, cabron! Say that her eyes are like molten copper that melts away the ice of your heart! Say that her face is more beautiful than the finest painting or sculpture in the Louvre! That the sound of her voice shatters all the blackness in your soul and purifies it with a golden, heavenly light! You’re a writer and a poet! Just say something! Anything!

“You look good!”

Mierda!

“Thank you... I wish I could say the same.” Imelda said, not unkindly. Indeed, she was staring at him with a critical eye and what she saw made her look worried. “You’ve lost too much weight, Héctor.”

Héctor ran a hand self-consciously across his stomach and chuckled nervously. “Ah, yeah... Well, I was insisted to do so. You know, they say the camera adds ten to twenty pounds. Got to look my best on screen!”

“I see...” Imelda stepped passed him and walked over to the ofrenda. She stared at it with a little distaste but smiled wistfully when she saw Leti’s picture. Bending down she started to pull items from the basket and set them on the table. “I heard that you’re also sick.”

“It’s just a chest cold. I promise you I’m fine-”

“And that you’ve been drinking a lot.”

‘Damn you, Chente!’ Héctor thought angrily. He sighed harshly and decided that the fake positive shtick was not going to work. He crossed his arms and started to pout like a child. “Well, I haven’t been having the most ideal time out here, now have I? They’ve been running me ragged to get
this stupid movie finished and I’ve been worried sick about Matty and….” He saw her
flinch slightly at the name as she set down a bowl of pepitas in front of her parent’s foto and
he scowled. “He wrote to me. Said you sent him some boots.”

Finishing up with a basket filled with pan de muerto, Imelda nodded as she made the last
adjustments on the offerings to make room on the table. ”Sí, I did.”

Héctor’s chest ached at her confirmation. Every year on his birthday he would always get a new
pair of shoes made lovingly by his wife. Despite her prideful boasts that her shoes were built to last
a lifetime, and indeed they were, she always made him a new pair in various styles and colors to
keep up with the latest fashions of the time and to show off the superior qualities and
craftsmanship whenever he walked out with her on his arm. But for the last few years she hadn’t
made him any, and she wasn’t on his arm anymore. And he couldn’t help but feel cheated.

“So that means you forgive him then?”

Imelda snorted and crossed her arms in anger, still not looking at him in the eye. “Of course I don’t
forgive him! I will never forgive him for leaving his family to go on this foolish crusade of his,
especially when he wasn’t even forced to go!” She paused and dipped her head again, her
expression slowly melting from anger into a deep sadness. Héctor itched to take her into his arms
and comfort her, but he feared any sudden movements on his part would only serve to spook her.
So, he waited. “But…”

“But?”

Imelda huffed out a bitter chuckle and a small smile graced her lips. “Even if it costs me the rest of
my life... I will never stop loving him…”

Héctor’s heart clenched painfully at that and he slapped a hand over his increasingly watery
eyes and choked down the lump in his throat. He really should have stopped himself. But he lost
control. No, he had no control since the moment she walked into the room. He never did when it
came to her. “And me? Have you... stopped loving m-me?”

Not taking his hand away from his eyes he didn’t see what expression flitted across her face. But
the long pause and lack of immediate answer was enough for him, and he finally broke.

“Please let me come back!” Héctor whispered desperately, some tiny part of his self-control reeling
in his voice to avoid making a scene for anyone outside. “I just want to come home to my family,
Imelda! I’ve missed you all so much! If you—... If you want, I’ll even buy a separate house in Santa
Cecilia! We won’t have to live together if that’s what you want. Just so I can at least see Miguel.”

“Héctor—”

“I’ll do anything you ask of me! I always have! I’m only asking for you to do the same!”

“Héctor, I did not come here to discuss this with you. Please don’t ruin this night for me—”

“Then why did you even come?!!”

So much for keeping quiet. Héctor’s shout rattled the light fixtures slightly and some of the
conversations from the other dressing rooms screeched to a halt. At first he thought his voice,
usually so calm and jovial, would scare his poor wife and spook her just like he had feared it
would. Imelda didn’t even flinch. Instead her face grew cold and she gripped her clutch tighter to
her chest. That was even worse.
With a steady voice, Imelda spoke quietly. “I came... to see my daughter perform on stage... No other reason.” And with that she briskly walked past him and out the door, her heels clicking away until all was silent.

Silent except for the blood rushing though his ears and his heart hammering in his chest. A gradual pain settled in his head and behind his eyeballs, but Héctor was too numb to even try to lift a hand to cradle it. It was nothing compared to his cramping insides and his stinging eyes. Blindly reaching for his hip flask in his breast pocket he was dismayed further when he found not even a half a mouthful was left in it. Without a sound he chucked it as hard as he could at the wall, leaving a large dent and cracked paint, and collapsed into the sofa.

With a brief knock on the door, Héctor let himself into Ernesto’s dressing room. “Ernesto-”

“Joder!” Ernesto shot up from where he was crouched over the makeup table and vigorously started to wipe at his face frantically. “Madre de Dios, Héctor! Knock next time, I’m not even fully dressed yet!”

“I did knock...” Héctor slowly made his way in, not even registering his friend’s frantic actions. “I need to talk to you about the show.”

“Uh-huh. What about it?” Ernesto asked, facing away from Héctor. Plugging one nostril closed he sniffed as hard as he could to get rid of any lingering evidence to what he had been doing. As a tiny burst of energy and euphoria hit him he did the same to the other.

“I should have come sooner, but... I was preoccupied with something.” Héctor sadly walked over and sat at the makeup table, placing his aching head in his hand. “Coco doesn’t want to join you for Remember Me. She doesn’t feel comfortable with singing your version of the song. It’s too personal for her.”

“Couldn’t you have told me this earlier, hermanito?” Rubbing a finger on the underside of his nose, Ernesto silently cursed at the white powder still present and scrubbed the residue against his teeth. “I know, I’m sorry...”

“Well no matter!” Ernesto shucked off his robe and grabbed for his sleeveless undershirt. “You know me. I prefer to bask in the spotlight alone on stage. And if Coco is uncomfortable singing it with me then I won’t pressure her into it.”

“Ernesto?”

“Besides, you know my version is a little, heh, sensual. I don’t want to sing that to my own goddaughter that way.”

“Ernesto.”

“I mean I’ve known her since she was a baby. It just wouldn’t be right-”

“Ernesto!”

“What?” Turning around Ernesto saw Héctor looking down at his makeup table with a confused expression, a long finger tracing a path through a few lines of fine white powder that were left on it. His stomach dropped as he saw Héctor rub the powder between his fingers, confusion slowly
turning into surprise and dread. “Ah! S-sorry, I left that there. You startled me and I didn’t get a chance to clear it away. You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“Ernesto, what is this stuff?” Héctor brought up the finger to his nose to sniff it before his brain kicked in enough to jerk it away before he could inhale. Wiping it off quickly as if it would burn him, he turned incredulous eyes towards Ernesto. “Is this cocaine?!”

“Uh... I... Si.” Ernesto sighed, wincing at Héctor’s horrified expression. Putting on his best charming smile he held out his arms in a friendly gesture. “I simply use it as a stimulant for when I’m onstage, Héctor. A person with my busy schedule needs all the help they can get. How else would I have been able to shoot three movies and do two concert tours in one year? I’d offer it to you too, mi amigo, but it... Heh, it’s damn near impossible to stop!”

Héctor shook his head, looking both dumbfounded and betrayed. “I don’t... I don’t understand! How long have you been using cocaine?”

Ernesto groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. He should have said nothing. He really shouldn’t have. But he knew this junk had the nasty little habit of making him too chatty for his own good. “Ay... I don’t know. Off and on for about... twenty years maybe?”

“Twenty years?!”

Ernesto grabbed him by the shoulder and pressed a finger to his lips. “Shhh! Keep it down, pendejo!”

“Twenty years and you never told me?!” Héctor’s voice broke at the end and to Ernesto’s horror he saw tears begin to glisten in Héctor’s eyes. “And I never noticed. I should have! How could I have not noticed you were doing this?!"

“You were never supposed to notice, Héctor.” Ernesto soothed and patted Héctor’s shoulder with a chuckle. “Guess I’m not as bad of an actor as you think I am. But don’t worry, I’m fine-”

“What else?”

“Perdon?”

“What else are you on?” Héctor asked, his gaze starting to turn into a glower.

Like rat being corned by a cat, Ernesto nervously backed up with his hands raised nervously. “Nothing, mi amigo! Honest.”

“No me mientas!” Héctor growled and took one of Ernesto’s wrists to stretch out the arm. “You think I don’t know track marks when I see them?! Leti’s arms were covered in them towards the end. So what is it then? Heroin? Is this why you’re always wearing long sleeves? To hide your shame?!”

“No! No!” Ernesto stuttered, his heart hammering in his chest. All of his secrets were coming undone before his very eyes and he was powerless to try to stop it. Only try to plead his case. “L-look, sometimes I need help getting to sleep! Either I’m too wired or I have bad night terrors, but I can handle it! Y-you didn’t even notice, si? No one else will. I have it perfectly under control. I am in control!”

“Ernesto...”

Héctor’s anger was snuffed out immediately, replaced by horror as he took a good look at
Ernesto’s wrist in his hand. He gazed over the four raised lines that streaked across and he suddenly felt nauseous, as the tears finally started to fall from his eyes and his heart broke for his friend. Looking at the other wrist his fears were confirmed by the sight of four more identical scars. “Ernesto, what-”

Like lightening Ernesto snatched back his wrist and held it protectively to his chest, his expression eerily blank and his back rigid. “You weren’t supposed to see *that* either.” Turning his back towards Héctor he reached for his white button up shirt and began to put it on.

Héctor gulped down the stomach bile from the back of his throat and sniffled, his horrified eyes never leaving his brother as he watched him dress. “Ernesto... I don’t understand. What happened?”

“Not now, Héctor.”

“Did you... try to kill yourself?”

“Not now.”

“Ay, Madre de Dios!” Héctor cried out and fell to his knees hard, frantically crossing himself and raising his hands in prayer. “Dios, perdona a mi amigo! Perdona a mi hermano!”

“Stop it, Héctor.” Ernesto growled as he finished buttoning up his shirt and reached for his chaqueta. *There’s no point, anyway. I’m already damned.*

Héctor continued rapidly speaking the prayer as Ernesto stiffly finished getting ready. “*Right now, my friend is struggling with a difficult trial. I can see his strength is faltering, Dios, and know that you have all of the strength that he needs.*”

“Why don’t you save that strength for yourself Héctor?” Ernesto sneered as he combed his hair back into it’s usual curl. “You need it more than I do. You don’t see me pining for that cold bruja that you call a wife.” Checking his appearance one last time he gazed at Héctor’s reflection in the mirror, kneeling and continuing to pray for him. *For him!* Feeling his stomach roll at the very thought he grabbed his sombrero with a growl and smashed it on his head and smoothed out the wrinkles in his shirt. With a turn he made his way towards the door, preparing to ready himself for his big entrance, when a hand grabbed hard onto his pants and yanked back hard.

“Where are you going?!” Héctor asked incredulously with wide, scared eyes that reminded Ernesto of when he was a little boy following him around.

Ernesto’s frown deepened and he tried to wrench away from Héctor’s grasp. “Where does it look like I’m going? I have a show to do.”

“Are you out of your mind?!” Héctor shouted and laboriously climbed back to his feet while still keeping hold of Ernesto. “There’s no way you are going to perform in this state!”

Ernesto laughed darkly. “You think is this first time I’ve performed on drugs? Some of my best shows where ones I don’t even remember performing!”

“Well I didn’t know about that then, but I do now!” Héctor snapped back and tried to pull him away from the door. “I’m taking you to a hospital!”

“No, Héctor!”

“You’ll thank me later!”
“If I go to a hospital then word will spread!” Ernesto growled out, trying to pull the blue fabric out of Héctor’s fists. “I can’t have that, Héctor. My reputation is too important to me. And I have to do the show. The world is waiting! My family needs me-”

“I’M YOUR FAMILY!” Héctor cried out, grabbing Ernesto on both sides of his face and shaking him hard enough to knock the sombrero off of his head. “I’m your family! You are my brother, and you tried to kill yourself! You never told me! I could have helped you! Why didn’t you tell me?! I have the right to know!”

Ernesto’s blank mask slowly fell away as Héctor cried and screamed into his face, his own eyes filling up with tears. For a second Héctor saw something in Ernesto’s expression that he had never seen before in his cocky, arrogant, charming friend. He saw something dark, black and so so painful that Héctor had no time to say anything before he was enveloped into a bone crushing hug. Ernesto clung to him like his life depended on it and Héctor could feel the intense shuddering of his body pressed against his. Ernesto was terrified.

“You’re right.” Ernesto whispered brokenly as he hugged Héctor harder and pressed his eyes into his shoulder. “You’re right... I should have told you... And I-… I’ve been putting this off for far too long.”

“Ernesto?”

With a stuttering sigh Ernesto pulled back and wiped the tears off of his face. Looking back up he paused for a moment, gathering the strength he needed, and finally managed to choke out. “Héctor... that night... all those years ago... I-”

“Señor de la Cruz! Two minutes to showtime!”

The sound of the innocent pageboy’s voice startled both men badly and they both jumped with fright. The boy paid no heed to the distress in the room and went on his merry way back down the hallway. As the sound of his footsteps faded away Héctor sighed in relief and forced his breathing back down to normal. Looking back at Ernesto he was surprised to see a small, bitter smile on his face. “Ernesto?”

A small chuckle came out and Ernesto’s smile grew bigger, yet sadder. “I really am a coward. Just one second and all my courage flies right out the window.”

Héctor shook his head frantically. “N-no. Ernesto no!”

“Get out of my way Héctor. We’ll talk later.”

“Ernesto no! Please!”

“Just one more show. That’s all I ask.”

“You’re not going on stage!”

“Yes, I am!”

“I won’t let you-”

*WHACK*
Ernesto stood over Héctor’s sprawled body on the floor and his hand slowly unclenched from a fist, the only sounds in the room being his own frantic panting and his own blood racing through his ears. The sight of Héctor laying limp and unconscious brought back traumatic images from his past nightmares and with a terrified gasp he knelt down and placed a finger against Héctor’s neck. A steady thrum and the sight of Héctor’s chest moving up and down with breath caused him to sag with relief. He was only out cold. Would probably wake up with a sore jaw and a terrible headache, but that would be all.

But for how long would he be out?

With little effort Ernesto was able to lift Héctor up by the armpits and drag him over to the open broom closet in the dressing room. Propping him up into a comfortable position and checking once again that he was showing signs of life, Ernesto closed the closet door and stuck a chair underneath the doorknob for good measure. He wasn’t going anywhere for a while.

Sadly looking at the door one last time, he ran his fingers through is hair to instantly fix the curl and straightened his chaqueta out. Pulling his sombrero back on he ambled out the door, grabbing his prized gold guitar on the way out.

“Apologies, old friend. But the show must go on.”

Vicente walked down the hallway of the backstage, jotting down notations in his schedule book while sucking on a lollipop that Miguel had graciously given him from the party. Despite being several feet away and under the main stage he could still hear Señor de la Cruz warbling away to the cheering masses. After two years of working for Rivera de la Cruz Productions the starry-eyed wonder he had felt for the celebrity had faded in a comfortable working relationship and he had felt no need to actually watch the show after seeing him perform so many times. He did stay a little to see Coco perform, however. She was always a treat to watch. Besides he also wanted to see the look on Theresa’s face when, against her own demands, Coco wouldn’t be performing in the finale. Oh, it was delicious!

Walking past the dressing rooms his ears picked up a distant sound. Trying hard to distinguish the sounds from the concert to the rooms, he was finally able to pinpoint it coming from Señor de la Cruz’s dressing room. Stepping inside, the lollipop fell out of his mouth at the sounds coming from it.

“LET ME OUT! ERNESTO! LET ME OUT OR SO HELP ME I WILL STRANGLE THE LIFE OUT OF YOU! HIJO DE PUTA! LET ME OOOOUT!”

Vicente rushed over to the door in shock and tried decipher who in the world was screaming from the broom closet. With a gasp, he exclaimed, “Héctor!!”

“Chente!” Héctor cried out. “Chente, get me out of this pinche closet!”

Vicente fumbled with the chair propped up against the door but finally managed to unjam it from the knob, and that was when Héctor tumbled out onto the floor. He hacked out choking coughs that left his whole body shaking and spitting out whatever was heaved from his lungs and Vicente could see a dark bruised had formed on the lower left side of his jaw. “Héctor! Who did this to you?!”
“Ernesto!” Héctor growled, panting to get the air back into his lungs and his face clenched with rage. “How long was I out?! Where is he?!”

“He’s on stage! The show is almost over-Héctor wait! You need to see a doctor!”

“Bastardo!” Héctor hissed and marched out the door despite Vicente’s protests.

Making his way through the maze of hallways connecting its way to the main stage, all of the stage hands only took one look at him and instantly pressed against the wall to give him room to past. One only had to look at the murderous rage on their employer’s face to know that this was a man on a mission and no one was going to even try to stop him. Almost everyone.

“Señor Rivera!” Theresa popped into Héctor’s field of vision and briskly kept up to his furious pace. “What is this about Coco not singing with Señor de la Cruz for the final act? Why was this not run by me? We agreed that this was the best way to end the show! There was going to be a photo shoot of her and Señor de la Cruz under the bell-”

“Not NOW, Theresa!” Héctor shouted and threw the insufferable woman out of his path, ignoring her squawk of protest.

Finally, Héctor made his way to the backstage and stood behind the giant set design. If Vicente was right, and it was the end of the show, then Ernesto should be on the escalator and rising up to the top. Indeed, he was able to hear Ernesto singing his heart out to the audience and knew exactly what position he was in based on what part of the song he was on. Climbing up the stairs to the top, Héctor couldn’t help but agree that Ernesto was performing as well as he always did. He could even picture his fat, stupid face winking and smirking towards his familia.

Well, wait till they see you with my hands around your throat while I throttle you!

Reaching the top, he peaked around the corner of the elaborate archway, and sure enough Ernesto’s blue sombrero rose over the edge and he gracefully came into full view. Fists clenching in anger as he watched Ernesto hand his golden guitar over to the stage hand, Héctor waited for his move.

Until you’re in my arms agaaaaaiiiin ...

End of the line amigo! You’re going to get yours!

Remember Meeeee!

*CRACK*

In less than a millisecond a deafening toll ripped all sound away and filled Héctor’s head with a cacophonous ringing, and a violent shifting of the ground beneath knocked him off his feet and had him falling hard to the stage floor. He lay there in a sprawl for who knew how long, his eyes wide with shock and waiting for his senses to come back to him. The loud, persistent ringing still buzzing in his ears, Héctor lifted his head with a groan and looked up to a large, shadowy object blocking out the stage lights. Squinting past the dust and debris in the air, he was able to make out the vague shape of the church bell that just seconds before had been suspended over the stage.

Right above Ernesto.

…
“Nesto?” Héctor whispered, not noticing that there were people starting to run around him. Some of them looked like they were screaming. “Was this part of the show?... I don’t remember... Did you change the show, Nesto?”

He also didn’t notice Vicente coming towards him and pulling him up to a sitting position, patting his body to check for injuries. He was shouting something at him. He couldn’t hear. He just kept looking at the bell.

“I don’t understand... Where are you?... Where did you go? Nesto?”

“Nesto?!”

“ERNESTO!”

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone had a Happy Thanksgiving! And hope you enjoyed all the turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, squash… Oops. Sorry Ernesto. No squash.
Chapter 34: No Me Dejas

Julio tenderly held onto Coco as she wept brokenly into his arms. Despite his firm grip on her he was unable to stop the terrified trembling that shook her entire body. Probably because he could not stop shaking himself. He had been there in the audience when it had all happened. Sitting next to his mother-in-law, both in elegant formal wear, he leaned his cheek onto his hand as he dreamily watched Coco dance and sing with her godfather. However, when the final song came on his brow had furrowed with confusion. Having seen the previous rehearsals, he had fully expected Coco to join Ernesto in Remember Me, only to watch Coco slink in between the other dancers and join them as Ernesto sung by himself.

What he didn't expect was for the giant bell prop to snap from the overhead fixture and crash down on top of the escalator, right where Ernesto had been standing and belting out the last triumphant note, leaving behind a giant crater underneath the bell and a fluttering blue sombrero.

While Mamá Imelda had gasped and was frozen in horrified shock, Julio was up and out of his seat immediately dashing for the stage, barely making it past the heavy curtains as they hurriedly slid close to hide the grisly site. Passing screaming, hysterical dancers he made his way to his wife and grabbed her by her shoulders as she sank to the ground in horror. Frantically he asked her if she was all right, flinching back as Coco let out a piercing scream as she stared up to the top of the escalator. Following her gaze he saw several stage hands crowd around the bell hesitantly, unsure of what to do or even how to begin to move the giant obstacle from the celebrity.

All except Héctor.

Julio watched open-mouthed as his father-in-law flung himself across the bell and fruitlessly try to push and then pull the bell off of Ernesto, with Vicente right behind him trying to pull him off the bell. On top of all the frantic screaming and shouting coming from the people backstage, Héctor's rang the loudest at a blood-curdling level. But not the clearest. Besides of few cries of 'Ernesto!' Julio was able to pick up, Héctor's words were an indecipherable mess of wails and screams. His face was horrifying as he strained against the bell and screamed as loud as he could, tears streaming down from his wild and crazed eyes.

Héctor looked like he had lost his mind.

"Papá!" Coco cried out, snapping Julio's attention back at her and trying to pull her away from ascending the escalator. "Papá! Tio Nesto!"

"Coco, no!" Julio pulled his wife to his feet and tried to drag her away. "Don't go up there!"

"Papá-!"

"Coco, go with Julio now!"

The young couple were startled to see Imelda marching over to them with her skirts hiked up and a dangerous, no-nonsense look in her eyes. Julio was amazed that Imelda had managed to force her way through the thick curtains with no issue, but not really surprised. Mamá Imelda was a force to be reckoned with even in the most peaceable of times.
"Julio, take her backstage and away from all of this. I'll deal with Héctor."

Julio didn't need to be told twice. He easily led Coco away from the stage, barely glimpsing as Imelda started to race up the ruined escalator towards her husband and hearing the anguished cries of Héctor fade away as they wove their way back to Coco's dressing room. That was where they had been for the last half hour, with Julio gently holding his wife as she wept as much as she could until she was finally able to find her words again.

"Oh Julio!" she hiccuped and buried her face into his shoulder. "I can't believe it! Poor Tio Nesto!"

Julio gave a sweet kiss against Coco's hot, wet cheek and whispered to her in a soothing manner. "I know, I know. It'll be alright."

"He could be alright, right?! He could just be inside the bell, right?!"

"I don't know, Coco."

"Oh, Julio!" Coco's face shot up and she stared wild-eyed at her husband. "I was supposed to be up there with him!"

"But you weren't-"

"Only because I changed my mind at the last second!" she screeched and dissolved into another wave of hysterical sobbing. "I'm so sorry Julio! I could have died and you would have seen it! And Mamá and Papá! And Victoria would have lost her mamá forever! I'm sorry! So sorry!"

Julio couldn't help the shudder that went down his spine nor the sick clenching of his stomach. With a hard shake of the head he dashed away the image of his wife's lifeless body from his mind and held her closer, as if the reaffirm that she was well and truly safe in his arms. "Don't worry about that, mi amor. I've got you… I'm here."

"I quit."

The whisper was so soft and broken by her trembling voice that Julio almost didn't register it. With a slow blink his brain paused to register what Coco had said and what she had truly meant. "Que?"

"I quit, Julio." With a trembling breath she pulled away from his embrace to look him square in the face. "Acting. Show business. I can't take it anymore." With each word she said Coco looked like she was gaining more strength and confidence. He shoulders squared and she nodded to herself in slow affirmation. "I just wanted to dance, but… It's not worth it. I've wanted to quit for a long time! It has brought me nothing but trouble with the public and estrangement from my family. I'm becoming a stranger to my own daughter! I've neglected you as a wife! And now this! I could have-!… I want to come home to you and Victoria. To Santa Cecilia! Perdoname, mi amor! Por favor…"

This was not the time to be smiling. Coco had just possibly seen her godfather get crushed to death. She was reeling from a near death experience herself. It was selfish of him to feel the euphoric triumph of his wife finally deciding that even though she was an international star, she was just not made for the spotlight after all. But he couldn't help it. As the terrible weight of the past year finally lifted from his chest and seeing his Coco looking at him with those large, watery eyes full of love, his face split into a huge grin.

He cupped her face and kissed her gently on the lips, both of their eyes closing and tears spilling down their cheeks. "Mi Coco. All I've ever wanted was for you to do what you loved. What made
you happy."

Coco looked down at her lap, ashamed. "I thought that dancing would make me happy on the big screen... But it's nothing compared to dancing with you in Mariachi Plaza."

They sat there hugging for a few more minutes, Julio kissing his wife and letting her cry out a few more tears as he whispered sweet words to her. Wiping underneath her eyes and sighing deeply to get a hold of her emotions, she nodded determinedly to Julio. "It's done then. As of right now, I quit."

"I think not."

A harsh, no-nonsense voice broke through and startled Julio and Coco from their moment of peace. Theresa stood there with arms crossed and a raised brow as she smugly smiled at her client. At her prey. "You signed a three-year contract with Rivera de la Cruz Productions. You've still got two years to go. And besides that, no one will let you leave without resigning. You are in too high demand."

"The hell with that!" Julio shot to his feet and glared at the pompous woman who had been the bane of his existence for the past year. Never in his life did he ever feel like he could hate someone so much, much less a woman significantly shorter than even his admittedly small stature. But tonight was the last straw, and he was not holding back anymore. "You have a lot of nerve coming here, to face my wife, after what could have happened under your suggestion! She would have been under that bell and you would have been to blame!"

Theresa merely rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue. "There's was no way that I could foresee a stage mishap, Señor Magallanes." Dismissing him with a wave of her hand she walked towards Coco and gave a simpering smile. "But I can foresee a great opportunity in this, Coco. You can be the star witness in the tell-all story of the death of Señor de la Cruz."

Coco gasped and her eyes filled with tears again. Bringing a hand up to her mouth, she whispered. "So, he really is dead?"

Theresa paused a little, and if Julio didn't know any better it looked like she was deliberately trying to build up the tension of the situation. "Unfortunately. The bell was raised just a short while ago. Señor Rivera saw the whole thing and collapsed. He's being taken to the hospital right now."

Coco gasped again with fright. "Dios mio, Papá!" Frantically she began ripping off the elaborate decorations in her hair and flung them to the ground. "Julio, we need to go to the hospital now! Papá has been so sick lately! I need to be there for him! Help me get out of this costume!"

Before she could start to take off her jewelry, Theresa roughly grabbed her wrists and commanded her attention. "That can wait, the doctors will take care of him. Coco, we need to take advantage of this! The world needs to hear your statement while the moment is still new and raw. Your exact feelings at this exact moment!"

Coco gaped and sputtered, her mind in turmoil. "How?!... I can't possibly!- Not now!"

"Get your hands off of her!" Julio growled and drew Coco towards him and away from the shrew. "Her godfather just died and her father is sick and in shock! The world can wait for her pinche statement any other day!"

Theresa scoffed. "You have no idea how show business works! The news will be stale by tomorrow morning! I need her statement to give to press and I need it now!"
"Well then why don't you write it?"

The three of them turned their heads to the new voice. Vicente stood there like a towering figure, a welcome presence in this toxic atmosphere. His face was drawn and tight as well as slightly pale with a slight sheen of sweat. He had been there when the bell had finally managed to be lifted from the top of the escalator. He had seen... what was left of the most famous singer in all of Mexico. He was the one who had caught Héctor as he collapsed towards the ground, screaming until his eyes had rolled over white and he became silent.

It seemed like time had slowed down as he had tried to shake Héctor awake. His employers' breathing was slow and stuttering, his lungs trying to hack up fluid even in his unconsicenced state. When he was finally whisked away by a medical team with his wife hovering by his side, his brain finally started to work again, and his first thought was to get away from the gory site before he ended up fainting too. His second thought had been to see if Coco was alright.

He wasn't sure why he sought out the room he knew that Theresa had been using as a makeshift office instead of Coco's dressing room. Maybe he figured that Theresa would have managed to snatch her talons on her as soon as possible in order to capitalize on the excitement. He knew now that her husband had gotten to her first, but he was glad he went to that room anyway. For he had seen on the desk something that had been very interesting to him for the past few months now: Theresa's ever-present clipboard with a thick, bulging packet of notes that she was always scribbling into. How sloppy of her to leave something so precious lying around. Despite the horrible circumstances, Vicente Calles was not about to leave a golden opportunity like this to be let go.

So he had picked it up and quickly read through it. And oh, what a prize it had been.

"I mean after all," Vicente said as he held up the clipboard and waved it for them to see. "You've seen to have plenty of practice doing that anyway."

Theresa's smug expression faded into panicked horror and her face drained to a sickly gray color as she saw what he was holding. "Where did you get?!-"

"Coco, remember that interview you don't recall ever giving to that magazine two months ago. You know, where you describe your dream man and what you look for in a relationship that was the exact opposite of your own husband and marriage?" Vicente flipped through a few pages and stopped at a certain spot. "Well either Theresa has taken up the habit of copying your interviews word for word, or this is the rough draft of the whole thing. And when I flip the page here's the revision. And drafts of several other of your other interviews that you never did that made it to print."

"Give that back!" Theresa roared as she lunged for the clipboard. But Vicente used his height to his advantage and easily sidestepped out of the way.

"And you know your stalker Emilio Aguado?"

"He's not a stalker! He's the President of the Coco Fan Club!" Theresa screamed.

"... Your stalker Emilio Aquado? Well here several listings in her agenda to set up meetings with a certain Emilio A. Along with several other well-known Papárazzo with money signs next to their names. Dating back several months! Theresa has been milking you for all your worth, Coco."

It would have been comical to see Vicente leaping and hopping all over the furniture as he dodged the irate manager whilst reading undisturbed through the clipboard, but Coco was staring in jaw-
dropped shock as her trust in her manager was well and truly broken and destroyed with every word that came out of Vicente's mouth. And Julio was slowly seeing red.

"Theresa…" Coco whispered in horror. "Is that true?"

Theresa gave up her fight for the clipboard, especially when she discovered that not even her feeble punches could knock Vicente nor the board down, and drew back up straight after catching her breath. Smoothing back her disheveled hair, she tried to muster up any amount of dignity and sway that she might still have. "Coco… I was only trying to increase your star appeal. That's what a manager does."

"But Emilio…" Coco said with a shudder. "And the Papárazzi… They chased us so often. Even in places that were supposed to be safe… Victoria scraped her knee…"

"Fired…"

The growled out word shook Coco to her core. She had never heard her husband speak in such a threatening and intimidating way, nor did she ever see such intense hatred in his eyes. But even if she was a little scared seeing her normally timid, gentle husband look so savagely angry, a part of her couldn't help but feel a little… titillated.

Theresa blinked in perplexed astonishment as the word finally registered to her. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Fired…" Julio strained out the word again through tightly clenched teeth and slowly walked towards the woman with fire in his eyes.

Theresa huffed haughtily and crossed her arms. "You have no authority to fire me, Señor Magallanes."

Vicente chuckled. "Oh, I think it safe to say that you are without a doubt fired from not only being Coco's manager, but also from Rivera de la Cruz once Héctor learns what you've been up to. I hope you made a pretty peso selling out your client, your going to need every bit of it once we take you to court."

"You can't!"

"The only reason…" Julio said as he stuck a finger in Theresa's pale face. "… That I don't throttle you on the spot is because I promised my Mamá on her deathbed that I would never hurt a woman."

"I don't mind, querido." Coco piped in.

Vicente nodded. "Si, knock yourself out amigo."

Julio paid them no mind. As he bore down on the detestable woman, he pointed out the door and snarled into her pug-nosed face, "Get…. OUT!"

Theresa backed away like a cornered animal, nervously glancing at all three of them, before bolting out of the room and down the hall like the coward that she was. Julio went out into the hall to make sure she was out of their sights and huffed out a harsh sigh of relief. It wouldn't be the last time he would see her, because Vicente was right. There was no doubt that she would go to court to face what she had done. But for now, the toxic harpy that had been preying on his wife for a year was gone, and his family was safe for good.

Letting his heart rate get back down to normal and his breathing under control, he walked back into
the dressing room… And did not like what he saw.

"So, there's nothing that can be done about my contract?" Coco looked up at Vicente helplessly with both of her hands in his.

Vicente hummed thoughtfully. "Well you did sign a three-year contract, and despite what your father might say in your defense there are several teams of lawyers who will make sure that you stay for the full term..." Looking down at Coco's stricken face he paused and then smiled warmly. "But I don't see why you can't fulfill your obligations by just making a few short films for the war effort with several, very long vacations in between. I think you've earned some rest and relaxation, especially after what's happened tonight."

Coco smiled brightly and gratefully hugged Vicente. "Gracias Vicente! For everything you've done, with Papá and with Theresa. You are so kind."

Vicente smiled softly and returned the hug. "Well, it's my job to help the Rivera's. And even if it wasn't, I would always try to help you Coco. With anything."

*That's it!*

"*Ahem, Coco.*" Julio gritted out, trying to keep his voice as soft as possible. "We should really head for the hospital now. You should get dressed into your regular clothes."

"Ah, *si!*" Coco stepped out of the embrace and wiped her eyes. "I'll get changed and then we'll leave at once."

"We'll wait outside." Vicente said and left the room to step out into the hall with Julio. With a long, exhausted moan he ran his hand through his hair and leaned against the wall. "Ay Dios mio...I cannot wait for this night to be over. I feel like I aged twenty years just within the last hour... But you really showed that puta what for, eh amigo? I'm really impressed."

"I'm only going to say this once, cabrón."

Vicente's good natured-grin froze on his face with a little twitch and his brow furrowed. "... Que?"

"Coco is my wife, Señor Calles." Julio snapped out. "And it was not an easy task to get her to marry me, let me assure you. I am not a handsome man. I am not tall. I do not bring in enough money to even compete with the enormous wealth that the Riveras make. And for the longest time Coco didn't even like being in the same room with me. I had to earn her love through literal blood, sweat and tears. And I'm not about to let some dashing pendejo come in and take her away from me. I will fight anyone who tries to."

Vicente's eyes widened in comprehension, and a weak chuckle escaped his throat. "Señor Magallanes, I can assure you that I-"

"I know that in this business, in this city even, that the sanctity of marriage means nothing to big shots like you." Julio said. "But it does to me. It does in Santa Cecilia. And you can ask any person living there that despite all the money, glitz and glamor you can try to entice Coco with... It pales in comparison to the love that I feel for her...*I love her*, Vicente... Please tell me you understand... that you and her will never, ever be."

For several moments the two men stared at each other: Julio with bold determination, Vicente with wide-eyed astonishment. Just as Julio was certain he would have to try to convince him further that his sights on his acquiring Coco was fruitless, Vicente sighed deeply and nodded sadly.
"Si... You are right, Señor Magallanes. I understand." He placed his hand over his heart and Julio was just a little saddened to see the pain flit over Vicente's face. "Coco loves you... despite my valiant efforts to prove myself to her. Your love is truly one of a kind and from now on... I will respect that and keep my relationship with her purely professional."

Julio sighed in relief and nodded: The man sounded truly genuine. He let his tense frame relax finally and held out a hand towards the poor suitor. "Gracias... No hard feelings?"

Vicente smiled a little and took the offered hand. "Never. All that matters is that Coco is happy and well loved. I wish you and your family all the best."

It wasn't long before Coco finally came out of the dressing room and changed into her street clothes. "I'm ready, mi amor. Let's go... And gracias again for everything, Chente."

"De nada, Coco. Go on down to the hospital. I'll be down there as soon as I can." Vicente kept the soft smile on his face as he watched Coco and Julio hurry down the hallway arm-in-arm. It was only when they rounded the corner and were out of earshot that he let himself collapse against the wall, slowly slide down it until he was crumpled on the floor, and break out into hysterical, barely suppressed...

Laughter.

"AY DIOS MIO! HA HA HA!... Pinche idiota!"

Maybe it was the shock and the stress of the day that had finally broken him, as normally he would have never let himself dissolve into such maniacal tittering. But the whole situation was just too funny, and he had played the part of the heartbroken, lovesick fool extremely well if he didn't say so himself. Maybe he should have been and actor instead of getting into business!

Julio actually believed that he was in love with Coco!

No, scratch that!

He believed he was in love with a woman!

"Ay, joder!" Vicente giggled as he wiped the tears from his eyes. "Gracias, Señor Magallanes! I really needed that!" Panting as his laughing spell finally passed he slumped against the wall and closed his eyes, his smile slowly fading as the more tragic aspects of the day came back into mind.

Ernesto de la Cruz was dead.

Héctor Rivera was in the hospital probably fighting for both his life and his sanity.

And the fate of the whole company was anybody's guess at this point, with hundreds of jobs on the line.

As he sat in the hallway pondering all these dreadful things that had been thrown at him within the last hour, all Vicente wanted to do was curl up in his bed with a bottle of tequila and in the arms of his beloved Javier.

"Three days have passed since Dia de Muertos, and the country still mourns the abrupt and tragic loss of Ernesto de la Cruz, widely considered as one of the greatest musicians in the modern history of Mexico. Señor de la Cruz had just finished performing a concert that evening when sources say that a giant prop bell had accidentally broken off from the stage rigging above the
singer, crushing and killing the singer instantly.

Since then thousands of grieving mourners have flocked to the gates of de la Cruz's magnificent mansion in Colonia del Valle, holding candle light vigils and singing prayers while also leaving tokens and flowers outside. The mansion has also served as the home to his goddaughter and rising starlet, Coco Rivera. Whilst being known as a favorite topic of gossip this pass year in newspapers and magazines, Señora Rivera has surprisingly been keeping a low profile and out of the public eye since that fateful night. It can only be assumed that she is taking this time to mourn as well for the loss of such an important family member.

In related news her father Héctor Rivera, de la Cruz's longtime business partner and songwriter, has been in hospital since that night after being taken from the scene by paramedics. There is no word on his condition, but his lawyer has assured that Señor Rivera was not injured in the stage accident but is instead seeking treatment for an undisclosed illness. We here at Excélsior wish him a speedy recovery and our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family.

Petitions are already being made to have Senor de la Cruz’s body to be lain to rest in his hometown of Santa Cecilia in Oaxaca, despite heavy requests to have him entombed in la Panteón Civil de Dolores alongside other famous people in Rotonda de las Personas Ilustres.

At the time of his death S eñor de la Cruz was in the middle of several movie projects that will sadly forever remain unfinished, including a biopic about the Mexican Revolution, and was in talks of a deal to lend his voice for an American animated movie with Dis-"

A low, quivering moan broke Imelda's concentration on the newspaper and turned it towards her husband currently occupying the hospital bed in front on her. With a sigh she folded it and placed it to her side, reaching out and grasping one of his twitching hands with hers. She winced at the tremors she still felt rattling slightly through his fingers, as well as the awkward way she was forced to hold his hand.

What with his wrist being tightly braced and strapped to the guard rail of the bed.

His other hand was also strapped on the opposite side, and a large padded belt wrapped around his thin chest to keep him firmly in place on the bed. An oxygen mask was placed over his face and several IVs were pumping him full of fluids and medicine. And despite being in a deep state of sleep, his teeth were clenched tight and his brows knitted into an expression of intense distress. A keening whine escaped his throat that gave into a deep, hacking fit of coughs.

Imelda immediately pulled off the mask and brought a clean handkerchief to his mouth as Héctor coughed painfully, only the straps keeping his body from convulsing on the bed. Finally, with one good expulsion he was able to clear his airway for the time being, gasping as Imelda wiped the corners of his mouth and placing the mask back. As he settled back down, he gently started to tremble again, whining pitifully and tears leaking from his dark sunken eyes.

Imelda sighed as she brought a clean corner of the handkerchief to wipe the tears from his face before placing it down to run her fingers through his greasy, unwashed hair to offer some form of comfort. It only seemed to distress him further and with a broken dry sob he wrenched his head away from her touch, lost in his nightmares.

It was truly heartbreaking to see Héctor reduced to such a state, but she was grateful to see him getting at least some form of rest. Especially after the last few days.

"What is this?!" she had screamed at the doctor, watching on in horror as several orderlies fought to restrain her husband's mad flailing. "This is not pneumonia! What is happening to him?!"
Before the doctor could answer Héctor let out a wail and swung a punch at an unfortunate orderly standing too close by and knocking him off his feet. His arm now free he managed to rip off the IV out and began to frantically scratch at his chest, all the while yelling out profanities and indescribable words as his eyes tracked at unseen figures and visions. As Imelda was hurried out of the door the last thing she heard was Héctor calling out for Ernesto.

And then for her.

"It's the DT's." the doctor had explained after he was able to calm her down some with Coco and Julio by her side. "Delirium tremens. It's alcohol withdrawal. If he's been drinking for as long as you've said, Señor Magallanes, then it's quite dangerous for him to just completely stop. It causes vivid hallucinations, irregular heart rates, sometimes seizures and, if severe enough, death."

Ignoring the agonized weeping from her daughter and her own breast clenching in grief, Imelda whispered. "What can be done?"

The doctor wrung his hands and looked down in dismay. "Honestly, not much. There are medicines that can be given to treat this, but they would adversely affect his respiratory system. Given his pneumonia I can't recommend giving it to him. Also, there's the fact that he's malnourished, and the shock... All I can do is give him some mild sedatives and monitor his heart and lungs. The rest is up to him, I'm afraid."

They had returned to his room a few hours later to find him as he was now: strapped down and barely able to move, Dios knows that he was trying though. Despite the small amount of medicine that was given to calm him down, Héctor still saw visions that were terrifying to him and he strained to lash out at them. His screams had died down to pitiful whimpers and moans, and tears streamed down into his hair and ears. Over the next few days he was either in this state or a death-like sleep, and Imelda didn't know which one was worse.

She felt absolutely foolish about it now, but seeing her husband going insane right in front of her had caused her to lash out at her daughter. Why didn't she tell her that it was this bad? That he was starving and drinking himself to death, that his cold was actually much worse than it was, and that he was so miserable and broken-hearted that he screamed for her in his nightmares?

Instead of a cowed child being rightfully chastised by her mother for keeping secrets from her, Coco had met her glare dead on and even more. Imelda flinched back in shock at the righteous fury that showed on her daughter's face, and what she had said next had finally knocked her off the high pedestal that she had set herself up on:

"What do you care, Mamá?"

And Imelda had to admit, she was right. Nothing she had done the past few months had shown that she cared about the man that she had kicked out of her life. She ignored every call, sent back every letter and telegram, even dodged each mention of him when Coco would talk to her on the phone. When she had bid a warm goodbye to Julio and Victoria she told them to give her love and warm wishes to Coco when they arrived. But not to Héctor. She just didn't care.

But that was wrong. She did care. She cared about him and loved him so much that it hurt. And seeing her husband now, so lost in his sickness and misery, Imelda couldn't bear the guilt that was crushing her from the inside.

"idiota... This wasn't supposed to happen." Imelda whispered as she locked Héctor's cold fingers around hers once more. "You weren't supposed to do this. Héctor..."
But he continued to sleep fitfully, his breathing hitching and occasionally giving in to more cough fits, and she continued to stay by his side. It was all she could do, now that it was too late.

It was quiet now.

The walls had stopped melting into putrid puddles of gore and maggots, the bugs had stopped buzzing in his head and stinging his flesh, and the monsters had stopped attacking him.

The monsters were the most terrifying though. They held onto his arms and legs so tightly that he thought he would end up breaking his bones in his efforts to get away from them. They had looked human too, but humans didn't have glowing white eyes and rotting flesh. They're voices were low and distorted, filling him with dread despite what the words they said that were supposed to sound soothing.

Señor Rivera, calm down. You're safe!

We have to give him something!

We can't risk his lungs giving out! Just strap him down!

Dios, turn him over! There's too much fluid, suck his lungs out!

It took forever for them to finally let him be, after many terrifying episodes of not being able to breathe and more fits of screaming in terror of the horrible visions in front of him, but he was finally able to break free and make a run for it. Well, run wasn't the best word for how he was able to finally move. Floating wasn't either. The world seemed to dissolve into a myriad of distracting colors and sounds, and he simply let his mind flow with it in a dream-like state.

And then suddenly he found himself finally there.

Back in front of the bell.

With a cry of triumph, he made his way over to it and braced himself against it in a sort of clumsy hug. "Don't worry Ernesto! I'll get you out! You'll be alright!"

And so he had pushed. And pulled. Digging his feet into the earth and straining as hard as he could against the cold hard bell. He shouted encouraging words towards his friend, not letting the lack of a response deter him in any way. It seemed like he did it for hours, for days even, his throat hoarse as he cried out for help from someone, anyone! He'd even accept the monsters help if he could find them. In a last ditch effort he had even called out for his wife, pleading with her to help him even if she wanted nothing to do with him afterwards.

But she didn't come. He could swear he heard her voice whispering to him, but he couldn't make it out no matter how hard he tried to listen. With a broken heart he could only conclude that she was telling him to leave her alone. She had no use for such a lousy husband and a terrible father to her children. He couldn't say he blamed her. He couldn't even help his brother escape from his prison. He was worthless.

And so, for the longest time, there was nobody except him and that bell. When he couldn't push against it anymore, when his voice finally gave out and his spirit broke, he sat in front of it and softly cried. He murmured apologies to Ernesto, to Imelda, to his children, to anyone he had wronged in his existence. There was no use. There was nothing left for him. Except that bell.
"What are you doing?"

With a gasp Héctor looked up at the new presence before him. At first he feared it was one of those terrible monsters come back to take him away again, but its voice was not bone-chilling and grating. Rather it was sweet and clear, the clearest Héctor had heard in a while, but the figure itself was... light. A vaguely human shape ball of light that burned so bright yet oddly didn't hurt to look at. If he squinted a little Héctor could guess that its head was slightly tilted in a sort of curious quirk. It was sort of cute, if a ball of light could be considered cute, and Héctor found himself slowly start to relax.

"I-..." he sniffled pitifully and turned watery eyes towards the bell. "I can't move it... Ernesto's under there and... I have to save him."

"Really?" the light said and floated over the bell. Héctor saw a hand reach out and knock against the bell, and it rang out loudly enough for Héctor cringe back with a wince. He didn't like that sound. Not at all. "I don't know. Sounds empty to me."

Héctor gaped at the bell, his heart sinking, and frantically shook his head. "N-no!... He's under there! I saw it drop on him!"
The ball of light chuckled in tinkling sort of way, and Héctor glared at it. "Well, si, you did. I saw it too. But that was a while ago. He's not under that bell anymore either. This bell," it said and knocked on the bell again, the loud clanging causing Héctor to grip his head in pain. "…is hollow. Empty. And is just here to waste your time."

Tearing his hands from his head, Héctor stared wide eyed at the ball of light. "Waste my time?... What do you mean?"

"I mean you need to wake up and face reality, tonto!"

Suddenly the ball of light zipped towards him and enveloped him in a soothing warm glow, almost as if it was hugging him, and Héctor found himself being lifted towards his feet. Once he was firmly standing up the light took him by the hand and started to lead him away from the bell. He resisted a little with a slight whine, his gaze fixed back on the bell, until a sharp tug jerked him away and pulled him forward. With a huff he glared at the light leading him away, gritting his teeth when he thought he could make out a sly smirk flitting across the vague features.

He continued to look back though, watching as the bell slowly faded from view into a white void. Then he noticed that the walls started melting again. His breath hitched a little in fear, terrified that the horrible visions from before were coming back to haunt him. The light gripped his hand tighter, but in a soothing manner, and Héctor managed to find comfort in the light for the first time since he met it. It was then he noticed that the walls weren't exactly melting, but rather…falling into place. Windows stacked next to each other, light fixtures dotted the ceiling in a straight line, and floor tiles tumbled into place just as his feet managed to touch them. It was then he noticed the pattern of the tiles, the color of them, and the shape of the windows and other fixtures. He had been here before. It had been a long time ago, but he had been here long enough to recognize the way the hallway was set up, and what doors led to what. It was engrained into his memory.

"I don't like this place." Héctor whispered.

"No, I don't either," the light said softly. "But it's where you need to be right now."

They continued on at a comfortable pace down the hallway, and slowly people started to materialize in Héctor's vision. Men and women in sterile white clothing walking past them without even noticing them. Two of them were wheeling a bed down at such a speed that Héctor barely had time to react before they barreled right through them and raced down the opposite direction. The light giggled at that, and Héctor couldn't help but give a shaky smile himself.

But suddenly a thought came to mind that chilled him to the bone, and he looked down at the light apprehensively. "Am…Am I a ghost?"

"Hmmm… No, I wouldn't say that. But I wouldn't worry about that. It'll all be over soon."

That was when the light finally led him into one of the rooms and let go of his hand. Looking up Héctor stopped dead in his tracks at what he saw: It was him. Lying in a bed, his hands strapped tightly onto the railings and his chest rising slowly with breath. And sitting beside him… was…

"No."

The light paused on its way to bed to turn back and look at him. "No?"

"No I-I… I can't." Héctor whispered, his eyes never leaving his beautiful wife's face. "Why is she there? She… She doesn't love me. I can't take it anymore… It h-hurts too much."
"I'm pretty sure she loves you. Why else would she be sitting with you? Look at her. She looks so sad."

Héctor shook his head miserably. "She's just waiting for me to wake up… to tell me it's finally over. That she's moved on… I can't face her… I'm too tired." He dropped to his knees and stared at the floor, all the peace he was starting to feel again being crushed by despair. "Maybe it's for the best… That I don't wake up at all… Ernesto's gone. Imelda hates me… I have nothing left."

His head hung low and tears clouding his vision, he almost didn't see the light step towards him until he felt its warm glow cup his face gently. With a snuffle he raised his eyes its face, or what he could guess was its face, and let it wipe the tears from his cheeks. Then he watched as it raised its hand slightly above his line of sight, and then…

*THUMP*

"OW!"

Héctor reared back onto his rump and flashed a hand up to his stinging forehead, rubbing it and staring at the figure before him in shock. "Did… Did you just flick my forehead?!"

"Si."

"Why?!"

"For being an idiot."

With a snarl he managed to get back onto his knees. "I don't need to take that from- GGGNAK!"

His head was yanked forward as the light grabbed his nose, twisted, and pulled down hard. Then with its other hand it pulled his ear as hard as it could and started to shake his head back and forth. "GAH! What are you doing?!" he screamed nasally. "Stop!"

"What do you mean don't wake up at all?!" The light shouted at him, continuing its assault as Héctor's eyes watered with pain instead of sorrow. "Where is that coming from?! 'Riveras never give up.' Isn't that what you've always said?"

Trying to pry the figure's hands from his face, he glared up at it. "I'm not a real Rivera… I just married one- ARGH!"

"You've been a Rivera a whole lot longer than you haven't been, old man!" the light yelled back. "And you haven't lost everything! What about your children? Coco, and your granddaughter! What about Miguel. Are you really going to leave a little boy to grow up without his father? And who's going to greet Matty when he comes back from the war?!"

"As for your wife, she right there waiting for you to wake up! She can't run and hide in Santa Cecilia anymore! If you have something to say to her, then you make her listen to you! Think about it, you're sick in a hospital bed. At the very least you have pity on your side, right? But don't give up on her so easily, cabrón!"

"All right, all right! Ow! Just let go of me already!"

With one last shove the light let go of Héctor's head and he cradled his face in his hands, getting his breathing back under control and trying to rub away the burns and stings. He flinched as the warm hand landed back on his shoulder, but when no further violence came his way he dared to look back up.
"I know this has been hard on you." The light said gently. "And I know that you're scared. But even if things don't work out for you and your wife, you shouldn't feel the need to give up. You still have a lot to live for."

Héctor stared at it for a few long moments, before turning back towards the bed. Towards Imelda. It was right, she did look sad. And tired. If he woke up now, maybe he could talk to her. Maybe she'd talk to him. Despite his brain trying to convince him over and over that he was done, it was his time, and there was no need to linger on, his heart wouldn't let him. It was leading him back to her. To his family.

Just like it always had.

Damn poet.

With a heavy sigh me slowly stood up and made it to his feet, his gaze now fixed on his unconscious form on the bed. With a new determination he made his way over and paused at the edge. Do I just… lay on myself? With a short snort of laughter he did just that, and was surprised to see his leg phase through himself as he climbed onto the bed. Rolling over he laid down onto his back, stared up at the ceiling, and waited.

…..

And waited…

…..

"Uh, nothing's happening?"

The light shrugged. "You have been sleeping for a long time, and you're sick. It might take a while for you to actually wake up."

Before Héctor could reply to that, he started to feel changes slowly flowing into his body. Ah, this must be it. He started to feel heavier, more solid. That itself was a comforting feeling. He settled back down onto the bed and let the sensations build up through his limbs. He stayed still like that for a few minutes, with his eyes closed, before a tinkling little laugh next to him caused him to open them.

"This is taking forever!" The light giggled. It was such a sweet sound. So pure. Where had he heard it before? "Though not surprising. Even when you were healthy it took forever to wake you up, even when I jumped on your chest in the morning and tried to pry your eyes open."

Héctor brows furrowed in confusion. He tried to lift his head off the pillow to look at the light properly… but found that he couldn't. Slowly the solid feeling of his body turned into a heavy burden. He was so heavy! Too heavy! I can't move!

"W-what?... What's hap-"

The heaviness started to form inside his chest. His breathing turned into frantic gasps as he struggled to get air into his lungs. And now his body started to hurt! His arms and legs cramped and his head started to pound. Behind his gasping he heard his heart beating loudly in his ears. This is bad! This is bad! What's happening to me?!

Then suddenly the light was leaning over his face, and Héctor stared at it with fright. Was this it's plan all along? To trap him in this pain filled husk and laugh at him for his foolishness? He never should have trusted it! It started to lower itself to him, and with a small whimper he clenched his
eyes shut and braced himself against... What? Oblivion? Mutilation? The destruction of his very soul? Whatever it was it couldn't be good! It couldn't-

"And don't worry about Tio Nesto. He'll be all right. I won't let him be alone."

....

**Tio Nesto?**

Héctor's eyes snapped open and he saw the light was hovering over his face. He saw that smile again grace it's face before it leaned over and... gave him a small kiss on the forehead. It was quick and chaste, but it was so warm and sweet, and it slightly soothed the aches that were afflicting his body. It drew back again and stared at him with such love in it's eyes, and Héctor realized with a start of the fact that he could see it's eyes.

They were his eyes!

*Her eyes.*

"You feel better Papá."

With a choked out sob, reached out towards the light- *my daughter!*- but found that he couldn't. He glanced down at his hands and saw that they were strapped to the railings of his bed, and no matter how hard he shook or strained against them he could not tear them free. Sitting up was also not an option, as the thick belt across his chest prevented him from lifting even an inch.

He turned his attention back towards his little girl, but she was gone. She had left him. Again.

"**Leti!**" Héctor cried out, tears streaming down his face as he tried to strain against the bindings once more. "*Leti, don't go! Leti come back, please come back! Don't leave me, mija. Please don't leave me again! Please, please, please..."

"Calm down Héctor." A tired voice broke through his weak sobbing, and he glanced up through watery tears as his wife ran a hand through his hair in a calming motion. She began to speak to him, numbly, as if she had been repeating the same things over and over. "It's not real. You're alright. None of this is really happening. She's not here. It's okay, Héctor."

Héctor concentrated on his wife's face, forcing himself to calm his seizing chest and his pounding heart. He listened to her soothing words and slowly the hysteria faded away, leaving him exhausted and light-headed. And as the minutes passed and he became more and more aware of his immediate surroundings, the visions from before slowly faded as well. What had he been dreaming about? There was a light, he remembered. And a voice. It was so familiar. But even those vague recollections of his dream faded into nothingness as well, as for the first time in over three days Héctor was finally awake and aware.

"Imelda?" Héctor whispered. "What happened?"

"...Héctor?"

**Chapter End Notes**

(60 years later in *The Land of the Dead*)
Julio: So... You're gay?
Vicente: As a bright sunny day, Señor Magallanes.
Julio: ... Were you... then?... When you and I had that... talk?
Vicente: Si.
Julio: So what I said was-
Vicente: Completely unnecessary. And I nearly gave myself a hernia from laughter.
Julio: (hides face) Ay, Dios mio!
Vicente: But if it makes you feel better, I also found it quite endearing. Coco is lucky to have you for a husband.
Julio:..... Gracias....
Chapter Notes

Hey y'all, sorry it took so long to do the illustration. I've been bombarded at work as well as I've been having computer problems. But I hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 35: I Could Never Hate You

"This now concludes your Limbo experience with your loved one in mortal peril. Welcome back to the Land of the Dead. Please remain seated until your assigned attendant can safely remove your Limbo Lenses and motion gloves."

With a flick of his wrist old man Chicharrón flung away the prepared pamphlet of sayings, that he really should have memorized by now after all these years but refused to do it purely out of spite, onto his desk and with a grunt hopped off his chair and out of the office. Grumbling quietly to himself he made his way over to the little girl sitting on the oversized lounge chair with that stupid contraption wrapped around her head and gloves covering her hands. 'Very advanced technology' some of the higher ups had told him when the Limbo Lenses were first produced. 'We can now make the transition from life to death much faster for those stuck in Limbo. And make it peaceful too'.

Advanced? Pah. Nothing advanced about ugly purple oven mitts with a thousand wires coming out the ends and what looked like lit up aviator goggles with five-foot-long antennae wobbling back and forth. It was ridiculous looking and very complicated to start up and shut down. After performing quite a few Limbo runs with other skeletons Chich should have now been able to do it in his sleep without having to consult the manual every time. But he refused to learn it. Again, out of spite.

With a few knob twists and buttons pushed steam was let out of the goggles, letting Chich safely remove them from his client. The little girl blinked rapidly, letting her eyes adjust to the natural light, while he also slipped the gloves off her hands. She clenched her phalanges thoughtfully as she stared at them, as if coming back down to reality. They were not soft light anymore, but healthy white bones. With a sigh she looked up at Chich, and flinched back at his glare.

"What?"

"What were you told to do?" Chich asked with his arms crossed as he glared at her.

"Uh…"
piece of paper. "Leticia Rivera. When you signed out the forms letting you progress into Limbo, you specifically checked the LIFE box. That is to say you were going to coax your father back into the Land of the Living so he can live out his happy little life. And what were the specifications of going the life route?"

"Um…"

"Vagueness. You were told to be as vague as possible. No clues about who you are, what you want, not even if you were male or female. Just a non-threatening, anonymous entity to lead Héctor Rivera back to life. And exactly what did you say to him?"

Leticia looked down at her hands sheepishly, picking at a ridge in her knuckle joint, and softly mumbled, "Feel better Papá?"

"Papá! Exactamente!" Chich paced in front of Leticia and continued to grumble. "If you had checked the DEATH box, you could have called him Papá, Papi, Papita, I don't care. But you checked LIFE. Unless he has more dead kids that I'm not aware of he would have known it was you, and would have been pulled into the Land of the Dead, which means I'd have to refile the paperwork and probably get a citation for poor Limbo management skills again. Then I'd have to go to that stupid retraining seminar and-"

"What does it matter?"

A small, teary voice interrupted Chich's tirade. He turned sharply towards the girl to chastise her, but his brows shot up in alarm. Leticia's mouth was in a thin trembling line and her eyes were glossy with unshed tears as she hugged herself. The angry words that had been flowing freely out of his mouth before were now stuck in his throat as he watched the little girl slightly curl forward with a sniffle.

"He won't remember anything that happens, right? It doesn't matter what I said. I just wanted to… somehow show him that he was safe, that he shouldn't be afraid. That I lo… love him so much."

And much to the old skeleton's horror, Leticia covered her face with her hands and started to cry like a child.

Because that's what she was. Not some absent-minded simpleton who barely skimmed through the instruction manual and promptly forgot the rules.

She was a child, separated from her father, who just wanted to speak to him one last time.

Mierda.

As Leticia continued to gently weep, Chich made a quick dash to his office and pulled out his metal lunch kit. Flipping it open he tossed aside the sandwich and pulled out a bottle of his favorite apple soda and a freshly baked concha wrapped in a napkin. His non-existent gut clenched at the thought of losing his dessert, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Making his way back to Leticia, he loudly clunked the bottle on the table next to her. Startled, the little skeleton looked up and saw the snacks sitting next to her, then looked at Chich with confusion.

"Uh… p-please remain seated for at least ten minutes after the removal of your Limbo Lenses and gloves." Chich stammered as he tried to come up with what he hoped was legit sounding instructions off the top of his head. "Transferring from light-ball to bone can lead to some troubling side effects, including dizziness, nausea, vomiting."

"But skeletons can't vom-"
"Ah you'd think that, si?" Chich chuckled nervously as he scratched the back of his neck. "Well… That's true for normal skeletons! But when you turn into a ball of light it uh… messes with all the bone molecules and particles and monocles… that can cause physical ailments that mimic real life illnesses. Very scientific stuff, you wouldn't understand. But anyway, to combat this, the Department of Family Reunions offers you these complimentary snacks to aid you in your recovery."

Leti looked at the soda and pan dulce morosely for a bit and sniffled. "I don't feel sick. I don't need it."

"I am not legally allowed to let you leave without eating something. Stupid rules, I know, but trust me it will make you feel better. Here, I'll even open the bottle for you."

Taking the bottle from the table he jammed the mouth of it into his eye socket and squinted down hard. With a jerk he popped the cap of the bottle off, letting it fall and clatter into his skull. As he handed the bottle back to Leti he tilted his head back and spit the cap into the air, catching it neatly between two fingers.

"Woah!" Leti exclaimed as she took the soda. "I didn't know we could do that!"

Chich chuckled as he tossed the cap into the trash bin. "When you've been dead as long as me you learn to get creative with your bones. Helps pass the time. Now eat up."

They sat there quietly for a few minutes while Leti slowly ate the concha. Her amazement at Chich's trick faded quickly and her sadness returned, making each bite look painful as she swallowed. Chich twiddled his thumbs as he watched her, his jaw clenched tightly as he tried to find something else to say to make her feel better. As he racked his brain trying to think of something, Leti again spoke up.

"I'm sorry."

Chich blinked at her in confusion. "Que?"

Leti mumbled around the lip of the bottle. "I'm sorry I broke the rules. I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Aw." Chich pulled the green visor from the top of his head and rubbed awkwardly on his bald skull. "You didn't get me in trouble, and you didn't break the rules. Look chica: the thing about viejos like me is… We feel that we've earned the right to be cantankerous and ornery with people. So, if any little thing bugs us, we feel that its within our rights to blow it way out of proportion. But I shouldn't have lost my temper at a kid. And for that I'm sorry."

Leti nodded slowly at the apology, but still looked too down-hearted for Chich's liking. With a smile he leaned over to her. "For the record I think you did a good thing."

Leti looked up at him. "I did?"

"Si." Chich crossed his arms and leant back in his chair. "Most kids would want to have their parents join them in death as soon as possible. But not you. And not because you don't love your parents, it's because that you do. You love them enough to let them live out their natural lives. When you checked the LIFE box I was very surprised and impressed. Shows that you're very mature."

Leti smiled faintly at the praise. "My little brother needs his Papá."
Chich nodded sagely, then chuckled a little to himself. "Though you did beat your Papá up, so you're not that mature."

Leti scoffed at him and pouted. "I didn't beat him up! I simply... knocked some sense into him. You don’t know what he’s like. He's pretty dense! Do you know what happened on Dia de Muertos three years ago?"

They chatted for a few more minutes, laughing at stories while Leti finished eating and Chich finished the paperwork. Once Leti signed the last form she drained the apple soda to the last drop and handed Chich the bottle.

"Gracias for the snack, Señor Chicharrón. It did help after all. All of my... monocles are in perfect working order." She said with a smirk as she formed a circle with her fingers and held it up to her eye.

Ah, she figured it out.

"Hmph," Chich grunted and snatched the bottle to toss it in the bin. "You're pretty smart for a kid."

Leti puffed out her chest. "Well, technically I am twenty years old."

Chich sneered. "Oh ho ho! Such a wealth of wisdom you must have then." With a final signature he put the last paper in the outgoing folder and closed it up. "Okay chica, you're all finished. Want me to call your abuelos to let them know you're done?"

"Nah, they already know I'm going to Shantytown afterwards."

Chich's eyebrows shot up again at that. "Shantytown?"

"Si!" Leti nodded happily. "I've gotta go tell Nieve all about what I saw and what I did. I just know she'll be dying to know! Or- well- you know what I mean. Adios!" A spring back in her step she made her way out the door and down the hallway. Before Chich could settle back down he heard the screech of shoes on the linoleum floor and Leti was back in the doorway. "Oh! And you'll let me know when Tio Nesto is here?"

Chich waved her off. "Once he's in the ground we'll let you know, don't worry. Go on now."

"Great, gracias Señor Chicharrón!" With one last smile Leti dashed out the door, leaving Chich in the peace and quiet of his office.

"Weird kid." Chich said with a shake of his head as he pulled a newspaper out of his desk. "Who in their right mind would want to go to Shantytown?" As he settled down for his afternoon break with his paper and his lunch- now sans dessert- Chich couldn't help but smile.

Weird kid indeed.

But very sweet too.

"Im... Imelda?"

"Héctor!" Imelda reached over and cupped his face with her hand, looking deep into his blurry eyes. "Are you here with me? Do you understand me?"

"S-si... I can't... I can't move my arms. Agh, Dios, my head!"
"Hold on." Imelda made quick work to unlatch the thick straps wrapped around his wrists, and once one was free his hand immediately went up to his forehead to try to soothe the pounding ache. When she had finished with the other one she was back close to his face. "Héctor, I need you to relax and tell me what you remember last."

It took a few seconds, as Héctor gazed dully at his wife, before the memories started to flood back. "Ernesto..." he choked out, lowering his hand over his eyes as he bitterly wept. "I saw him... He's-"

"Okay." Imelda shushed him and ran a hand through his dirty hair. "Okay, you don't need to say anything else."

Héctor blinked up at the harsh lighting and his gaze went around the room, recognition settling in and disgust coming in quickly. He recognized this place. This was where his little girl had wasted away into nothing while he foolishly believed that she was getting the help she needed. And anger was a much better feeling to have than despair. It helped him, gave him strength. It would do. "Why am I in this hospital?" he growled. "Why am I here?"

Imelda's face hardened and she looked at him with exasperation and anger, making him shrink back. "Why are you here? Héctor, you... You brought yourself here! You've been drinking so much that your body nearly shut down when you stopped. You haven't been eating, you are ten pounds underweight! Your lungs are so congested that I... I watched you nearly choke to death Héctor! How could you have neglected your health so much?! Were you trying to kill yourself?!"

_Did you try to kill yourself Ernesto?_

With a shake of his head he turned away from his wife with a snarl as he focused on anything else but her and that horrible thought of his brother. "Of course not! I would never do anything so... so cowardly! What do you care anyway?"

She didn't answer, but Héctor heard the sharp inhale before there was a quiet still. It lasted far too long, until finally the metallic screech of the chair she was sitting on startled him into looking at her again. Imelda had stood up and patted her dress down, refusing to look at him, and cleared her throat. "I must tell the doctor that you are awake and aware."

As she quickly walked towards the door, each click of her heels sent a sharp stab of pain directly into Héctor's heart. She was leaving him. Again. And this time he knew why. He shouldn't have snapped at her. But his head was throbbing just as terribly as the ache in his chest, and he had lashed out in his pain and suffering. But it wasn't just this. The past few years of distance, that had eventually grown into separation, had been on him.

It was all his fault. It had to be.

"I'm sorry Imelda."

His desperate, whimpering voice reached her just as she had opened the door, making her pause. She turned her head towards him so he could see her beautiful profile, but still wouldn't look him in the eye. Still, he had gotten her attention, and he could work with that.

_Make her listen._

"This is all my fault... Not yours." Héctor said softly, his vision slowly becoming even more blurry with tears. His head only felt worse, and it hurt to breathe, but he continued anyway. "I've been a terrible husband... and father, and a... a terrible friend. I couldn't see how bad Ernesto was because
I was only caring about myself, and now he's... He's gone. And it's all my fault."

It was at this point Héctor had dissolved into sobs and what he was saying could easily be described as blubbering. But he couldn't stop. "I should have been stronger, I should have made him go to a doctor, or just have kept him in the room, just not on the stage. But I was too weak. I'm too weak. It's all my fault. He's dead... I couldn't keep him off the stage, and I couldn't make Matty stay at home, I couldn't make you... I'm so sorry, Imelda!"

He broke off into a fit of weeping, trying and failing to keep it at a low volume. Trying not to look as truly pathetic as he felt. With his eyes still squeezed shut in misery he heard the door solidly close, and his heart shattered. It didn't work. He had poured his heart out to Imelda, and she still left him. He had finally talked to her, tried for one last time, and he had still failed. Curling as much as his IVs would allow, he buried his face into his pillow and continued to cry. So lost in his misery he didn't even realize that he wasn't alone, until a soft voice startled him.

"Who said that you were a terrible husband and father?"

With a gasp he looked up and saw Imelda staring down at him, with an unreadable yet soft expression. His breath stuttered to halt at seeing her look at him like that, and for the life of him he couldn't answer her. His voice was stuck in his throat as he gaped at her with tears still spilling silently down his cheeks. Luckily for him Imelda continued on her own.

"You have been nothing but a loving and devoted father." Imelda said as she sat down on the side of the bed, and now that she was closer Héctor could read the expression past his blurry gaze. She looked so... sad. "Our children couldn't adore you more if they tried. Never think differently."

With a sniffle, Héctor smothered a cough as he swiped at his eyes. "But... But Matty. I let him go. If he dies..."

"Then it will be the fault of whoever kills him. Not his, not yours." With a bowed head she looked down at he clasped hands in her lap. "And you didn't let him do anything. Mateo does what he wants." Then, suddenly, Imelda did something that Héctor had not seen from her in quite some time and made his heart flutter. She smiled. "Remember when he wanted to join the fútbol team, and I was afraid that he would fail, or hurt himself? I refused to sign the permission slip, and what did he do?"

Héctor was surprised when, despite all his sorrow, the corner of his mouth twitched upward at the memory. "He forged your signature."

"And despite my concerns, he surpassed my expectations an succeeded in it. Even kicked the winning goal in his first game. Probably just to prove to me that I worried over nothing."

"This isn't a fútbol game." Héctor whispered, the fleeting lightness of mirth vanished. "I sent him off to war."

"No." Imelda shook her head firmly. "No he was already going, you sent him off with a lighter heart. With the knowledge that you didn't hate him for his decision. I... didn't realize that until afterwards. It's what I should have done."

"That's why you sent him boots?"

"Si." Imelda nodded and smiled again. "He is still an idiota, but I wanted him to know that I still love him with all of my heart... Like you did. I am sorry Héctor. I never should have said those things to you when it happened."
Héctor sniffled again, the tight vice around his heart lessening just a little at her words. Knowing that she didn't blame him for Matty's actions made him feel a little better, but he still had to know the full truth. "But… you said it. Because you… wanted me to leave… Didn't you?"

"…Si."

Héctor sank deeper into the pillow and turned his gaze away from her. He knew it. She didn't love him anymore. She truly didn't want him with her. That was it. It was over.

"It's for the best. You deserve so much better."

Héctor's head snapped back to stare at Imelda in confusion. A little too fast as his aching head protested against the harsh movement, but he struggled through the pain just as he struggled through his confusion. "Better?" he whispered. "I don't… I don't understand."

Imelda looked away and crossed her arms across her chest tightly, almost as if she was hugging herself. Or maybe to prevent herself from touching him. "You're a successful man, Héctor. And you're still young. Young enough to find another woman who would be more than happy to start a new life with you."

"Y-young?!" Héctor choked out in disbelief. "Imelda, I'm a grandfather."

Imelda waved a hand at him dismissively. "That means nothing to a man. You'll be as virile now until the day you die. You can expand your legacy even more with someone else. I'm finished Héctor. I have nothing more I can give you."

"I am old, Héctor." Imelda cut him off, and for the first time Héctor saw her cold façade crack into something vulnerable. "I am sagging and wrinkled. And not only that I am broken. Everything that made me worthy of being your wife is gone. Cut from me never to be replaced. I am a shadow of what I once was, and I am no use to you anymore."

With a slow blink, Héctor suddenly understood. "Imelda… Are you talking about the surgery?" She didn't answer, but her silence was answer enough. "Imelda! You nearly died! The surgery saved your life!"

"And it ruined my body!" Imelda choked out, and she finally started to cry. "I see that scar everyday Héctor. It's hideous and it's disgusting. I've never felt so disgusted, and so… So embarrassed! And ashamed! I am not a woman anymore, at least not one that can bear you children!"

"I don't want more children!" Héctor shouted, and the strain of the outburst proved too much as his chest was seized with a fit of deep hacking coughs.

Imelda was at his side in a second pressing a soft rag against his mouth as the violent coughs shook him. After what seemed like too long, to the point she was afraid that he would pass out again, Héctor finally drew in enough air to gasp and collapsed back onto the bed in exhaustion. As she wiped at his lips gently and shushed him, Héctor locked eyes with her and held her gaze.

"Imelda, I love you." He whispered, his voice rough from his fit. "I've loved you since I was eleven years old… The angelic girl in the creek who sang La Llorona so… hauntingly beautiful… You're all I ever wanted. But I wanted you for you, not as a… a baby factory."
Imelda laughed softly, bitterly, as she stood up to walk towards the trash bin. "Some factory!" she sneered as she tossed the soiled rag into the bin. "I couldn't even carry our child to term. I was just too old, and Miguel nearly died before he had a chance to live."

"But he is alive! You're alive! Everything is fine!"

"And I gave you the most beautiful little girl." She whimpered and lowered her head into a dry sob. "Leticia… with flowers in her hair… and in the end she rotted away."

Héctor choked on tears as he struggled to sit up. "No. Imelda, that's not true."

"And I made you give up on her!"

"That's not true!"

"How could you love a woman who killed her own daughter?!"

"Enough! Imelda, I – UGH!"

It wasn't until he had crashed to the ground did Héctor realize that he had forced himself out of the bed, desperate to reach his hysterical wife. His weakened limbs couldn't bear even his own meager weight and landed heavily on his knees and arms in an awkward, painful kneel. He hissed as sharp pain shot through him and collapsed to his side, his ringing ears preventing him from hearing Imelda's terrified gasp.

"Héctor!"

And then suddenly he felt her hands on him, pulling him up into sitting position and muttering frantically that he had to get back into bed. As the pain slowly subsided he managed to grab her hand with his, squeezing hard and trying to draw strength from her. When she stilled and looked at him, he brought her hand up to his face and nuzzled it. Dios, he missed her. And being so close to her he could actually smell her again. And her kiss her palm, and-

Ay, mierda. I kissed her palm!

With a start he looked up at Imelda, expecting to hear a barrage of curses or maybe even being on the receiving end of a few indignant slaps. But what he saw stole his breath away. She just looked at him with profound sadness in her eyes, tears still running down her cheeks, and there was something else. Something that pulled at his heart and gave him the courage to keep pressing forward.

It was longing.

"Imelda." Héctor whispered as he again pressed her hand against his face. "You didn't kill her. She was too sick, and you did not make her sick. And you didn't make me give up on her. You were right. All I was doing was hurting Leti. And you… You did it first."

Imelda blinked. "Did what first?"

Héctor smiled. "You said I let Matty go with a lighter heart. Well… You did it first, to our little girl. She didn't have to fight anymore. She died peacefully with her family at home. That was because of you, and I am forever grateful for that."

"And I don't want more children, or a young mistress, or anything like that. All I ever wanted was a real family. Ever since I was a little boy, after realizing that my Mamá and Papá were never going
to come back for me. And when I saw the bossy, snooty girl who always made fun of me for being too short, sing my favorite song in the most beautiful way... I knew I wanted to start one with you. I don't care if you can't have any more children. I just want you to be healthy, Imelda. And no matter how many scars or wrinkles or gray hairs you'll get, you will always be the most beautiful girl in the world to me. I don't want you to hate yourself Imelda, and if you do I'll just have to love you twice as much to make up for it. Because, when I married you... I was ready to be with you... for life."

Imelda closed her eyes and nodded, fresh tears falling and a trembling smile suppressing her weeping. With a shaking hand Héctor wiped the tears off of her face, and soon she too was nuzzling his hand. Slowly they came closer together until their foreheads were resting against each other, noses barely touching, and they just stared at each other and cried.

"Imelda… Mi amor… Mi diosa… Please tell me you still love me... Por favor…"

...

"You are the love of my life."

When the nurse came in several minutes later for a routine check on her patient, she was startled into a near heart attack and horrified at what she saw: Héctor Rivera, the man who all of Mexico had been waiting on with bated breath to wake up from Death's door, and Imelda Rivera, the fashion mogul and shrewd businesswoman who had been coldly separated from her husband for months, were on the cold hard ground in a twist of IV tubes and blankets. Laughing, crying hysterically, and kissing each other with intense fervor.

The nurse frantically called for orderlies and doctors to come lift Héctor off the floor and back into the bed, difficult to do when he and his wife couldn't stop clinging to each other. Once he was settled back into bed, and the doctors tried to treat him and question his well being between all the kissing a crying, did they finally leave them alone again.

Ernesto was dead. He would have to be buried. Héctor would have to watch his friend be placed into his eternal resting place. It was the lowest he had ever felt in his life. But as his wife peppered his face with kisses and whispered words of love and apologies, that she did love him, that she wanted him to come home as soon as he was well, that she missed him and that Miguel missed him too, Héctor finally started to feel himself slowly rise from the pit of rock bottom.

It was a tragedy, but things couldn't get worse than they were now.

Now it was time for things to start looking up.

"I can't believe you're kissing me!" Héctor said as he giggled.

"I can't help it." Imelda said as she kissed him for what seemed like the thousandth time in the last hour. "I love you. And I miss you. Anyone would kiss their husband in this situation."

"No, I meant that I've been the hospital for days! I must stink and taste too terrible to kiss!"

"I don't care." Imelda kissed him again, this time on the brow, and nuzzled his forehead. "I want you to come home Héctor."

"Si, of course." Héctor whispered. "I've wanted to come home for so long."
"As long as you don't mind sharing the bed with someone else… Someone younger. Like I have for the past few months."

There was a beat of silence, before Héctor leaned back to look Imelda in the eyes again, a cold feeling of dread starting to creep back into his heart. "What?"

Imelda held his gaze for a second, before a sly smile curled her lips. "I got a new cat… Her name is Pepita."

"..... You are so lucky I'm in a hospital right now. I think I just had a stroke."

Imelda laughed again, with Héctor joining her, and they resumed kissing, and crying, and kissing some more. When the nurse came back in again later, she was once again shocked and exasperated at the sight of the both of them, cramped together on the small hospital bed, sound asleep in each other's arms.

Ay! Ay! This is terrible! Mierda! Basura! I can't eat any more of this!

It had been a week since Héctor had woken up in the hospital and it had been a week since he had regained the love of his wife. With the promise that they would be together again, that he would finally get to go home, that he would get be with his adorable Miguelito and that that Coco would also be coming back with him, Héctor was ready to leave the hospital as soon as he had showered and shaved. The doctor, however, had abruptly dashed those hopes away.

'Well Señor Rivera, I must say that you have some amazing lungs.'

'Ha, you see Imelda? I'm fine! When can I-'

'Amazing due to the fact that they're both so full of fluid it's a miracle that they've been able to absorb as much oxygen as they have been.‘

'... Ah…‘

'I'm sorry señor, but it's going to be a while until you are properly discharged. But if you want to get out of here faster I suggest you rest as much as you can and eat everything that is put in front of you. You need to put on some weight.‘

And so he had. It wasn't hard to sleep; he was so weak nowadays that he could fall asleep at the drop of a hat despite the glaring lights and sunny rays pouring through his window. The eating, on the other hand, that was the challenge. Granted, since he had finally finished enduring a painful withdrawal from the alcohol and he was finally back with his family, Héctor had gotten back his appetite tenfold. He was still gaining weight painfully slow, which had always been a problem for him, but he had become a bottomless pit.

There was just one problem.

Hospital food was made in Hell by el Diablo himself.

With a hard swallow Héctor gulped down the mouthful of food he had been chewing on for two full minutes, and with a pleading whine and smile he held out the bowl to his two judges sitting on either side of him on the bed. Said judges being his youngest son and his granddaughter.

Miguel looked into the bowl and then shook his head. "Uh-uh."
"There's still some left." Victoria piped up. "Finish it, or no dessert."

Héctor groaned and looked up for any potential allies in the three adults sitting in the room with him. But Imelda, Coco and Vicente just stared at him with crossed arms and hard expressions, silently demanding that he finish his meal. Except for Coco. No, fire flashed in her eyes and Héctor shrunk away from her intense gaze, combining the last two bites into one huge glob and shoveling it into his mouth. He gagged a little at the taste and struggled to chew the large mass, but he did it. Anything to placate his sweet, terrifying little Coco.

Coco had always taken after him in temperament. Kind, motherly, always willing to help out others, and very gentle. But when she got really riled up, that was when the Imelda in her rose to prominence and blasted her ire at anyone in the wrong. So when Coco had visited him after he had woken up, had seen both him and her mother together and happy again, and was reassured that he would be all right, she had sighed in relief and smiled with happy tears.

'Ay, gracias a Dios. I had prayed for so long... that you two... IDIOTS!... WOULD STOP THIS FOOLISHNESS!' And so Héctor and Imelda had sat there in shocked silence while their little girl screamed and bellowed at them, and called them names, and shamed them to the point where in the end they could do nothing more than slump in pure dejection and just accept everything their daughter yelled at them like she was their own mother and they were the naughty children.

'For months! NO! For years! YEEEAAARS! I have watched you sulk and whine and piddle and cry and not even try stand up for yourself while Mamá treated you like dirt! No, instead you drank yourself into a hospital bed and made all of us worry for your health when you didn't care at all! What an wonderful example you've set for your son and granddaughter! No, you're not a grandfather! You're just a kicked puppy trailing after Mamá! And you Mamá, are the puppy kicker! Imelda Rivera, kicker of puppies! You should be ashamed of yourself! And why?! Because you were depressed about the surgery! All- of-this-could-have-been-prevented-if-you-had-just-TOLD-US!'

After she had finished, and making her parents vow that they would never do this to her or the family again, she had dragged an amazed Julio off by the wrist and had gone back to the mansion for the night. When they had returned the next morning to visit, no one mentioned the fact they both had suspicious marks and scratches on their necks and arms or that they were wearing the same clothes from the previous day.

With a heaving gulp and a disgusted groan, Héctor collapsed back onto the propped up pillows and let the bowl clatter to his side. Miguel picked the bowl up to inspect, and then held it up triumphantly. "It's empty!"

Everyone cheered and clapped in such a patronizing way that Héctor growled and rolled his eyes in annoyance. "That was the worst one yet." He groaned and held onto his gurgling stomach. "How can you screw up corn and beans so much?" He watched as Miguel curiously ran a finger through the lingering blob of gravy left in the bowl to taste it, smiling as the little boy's face screwed up in disgust.

Vicente chuckled, stood up and walked over to the huge pile of flowers, balloons, gift baskets and presents that took up the whole side of the room. It had taken him and Julio several trips to bring up all of the gifts from the fans and Mexico's elite, and the room was so overpowering with the scent of flowers. "I don't think hospitals put seasoning in their food. It's to nourish you, not upset a weak stomach. However, I think a little treat won't hurt you." He picked out an ivory box and
brought it over to the bed. "Esther Fernández sent you a box of chocolates from Switzerland, along with a sweet note to get well soon."

"Chocolate!" Miguel shouted and reached for the box, Victoria preventing him from flinging the lid away and placing it gently next to her. "Can we have some too, Papá?"

"Of course, but save some for me!" Héctor said as he plucked one out of the box. "Anything to get the taste out of my mouth."

Vicente went back over to the pile of gifts and pulled out another, wooden box and handled it nervously. "Also, Emilio Fernández sent you this box of cigars. Very poor taste for someone getting over pneumonia, and… I thought since you don't smoke I could give them to a friend of mine who would appreciate them more?"

Héctor waved him off and stuffed two chocolates in his mouth. "Take them, they're yours. I can't stand the smell of them."

"Gracias, Señor." Vicente said and sat back down with a drawn out sigh, rubbing the back of his neck and closing his eyes.

His exhaustion wasn't unnoticed by the rest of the adults in the room, and when the three of them exchanged knowing looks Coco reached out to touch his arm gently. "Chente, you look so tired."

Vicente blinked his eyes open. "Me? No no, I'm fine. It's just… been very hectic for everyone this past week. We've finally settled on a burial site for Señor de la Cruz in Santa Cecilia and construction of a tomb for him is underway, but… there's still so much to do. Like canceling the production on the movie, sending back the funding to the investors, a massive retooling for the new year's schedule, and worst of all… I can't find Señor de la Cruz's Chihuahuas anywhere!"

Victoria gasped. "Oh, poor puppies!"

Héctor listened to Vicente's woes in silence, nodding and smiling solemnly. "I'm sorry Chente. You've been under a lot of pressure for a long time."

Vicente shook his head. "It's all right. You've been sick."

"Not just now." Héctor said. "The whole time you've been my assistant you've been doing my workload as well as your own, while I've been wallowing in my own self-pity. I didn't realize it but I took you for granted, and for that I'm truly sorry. You've been absolutely wonderful and I am very grateful for it."

Vicente's face flushed red at the praise, and he bowed his head humbly. "W-well… Gracias Señor Rivera. I would do anything to help you and your company. When you're well again everything will be waiting for you back in tip top shape, I promise."

Héctor smiled. "Oh, I'm not coming back."

"… Que?"

Héctor looked at Imelda, who took his hand lovingly and nodded encouragingly, and continued. "I'm not an executive, Chente. I have no talent for business, and numbers. You do. Now I'll still be the sole head of the company, but I'll be leaving all those boring aspects to you. I'm retiring and going home to live with my family, and you'll be the new CEO of Rivera de la Cruz Productions and Records."
"… Que?"

"But don't panic, Chente. It's not going to be overnight. You're going to get all of the training you need, set you up with an excellent team and board, get you all nice and settled in. You won't be alone in all of this." Héctor smiled warmly and held out his hand to the poor man. "You've helped me and the company so much this last year, it's high time you get the right pay and a title to go with it. I hope you say yes, because there's no one else I trust more than you."

Vicente sputtered for a few seconds, his face turning from a burning red into a pallid white, before with a jerking nod he robotically grasped Héctor's hand and shook it once. "Yeah... Yes! S-si! Gracias, Señor Rivera! Héctor! I won't let you down- AY! What am I saying?! Yes I will! How can I run a company when I can't even find four dogs and make sure that you eat?!!"

"Don't you worry about him, Vicente." Imelda said as she squeezed Héctor's hand. "I'll make sure that he eats. You take care of the less important stuff."

"O-kay. Okay, okay, okay, okay..." Vicente mumbled, standing up on shaking feet and walking over to Héctor's unused oxygen cylinder. "Please excuse me. I think I'm going to pass out." With trembling hands he strapped the mask over his face and cracked the valve open to full blast, taking in deep gulping breaths and sliding down onto the floor.

Miguel jumped off the bed and walked over to where Vicente laid slumped against the wall, gently patting his head. "You'll be okay." Miguel reached down, pried open Vicente's shaking hands, and placed a half melted piece of chocolate into it, smiling sweetly.

A few minutes later, once it was determined that Vicente definitely would take the promotion and definitely wouldn't throw up, Julio walked in with a large wooden box under his arm. "Hola Papá Héctor. How are you feeling? Did you eat?"

Héctor rolled his eyes. "Yes, yes, I ate! Dios mio, I'll eat mud if it means these quacks will just let me out of here."

"Well, I know how bored you are, so I brought you this!" Turning the box over, Julio showed everyone that it was in fact a small radio. "I thought that maybe if you could listen to the news or some programs it'll make your stay seem shorter."

"What a wonderful idea, mi amor." Coco said.

"Gracias. It's a wireless one and portable too!" Julio said as he tried to find a place to set it down amongst all of the gifts. "Ay... Chente, can I just move some of these on the ground?"

Vicente, staring off into space, barely acknowledged him with an affirmative grunt.

Once a spot had been cleared and the box switched on, Julio fiddled with the knobs until the radio static finally began to tune into a station. "Alright then, just a few more adjustments and here... we... go!"

"-you cry!"

"For even if I'm far away I hold you in my heart"

"I sing a secret song to you-"

Julio sighed. "Ay, they're still playing his songs nonstop. It's understandable, but still."
Coco nodded. "Si, Tio Nesto endeared himself to a whole nation. It warms my heart to know how much he's touched everyone so-"

"Héctor?!"

At Imelda's cry, both Julio and Coco turned to see Imelda hovering over the bed as Héctor was… rocking back and forth, trembling violently and cramming the heels of his hands into his ears as hard as he could. His breathing became labored and a low, keening sound was coming out of his throat. His eyes were so wide and pinpricked, and even though the others couldn't see it, all Héctor could see was red.

Blood! So much blood!

It's all torn up! What happened?! Where are you?!

Ernesto!

The song won't stop playing!

The bell won't stop ringing!

It's all over me!

STOP THE SONG! STOP THE SONG!
STOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONG

"JULIO, TURN IT OFF!"

STOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONGSTOPTHESONGSTOPTHE-

"HÉCTOR STOP! Héctor, stop! It's off! It's off! Cálmese, mi amor. Cálmese… Shhhhh…"

With a sharp gasp, Héctor found himself lying back down of the bed. Imelda was hovering over him with a terrified expression, and the doctor was next to him drawing back an empty syringe and checking his pulse. As his eyes roamed around the room he saw Coco holding onto Victoria as the little girl cried into her mother's shoulder, and Vicente was holding onto a wide-eyed Miguel.

As a wave of drowsiness started to engulf him, Héctor turned back to Imelda and stared up at her in anguish.

"It's alright, Héctor." Imelda said gently.

Héctor shook his head slowly as the sedative took effect, tears falling down his face. "No… it's not… No more… 'Melda… no more… mu-…"

As he drifted off into a drugged state of unconsciousness, he didn't notice the worried looks that the adults exchanged with one another, and he didn't hear the innocent question his son asked them all. A question they couldn't really answer.

"No more what, Mamá?"

"~MEEEEEEEEEEE!~"

"AAAAAARGH!"
Instead of the rapturous applause he was expecting after belting out the last note of his song, Ernesto was startled by the sound of a hoarse, raspy scream of an old man. His eyes shot opened and he flinched back in confusion at his surroundings. The stage, the lights, the orchestra, the audience, the theater! Vanished! In the blink of an eye they were all gone! Instead he was in a rather sterile looking room not unlike what you would find in a hospital, and he wasn't standing anymore either, but sitting up on a simple fold-out gurney.

Where am I?

"Puta Madre! What the hell?! Who the hell wakes up singing like that?!"

Ernesto turned towards the gravelly voice of the only other occupant in the room with him: a short, stubby old man currently trying to totter over towards his head on the ground, wearing clothes common of either a bank teller or some other kind of office worker-
His head?

…

On the ground?

…

This man's head was on the ground.

…

How much did I take?!

Finally, when the old man finally reached his head and plopped it back on his neck, Ernesto realized it wasn't a head at all. It was a skull. A skull currently glaring daggers at him with eyeballs suspended in the inky blackness of his eye sockets. This was no drug trip. This wasn't even a dream. Ernesto knew himself enough to know that there was no way he could dream up something so ugly or terrifying in his life.

"AAAAH!" Ernesto screamed and scooted himself back as far as he could on the bed, plastering himself to the wall. He continued to scream as the skeleton slowly walked towards his desk with a sigh.

"That's more like it. This I can work with." The skeleton said as he held up a clipboard.

"S-stay away! Stay away from me!"

"Please remain calm." It said in a bored tone as it read from the clipboard. "You are safe now. Rejoice, for all of your worldly pains and ailments are a thing of the past."

"Wh-what?!" Ernesto croaked out and continued to press against the wall, trying his all to get away from this skeleton. From this monster.

"We welcome you to your final resting place- heh, final, yeah right- where as long as you remain well remembered in the hearts of your loved ones you will live on far longer than you did in lif… Lif? Ay joder, they still haven't fixed this typo?!

Ernesto continued to gasp in terror as he stared transfixed at the skeleton before him. "Don't come any closer!"

It rolled his eyes. "I'm not even moving."

"Yes, you are! You're creeping up to me right now!"

"No, you're pushing against the wall and moving the gurney towards me, cabron!"

Ernesto paused at that and looked down, seeing that the bed was now two feet away from the wall and his hands were still pressed against it. "Oh."

And then he looked up towards his hands.

…

…
"Ooohhh....."

"There ya go." The old skeleton chuckled hoarsely as he watched Ernesto stare at his new boney appendages in quiet, awed horror and went back to his clipboard. "Bienvenidos, Señor de la Cruz. Welcome to the Land of the Dead. Now, since the requirement to be here is to be dead, I must inform you that that's what happened. You are now dead. My name is Chicharrón and I will be death counselor for this eve- and there you go, pat yourself down. Down the ribs, to the stomach- ay, no stomach!- and then the face. Every time, just like clockwork."

Ernesto tore his hands away from pawing at his own cheekbones and glared at Chich. "This is not funny!"

Chich smiled at him. "You know I always thought your bulbous chin was just fat, but nope," and he smirked and tapped his own protruding chin with a pen. "You're just as chiseled as I am."

"How?!!"

"How?... Ay, I don't know. Genetics, I guess? I took after my Papá."

"HOW DID I DIE?!"

As he cried out that choked, desperate plea Ernesto already knew deep down what had caused his far too early demise. The drugs. What else could it have been? What else could have affected him so suddenly during such an enthusiastic, triumphant performance. As he had belted out that last note, it was obvious his heart couldn't take the strain. After gambling with his body for so long with copious amounts of drugs and sex, it had finally caught up with him. With one last song to his familia, he had perished right in front of their eyes. It was sudden, but strangely poetic. As tragic and as horrifying as he found his current predicament, he could not ask for a better way to go-

"Oh, that! According to reports, a giant two-ton bell fell from a stage fixture and flattened you into a tortilla."

".... What?"

"To save you some embarrassment I took the liberty of putting it down as 'Acto de Dios' as the cause of death." Chich said, pointing it out on the file before placing it in Ernesto's numb hands. "In hindsight maybe you should have sprung for cartonería props, eh?"

When Ernesto continued to just stare at the file in shocked silence, Chich made his way over to the telephone on his desk. "You've been dead for about three weeks now, but your body was just now buried. Guess they had to either build a fancy tomb for you or they had to finish scraping you all up. But it's givin' me plenty of time to finish the bulk of your paperwork. No deceased blood relatives on this side I'm afraid, they've all been forgotten, but I promised your goddaughter I'd call her the second you'd arrive."

The mention of that word shocked Ernesto out of his stupor, and he glanced at Chich with wide eyes. "M-... M-my... goddaughter?" he whispered breathlessly.

"Uh-huh."

"... Leticia... She's dead."

Chich quirked an eye ridge at him. "Like I said, it's a requirement for being here."

"Sh-she's dead... I'm dead... Oh! Oh no, no!"
With a frustrated sigh Chicharrón placed the phone back on the receiver and rose up to deal with de la Cruz's breakdown. "Easy, amigo."

"I can't die. Not now."

Chich snorted. "If you're worried about missin' out on your fans and fame, don't worry. There's plenty of people here just foamin' at the mouth to see the great Ernesto de la Cruz. A lot of the office ladies here are actually jealous I was assigned to you. You'll be fine."

"Héctor…"

Chich blinked at the deep sorrow and pain that he heard in de la Cruz's voice and frowned. "Your writing partner? Leticia's Papá?"

Ernesto brought a hand over his mouth and, seemingly too overcome to hold himself any longer, collapsed back onto the bed to stare morosely up at the ceiling. "Héctor… I can't die. I can't be dead, not now."

He had promised. He had promised years ago, as he had looked two little babies in the eyes, that he would never hurt Héctor again for as long as he lived. He had stood by his side throughout all of their successes, fame, riches, pain, loss, suffering. Anything to even try to make up for what he had tried to do.

He had promised.

"… I was going to tell you everything…"

Chapter End Notes

Cartonería is the Mexican art of paper mache. (The More you Know ~~~~ ⭐️)
The following year passed without much turmoil coming to the Rivera's, much to everyone's relief. Ernesto had been buried in a grand mausoleum taking up a good chunk of Santa Cecilia's cemetery, and Imelda was sure he would have approved the size and stature of it very much. It was nearly buried in flowers and cards from his adoring fans on the day of his funeral, as well as the next year when Dia de Muertos came and his death and memory were officially honored for the holiday.

Imelda had taken Miguel to the mausoleum as well as Coco and her own little family, so they could pay respect to their fallen godfather. Héctor had come as well, but he remained silent during the whole visit and was the first one to leave.

Imelda couldn't blame him. For months he had been tormented with vivid nightmares of the night Ernesto had been gruesomely killed, forcing Imelda to wake him up as he had laid in bed groaning and crying in his sleep, trapped in his dreams.

It took a while before Héctor was able to finally sleep through the night, and a little while longer before both he and she were ready to finally become intimate with one another again. In many ways it was so much like their first time all those years ago when they were teenagers, scared and embarrassed but so in love, only now they were so much older and burdened by the many curveballs life had thrown at them.

However, after shy kissing had given way to the passionate lovemaking they had both been craving for years, Héctor had laid back in the bed with his wife in his arms, both slick with sweat and panting, and grinned.

"You've… still got it."

And more joy had soon followed. Not long after Héctor had returned home Coco had discovered that she was pregnant again. Julio was over the moon and kissed his wife with such passion and Rosita squealed and hugged them both with bone-crushing intensity. Victoria pleaded with her parents that she wanted a sister, not a brother since Miguel was more than enough, and Coco was smacked with a melancholy sense of nostalgia. She had demanded the same thing when she was younger, and she did get a sister. Only to lose her later in life.

Luckily Victoria's wish was granted, and in the late summer Elena was born. A much rounder baby than Victoria had been, she looked like the perfect mixture of both her parents, and from day one she had latched on to every member of the family with unconditional love. And, ay, what a loud baby! Her cries would shake the walls. If it had been some other time in life Héctor would have said that little Elena would have been a great singer that could have projected her voice all throughout Carnegie Hall.

But he never did.

Because ever since the night that Ernesto had died there had been no music in the Rivera's house.

Héctor shied away from Mariachi Plaza from the day he set foot back into Santa Cecilia. The only times he listened to the radio were to hear about news and sports. He poured his time and energy
into other business ventures that had nothing to do with music, but had greatly reaped multiple benefits for his family and jobs for many other people: hotels, restaurants, a canning company that specialized in pork products, and schools that were scattered across Oaxaca.

Meanwhile his white calavera guitar, a present lovingly gifted to him by his wife on his birthday all those years ago, was tucked away in a closet, hidden away by hung clothes and slowly gathering dust.

But he was more than ever invested in spending his free time with his family, having missed them so much while he was away. Watching Miguel and Victoria develop their personalities, senses of humor and discover their own interests as they made their way out of their toddler years was always a treat. And Elena was so different from both of them even as a baby, so full of personality already, and she never failed to make Héctor laugh until his sides hurt.

There was one vital piece missing: Matty.

His last letters had come at the beginning of the year, after he had been shipped off from Africa to aid the troops in Anzio, Italy. And for a while all was well. He had complained a little of being stuck there as weather had bogged down the troops' advancement further inland, but other than that he was in high spirits. He talked more about his friend Martín, how he had spent most of his time scouting the area and putting up barbed wire, boring stuff really. All was well.

That was three months ago.

Before that he was managing a letter every week to allay their fears for his safety. From February to April there was absolutely nothing, and the family was frantic. Imelda sent several demanding telegraphs to the United States, not truly understanding who was exactly in charge of these things but desperate to reach anyone who could explain what was happening to her son. Héctor was sick with worry, nearly tearing his hair out in fear and nightmares consuming him once again.

And just when they were reaching the absolute peak of their terror of their son's safety, close to hopping on the first plane to Italy, damn the dangers it would pose to them… a telegram was delivered to them. An army telegram. With shaking hands Héctor took it from the delivery boy, not breathing as he read it. And his insides were flooded with the most enormous rush of relief that he had ever felt in his life as he read aloud:

To Héctor Rivera, Santa Cecilia Oaxaca, Mexico

Papá, I am so sorry it took me so long to write you. I have been injured and have been officially discharged. As soon as I am able to I will make it back home to you and our family.

Mateo Rivera

There had been a rush of emotions as the words registered to the whole family, and Héctor was too overwhelmed to really remember much of what happened then. There was screaming, shouts and laughter, and Héctor was faintly aware that he had managed to lift Rosita off the ground to spin her around and plant a huge kiss on her. And then Miguel had managed to grab his attention with a ride grin of his own.

"Matty is coming home, Papá?"

"Yes!" Héctor had cried as he twirled his little boy in a huge circle. "Your brother is coming home!"

It had taken a little while longer for him to actually get there, however. A whole month to be exact.
But they had kept in touch through quick telegrams, and one evening there was a phone call and his parents were finally able to hear his voice. He had made it to Juarez and would be taking a train all the way to Santa Cecilia.

"No, no! A train is too long and strenuous miño! I'll wire you some money to take a plane."

"Ay… It'll be too… difficult to use a plane Papá. I'll be fine on a train, don't worry."

And so that's were he and Imelda were two days later as the train pulled into the station, Miguel being held by Imelda, as they watched the passengers slowly exit. As more and more people poured out and the train became seemingly empty, Héctor felt that ever present pang of worry forming in his stomach. Did Matty miss the train? Had something happened? How could something happen now, after escaping the hellfire of war only to have bad luck fall on him before he even made it home?! That's all Héctor had these days: Just bad, rotten luck! How would he be even able to find him-

"Mamá! Papá!" Miguel screeched out as he wriggled in Imelda's grasp and pointed towards the rear railcar. "There he is! There he is!"

Héctor followed to where Miguel pointed at and… there he was.

Matty slowly made his way down the steps of the railcar as carefully as possible, being supported by an unknown woman and leaning heavily on two crutches, his face scrunched up and strained. Once he set foot on solid ground did he let himself relax with a great heaving sigh, and Héctor could see what the last two years of war had done to his boy.

Matty was only twenty-one years old. He looked thirty-one. His hair, which he usually kept slicked back and out of his face, was now much longer and hung disheveled over his forehead and was sticking behind his glasses. His face was covered in a scratchy stubble that was almost formed into an actual beard. And Dios, he was so thin! Even from a distance he could see his arms trembling to hold himself up on his crutches. His boy needed his help!

"Mateo!"

With a short start, Matty jerked his head up and peered throughout the bustling crowd in search of the voice that had called out his name. As soon as their eyes locked, all of the weariness on his face melted away and Matty's face cracked into the biggest smile that Héctor had ever seen him make. With renewed vigor he started making his way over to them on his crutches, slowly building up speed towards his family.

"Papá! Papá!"

Héctor wasn't going to wait for him. He wasn't going to let his son painfully hobble towards them. He would come to him instead. With several quick strides Héctor met Matty in the middle of Santa Cecilia station with a joyful whoop and crushed him into the biggest hug he could give him, the biggest hug he had been wanting to give him for the last two years now. And then Héctor did the one thing Matty had begged him to never do again ever since he was seven years old:

He grabbed his son on both sides of his face and peppered rapid-fire kisses on his cheeks.

"AGH-NO! Papá! Pap-pppt!" Matty tried to squirm out of Héctor's vice-like grip, his face squished into comical distortions and his glasses knocked askew. "Papá, stop -mmph! Papá, prrr frr-vrrr!"

With one last loud smooch, Héctor crushed Matty to his chest again and cradled his head tightly. "Matty! Mi hijo! Mi niño precioso!" He held his son even closer, re-familiarizing himself with the
feel of his child in his arms. His warmth, his scent, his solid presence. His son was back in his arms, alive and whole, just like he had promised two years ago in this very spot. His son had come home. "Matty… I'm never letting you go again."

"…Please let me go." Matty wheezed out. "Shot… hurts!"

"Ay!" Héctor quickly released Matty from his death grip and propped him upright. "I'm so sorry, mijo. I'm just… so happy to see you!"

Getting his breath back, Matty smiled faintly at his father. "You have no idea how happy I am to see you too." Glancing over Héctor's shoulder he practically melted at the sight of his mother. "Mamá…"

"Mateo!" Imelda sobbed and pulled him into an equally joyous, but much less painful, one armed hug with Miguel joining in happily. "Ay Matty, I was so worried! Are you in pain? Do you need to sit down? You're so skinny!"

"I'm fine Mamá, gracias." Matty smiled warmly. "If anything, sitting for so long on the train hurt more than standing now. Miguel! Look how big you are! You're practically a man!"

"I missed you Matty. I almost forgot what your voice sounds like!" Miguel said, not noticing the way Matty's smile dimmed a little and a flinch of pain creased his brow. "Did you get shot?" Miguel asked with innocent curiosity. "Did it hurt?"

"Miguel!" Imelda hissed.

"It's alright Mamá." Matty said tiredly. "We'll talk about that later, okay gordito? I just want to look at you all right now, I missed you sooooo…" Matty trailed off as he was finally able to drink in his family's appearance, and when he finally settled on Héctor his eyes widened and his voice trailed off in shock. "Papá!"

Héctor smiled lovingly at his son, not noticing his mild horror. "Yes, Matty?"

"Y-… Your hair…"

"Ah yes, I'm styling it now." Héctor chuckled as he raked his fingers through the slicked back bangs. "I'm too old for that messy, boyish look. It suits me, no?"

"Not that!" Matty said in exasperation. "Papá, your hair is gray! Really really gray!"

Héctor huffed and patted his hair down with a pout. Yes, it was true that his hair over the last year had grown… a touch lighter. 'Stress' his doctor had told him. Fine, he could live with that. He didn't need to be reminded of it though! "It's slate, not gray. Besides, I'm an old man. Of course my hair would lose it's color over time."

"Not this much when you're only forty-three!"

"Oh come on, I think it makes me looked distinguished."

"You look like you got hit in the head with flour!"

"Now wait just a minute-"

"Ahem… Um, Matthew?"

A soft, accented voice broke Héctor away from the banter with his son and his brow furrowed in
Turning towards the voice Héctor and Imelda saw a woman standing a few feet away from them, pushing a wheelchair in front of her. By her outfit Héctor was able to recognize her as the same woman who had helped Matty down from the train, but looking at her now he could see that she was… different. In fact, she stood out like a sore thumb against the numerous people bustling through the train station, some even stopping to gawk at her.

She was very pretty, that was for sure. She wore a dusky blue traveling suit, complete with a small matching hat, and dainty white lace gloves. Her brown hair was curled into several tight ringlets that framed her thin face and her large eyes were that faintest blue that Héctor had ever seen. And her skin was very, very pale. This woman… was not Mexican.

Matty held out a hand towards the girl for her to take, which she did with a soft and dimpled smile. And when Héctor turned to look at Matty he saw a look cross his face that looked alarmingly familiar.

It was clear to everyone that Matty was the spitting image of his father, albeit a more scholarly version. But their mannerisms were completely different. While Héctor was dreamy and expressive, Matty was stern and reserved. Aside from looks he and his son were as different as night and day. But the look on his son's face was eerily similar to a look he once saw on himself when he glanced in a mirror. A dopey, gob-smacked smile and drooping eyes that made him look like he was drunk. And this look only happened when he was staring at Imelda.

Love-drunk.

"Ay, Dios mio…"

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart." Matty spoke in English as he took her hand and drew her closer to his family. "I got so caught up with my family I almost forgot to introduce you, but let me do that now. Wanda, this is my father Héctor, my mother Imelda, and my little brother Miguel."

Switching back to Spanish, Matty held the woman close to his side and addressed his parents with a wide grin. "Papá, Mamá, this is Wanda Mae Neely. She is… a very good friend of mine."

"Mamá. " Miguel whispered loudly into Imelda's ear. "Why is she so light? Is she a ghost?" Imelda jerked him sharply in her arms with a harsh shush, but Miguel continued to stare at the woman with intense awe, mouthing 'La Llorona'.

Wanda bowed her head a little and did a slight curtsey. "Gusto en con-o-cer-lo, Señor y Señora Rivera. And you too-ah, I mean-… Ee yee tu, Miguel. No, that's not- Y Tam-bien?... Usted?"

Héctor smiled warmly as the poor girl's face started to turn bright red with embarrassment. "It's alright, Miss Neely. You can speak English when you're around us, no need to fret. Right Imelda?"

Turning towards his wife, he couldn't help but smirk as Imelda was looking at the girl with a guarded, yet still wary expression. Then she looked between Wanda and her son with growing apprehension and Héctor felt his smiling widening. Not a nice feeling, is it Imelda? To see that your son has found another woman in his life. Oh ho ho, how the tables have turned.

But seeing his son look at her with such a softness that he had never seen before made Héctor both happy and extremely relieved. Dios knows that Matty deserved it. "Any friend of our son's is a friend of ours." He said.

"How do you know my son?" Imelda asked pointedly. While it was true Imelda's fluency in English
wasn't as strong as Héctor's and one could believe that she was just asking in the most basic way, Héctor knew her enough to know that she was purposely sniffing out any abnormalities in this relationship that she could pounce on.

Wanda seemed to catch on to the slight hostility and blushed even harder. "Oh, well... I was a nurse stationed in Texas before I joined the war effort. I had to process the recruits before they were sent off, but I couldn't speak Spanish so I found Matthew- er, Mateo- and he became my unofficial translator. Then by chance we were both stationed in Africa together, so we got to know each other more after that."

Now that was strange. In all the letters that Matty had sent him over the years not once did he mention a girl as sweet as Wanda. Mostly they were talks of his travels, the friends he had made, complaining about weather and food, as well as dealing with a shrill and demanding harpy of a woman who exploited him for her own needs-

Oh!

"This is the harpy?!" Héctor exclaimed as he pointed at Wanda.

In English.

Matty's face lost all color in an instant and he made a painful choking noise before glancing frantically at Wanda, who for her part was smirking with a raised brow. "N-no! Wanda that's not-! Papá, what are you doing?!

"Dios mio, Matty. When you were complaining so much about that nurse in your letters I always imagined an old, spiteful crone. Not this beautiful señorita standing before us."

"That's not true! I-... I specifically said that she was pretty..."

Wanda giggled softly and rubbed Matty's shoulder as it was now his face that was turning bright red. "That's alright Mister Rivera. We didn't start off on the right foot. And trust me, I've called him much worse things."

Héctor nodded with a chuckle and Imelda hummed in slight approval, a slight smile twitching her lips. Alright, this girl was good.

Looking down at the wheelchair still being pushed by Wanda, Imelda said, "Mateo, maybe you should sit in the wheelchair now. We'll wheel you to the car."

"What? No I don't need to..." Suddenly Matty let out a gasp and turned towards Wanda, horrified. "Martín!"

"Oh, hell!" Wanda cursed, quickly turning around and made her way back to railcar, nearly plowing through the crowds of people in her haste. "Lo si-en-to! Lo si-ento!"

"Matty, what's going on?" Héctor asked.

"Ah-... I have... one more friend coming with us. With all the excitement I keep forgetting everyone, it seems." Matty chuckled nervously. "It's kinda why I didn't want to take a plane. But I've written about him a lot, it's my friend Martín!"

"Some friend!" A loud voice shot out from the crowd. "You and Wanda left me literally hanging on the doorway! Gangway pendejos, make room! And be careful Wanda, you're dealing with precious cargo here y'know!"
Wanda huffed out a sigh as she pushed the wheelchair with Martín in it. "I can't understand you when you speak Spanish, Martín."

"Well you'll have ample time to learn it with Rivera." Martín said with a sniff, brightening when he saw Matty with his parents. "Speaking of! Señor Rivera! It is an honor and a privilege to meet you! I have been waiting two years to personally shake your hand! My name is Martín Reyes!"

Héctor stared at the young man seated in the wheelchair. Martín had a very stocky build, but he could tell that most of his muscle mass had already wasted away a little with his uniform fitting him loosely. His hair had been primped and poofed into an impressive pompadour, and he had a gleaming wide smile. Clean-shaven and smelling strongly of cologne, Héctor could tell that Martín had groomed himself as best as he could to make a good first impression.

But he couldn't detract his attention away from the fact that the poor boy's left leg from above the knee was completely gone, the pant leg tied into a tight knot at the end. Miguel was already staring at it with wide eyes, with Imelda quickly whispering in his ear and making him nod his head in agreement.

Héctor's heart sank for the boy, but he smiled and grasped his hand firmly. "It a pleasure to meet you Martín, and we all thank you for your services. Matty wrote about you a little in his letters, I'm glad he found a friend in such a trying situation."

"No, I'm glad he befriended me!" Martín said with a laugh. "If he weren't there to save my hide back in Italy I would have lost more than my leg, that's for sure! I am hoping, however, that I'll get some Rivera Shoes at half off though!"

Héctor and Imelda stared at Matty in astonishment. "You saved his life? Oh, Mateo… You're a hero?"

"Well, he saved me after-" Matty started, but his words caught in his throat and he gazed towards the ground, emotionless. "We'll talk about it later. Si?"

Imelda stared at Matty for a minute, before nodding and turning back to Martín. "Still, after all of that, you must be glad to be home, Señor Reyes."

Martín shrugged. "Actually, I'm from Texas, Señora Rivera. My parents immigrated there before I was born. I've always wanted to come Mexico to find my roots, though ever since I've met Rive-uh, Mateo- I've found a… new reason to want to come here."

The way that Martín's face seemed to soften at that last statement drew Héctor's attention back to him. And the way he kept covertly sneaking peeks at the people passing by made it clear that he was looking for someone in the crowds. Someone specific.

"Where is Coco?" Matty asked, causing Martín to perk up at the question. "I'd thought she'd be here too."

Imelda smiled. "Oh, she would have! She's just as excited and relieved that you're finally home, however… the baby woke up from her nap a little too early, so she had to stay behind."

Matty's face split into an ecstatic grin at the news. "A new baby! Really?! Wanda, I have a new niece!"

Héctor nodded. "Elena. She is such a fireball, you're going to love her. The cutest little gordita ever!"
"Gracias a Dios for that!" Imelda laughed. "I'm tired of having flaco family members. It's about time someone in this family has some meat on their bones. Speaking of which, Coco and Rosita are cooking dinner for tonight. Is there anything special you want them to make?"

"Everything."

Startled, Imelda blinked at her son and shook her head. "I'm sorry?"

With an increasingly manic glint in his eye, Matty smiled widely. "I have been eating K-rations, 24-hour rations, minute meals and oatmeal for the last two years. The most exotic spice I've had across my tongue has been pinche salt, and if I see another can of tinned meat I'm going to chuck it into the sewage where it belongs. So I want everything that you have ever made me since the day I was born, covered in cheese, swimming in mole sauce, and smothered in peppers. And I want seconds. And I want thirds. I-want-to-EAT….."

Héctor and Imelda stared wide-eyed as Matty smiled maniacally, a thin stream of drool creeping out of the side of his mouth. Holding Miguel close to her, Imelda laughed nervously and turned to walk away. "Ha… Well, I'm always glad when my children want to eat… J-just… wait here while we pull the car around."

As they walked quickly away, Héctor whispered, "I guess now wouldn't be a good time to bring up the Papá Rivera Canning Company…"

Waiting for the couple to return for them, no one noticed the trio left behind conversing with each other in English.

"Ay, she's not here." Martín whined as he subconsciously gripped the thigh of his bad leg. "I thought she might be here to greet us, but…"

Matty patted Martín on the shoulder comfortingly. "Relax, amigo. You heard Mamá. She's staying behind to cook dinner."

"That's right." Wanda said. "Just half an hour more and you'll finally get to meet your armada."

"... What? Oh, no it's amada, sweetheart."

"What did I say?"

Pulling out a wrinkled, worn out foto from his breast pocket, Martín looked at it lovingly. The beautiful image giving him much needed strength, just like it had done for the whole time he had been fighting in the war, he nodded. "You're right. I've waited two long years to meet her. A half hour won't hurt."

When they arrived at the Rivera house it was surprisingly Oscar and Felipe who had greeted them first, their shouts alerting everyone else that they were there. Matty was delighted that his uncles had come all the way from Guadalajara just to see him, and the twins gasped in mock offense.

"Not see our own sobrino!"

"After he's been gone for two years-"

"-fighting in a hellish warzone-"

"-on the other side of the world!!"
"You wound us, Matty"

Matty ducked his head sheepishly. "Si, you're right. I'm sorry I worried you all."

"Also, we have soooome shoe designs we wanted you to look at first." Felipe said as he whipped out an inch-thick folder crammed with dozens of wrinkled blueprints. "Get your opinion first before Imelda immediately vetoes them."

"Ay, tios, that can wait until later!" Coco said, Julio and Victoria trailing behind her while she carried a squirming baby in her arms. "Bienvenido a casa, hermanito!"

Matty hugged his sister warmly, letting her kiss his cheek, and turned his attention to the baby with a small coo. Elena glared at him, a stranger, with as much vigor as a nine-month old could muster. She looked him up and down, trying to gage who this scruffy man was and what he was doing here. When her Mamá gently told her that this was her Tio Mateo, her family, the change was instantaneous. Soon Elena was beaming a four-toothed grin as she reached out for this new member of her beloved family, which Matty was all too happy reciprocate as he took her and held her close. Everyone laughed and aaawed as the baby pressed a sloppy kiss on his nose and then tried to tear the glasses from his face. He had officially passed the test.

Both Coco and Rosita were ecstatic to meet and get to know Wanda, who had already been nearly crushed twice by a Rosita hug, and told her they would need to teach her everything they knew if she wanted to learn how to cook for Matty. While the ladies had retreated back into the kitchen to retrieve the plates of food, the men chatted out in the courtyard as they set the table. Facundo went on and on about how he would plan a grand celebration in honor of Matty's return home later that week.

"You served in the American army for two years, saved countless lives, and were gravely injured in battle and they're not even going to give you a medal?! Not to mention they didn't even inform your poor family that you were hurt in the first place! Well if they won't honor your sacrifices, niño, then you'll be damned sure that I will immortalize you in Santa Cecilia history!"

Oscar and Felipe shared their numerous shoe ideas to Matty, not noticing the way the poor boy's eyes were glazing over as they droned on.

"See along the sole? Well instead of stitches-

"-how about just a zipper all around?"

"You can mix and match your shoes-

"-to your heart's content!"

Blinking numbly at that, Matty scratched the stubble of his chin. "Uh… zippers aren't very sturdy compared to stitches. Also wouldn't they scrape your feet every step? Oh! I think Martín asking me to come over! Excuse me!" Walking over to Martín and Héctor on his crutches, he leant down and hissed at Martín. "What happened to the signal?! You were supposed to save me from them ten minutes ago!"

"I can't take it anymore, Rivera!" Martín groaned out, his face straining red and sweat beading his forehead. "I've been dreaming of this moment for two years! I've waited long enough, fought through hell and painful agony to get here, just to see her! I have to act now! Seize my moment!"

Héctor winced at the words and fought down the sour, painful feeling that he always felt when he heard them. Dios, how he hated that catchphrase. With a shake of his head, he asked, "What are
you talking about?"

"Her!" Martín exclaimed and thrust his hands out at the kitchen. "Mi diosa!"

That made Héctor blink in surprise and confusion. "Diosa?"

Turning towards the kitchen he saw Coco come out with two bowls of food to place them on the table, and with a deep glare he turned his attention back to the love-sick Martín as he gawked at her like she was a piece of meat. Are you kidding me?

Fishing a pick out of his jacket, Martín started to fluff up his pompadour to an even more ridiculous height as his eyes never left Coco. "Forgive me, Señor. Your son told me that was what you called your wife, but I cannot think of a better way of expressing how truly mesmerizing she is! Words fail me in the presence of her beauty!" With a final flick to his hair he looked up at Matty with a nervous grin. "How do I look?"

Matty raised an eyebrow. "Like an electrified rooster."

"Perfecto! Now give me your crutches."

"What?"

"Your crutches! How am I supposed to swagger in this wheelchair, give me your pinche crutches!"

"Alright alright! Dios…"

"Now wait a minute, chamacos!" Héctor called out, but he was entirely ignored as the two young men clumsily tried both to raise Martín out of the wheelchair and switch off with the crutches. Soon though Martín was standing on his one good leg with a triumphant smile and winked at Matty.

"Watch closely, Rivera. I'll show you how to get a girl." He said as he slowly hobbled towards the kitchen.

Matty rolled his eyes as he leaned heavily onto the wheelchair. "I've already got a girl, but whatever."

"Mateo!" Héctor hissed as he leaned into his son's face. "He does know that your sister is married, doesn't he?!"

"Huh? Si, he knows."

Héctor was flabbergasted. "And still you're going to let him make a fool out himself in front of the whole family?! I won't stand for-"

"Shh shh shhh…" Matty pressed a finger in front of his father's face, then pointed towards the action about to take place. "Just watch, old man."

And so, with bated breath and a clenched gut, Héctor watched as Martín slowly and nervously made his way over to Coco. Ay, this was not going to end well! Soon Martín was right in front of Coco, to the side of Coco, past Coco-

Wait…

"Disculpe señorita?" Martín asked softly and with such heartwarming sincerity. "You are Rosita Magallanes, si?"
Rosita looked up from where she was putting the last plates of food on the table, and her eyes widened as she saw Matty's handsome friend gazing at her with the softest smile no man had ever given her before. She had seen him when Matty had arrived and had even chatted about him to Coco and Mamá Imelda. 'That poor man, how awful to be hurt that badly!' But now, seeing him standing upright she could see how tall he would be if fate hadn't been so unkind to him. And how wide his shoulders were. And how long and fluffy his eyelashes were. Feeling her face warming up to an alarming degree, she nodded. "Si… And you're Martín… From Matty's letters."

Martín chuckled at that. "Oh! I'm glad you know about me. Because… He's told me a lot about you. I mean, because I wanted him to tell me-Ay, see, umm..." With a fumbling hand Martín reached into his pocket and pulled out the worn foto and handed it to her. "You see, two years ago Riv- erm, Mateo- received a shipment of boots from his mother, and this was with it."

Rosita took the photo, and her eyes widened. It was the picture she had taken with Miguel and Mamá Imelda after they had crafted Matty a pair of combat boots, to serve as a reminder to him that his family loved him and were waiting for him to return home safe and sound. Only the portion of Miguel and Mamá Imelda had been cut off and discarded. Leaving only her. "Oh…"

"I kept stealing it from Mateo so much that he ended up just giving me this piece." Martín said with a shrug. "And I can honestly say that… this picture has gotten me through some very dark times these past two years. Or maybe not the picture but… just hoping for the opportunity to maybe get to see you, and... I'm sorry for being so forward, I don't mean to scare you or upset you, but... I didn't want to have to go through all that hell, pain and loss without telling you that if it helped keep you safe even a little... Then it was worth it."

Rosita clutched the foto to her chest with a choked squeak and blinked rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay. The two of them gazed at each other for a few moments, both smiling softly. Coco and Imelda stared at the two, completely surprised but exchanging excited smiles at each other. Wanda couldn't follow the conversation, but she could read the mood and nodded and winked over at Matty. Héctor stared like he had been slapped upside the head at the unexpected turn of events, ripped right out of a romance movie that reeked of so much cheese he was sure Ernesto would have killed to have read lines like that. He turned to look at Matty, who just grinned from ear to ear and shrugged.
Getting over his nerves somewhat, Martín continued on. "I must admit, I find myself a stranger in this new town, miles away from my home. But I would love nothing more than to have you as my company during my stay, Señorita Magallanes."

No. NO! That had to be from a movie!

"O-of course!" Rosita squealed as she shoved Coco's plate and glass roughly to the side to clear the space, ignoring her friend's offended protest as her tea was spilled everywhere. "You can sit by me tonight!"

"O-of course!" Rosita squealed as she shoved Coco's plate and glass roughly to the side to clear the space, ignoring her friend's offended protest as her tea was spilled everywhere. "You can sit by me tonight!"

Dinner carried on throughout the night, several toasts flung out to celebrate Matty's return, to Matty's health, Martín's health, to Mexico, and many others. Everyone talked animatedly throughout, with Matty stopping to translate every now and again for Wanda. The poor girl was a little overwhelmed by the spice of some of the food, but thoroughly enjoyed the tamales and the flan that came for dessert. Julio kept shooting worried looks towards his sister and this strange man who was apparently sweeping her off her feet, despite having only one himself. A subject that little Miguel couldn't hold off asking about any longer, but luckily Martín was fine with talking about.
"Did getting your leg blowed up hurt?" Miguel asked, wincing as Imelda poked him with a fingernail.

"Ay, honestly niño I don't remember much from when it happened." Martín said. "When you go through that much pain your brain sometimes turns off and you forget about it. It was the recovery part that was the worst, _that_ was when it hurt. Sometimes I can still feel my leg like it's still there. Sometimes it feels like it _itches_!"

"Really?!"

"Si! But the food they gave me while I recovered, _ay_, you'd think they were trying to kill me rather than heal me!" Turning towards Rosita with a syrupy smile, he gushed, "Of course, if I had any of your dear Rosita's cooking then I would have probably regrown a whole new leg by now."

Rosita giggled and blushed harder. "You flatterer. But by all means please have some more!"

By the time dinner was finished and little Elena was put to bed, all the adults were quietly conversing while Miguel and Victoria played in the courtyard. Julio tried get his father to notice that his daughter was _clearly_ being entranced by this weird soldier, but Facundo seemed blissfully unaware and was content that Rosita had simply made a new friend. Matty had his arm slung around Wanda's shoulder as she snuggled up to his, and Oscar and Felipe went over the shoe ideas that Matty had personally voted in favor for with Imelda. _Sí, hermana, a shrug counts as a yes_!

Somehow the conversation had come around to mention dogs and Matty slapped at his forehead. "Dios mio, I can't believe I forgot! Where's Dante? _Dante_! Come here boy!"

The talking fizzled to a halt as all the adults glanced at each other sadly while Matty whistled and clapped for the dog to come. Not being able to let this go on for much longer Héctor stood up and walked over to his son, placing his hand on his shoulder to stop his calling. "Mijo…"

Matty stopped at the tone of his father's voice, turning to him with his smile lightly faltering. "… What? What is it? Did something happen to Dante?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, Héctor groaned, "Well, see… the thing is… Dante-"

"ARF ARF!"

"Dante!"

Within a split second Héctor was knocked off his feet as a blur of tanned gray shot out from under him. He fell with a startled yelp as a hairless dog leapt up onto Matty's legs and frantically licked all over his face, knocking his glasses to the side of his head. Matty laughed happily as he tried to push the dog off of him and Héctor sat up with a groan covered in dirt.

"Aw Dante! I'm so happy to see you! Did you miss me, boy?!" He turned the dog's wrinkled face towards his girl. "Wanda, look! It's my dog, Dante! I told you about him, remember?"

Wanda stared at the dog, gritting a tight smile as her eyebrow twitched. "Yes… I didn't know he'd be so… leathery."

Héctor blinked at the scene before him, feeling like his brain was fizzling and popping inside his head. No. That wasn't him. Dante was _dead_! He had been gone for as long as Matty was! It had to be another dog, just another pelón dog that just happened to be as extremely attached to Matty as Dante had been. But then the dog looked at him, with those same distant eyes that pointed in different directions, and with that same vacant grin. Even the tongue was ridiculously long like
But no! It was impossible!

"M-Matty… That can't—"

"He looks great Papá! He looks just like when he was younger! What have you been feeding him?!" Matty exclaimed as he peered into the dog's eyes. "You even got his cataracts fixed! Gracias! This calls for a celebration! C'mon boy!"

As Matty hurried as fast as he could with two crutches and an overly-hyped dog yapping at his heels, Héctor sat in the dirt pondering what exactly was going on that night.

Bursting into his room, making a quick side glance at Leti's bed still made up to perfection, Matty pulled out his suitcase and flung it onto the bed. Popping it open and pulling back the various items of clothes and toiletries, his hard trumpet case came into view and he pulled it out. Retrieving the beautiful golden trumpet inside, he grinned at his distorted reflection in the brass. "Time for some music!"

"No."

Flinching at the voice, Matty turned to see Imelda standing in the doorway, a solemn expression on her face. Puzzled, he placed the trumpet down and made his way over to her. "Mamá?… What's wrong?"

"Your father… We… don't listen to music, not anymore."

This made Matty slightly gasp. Turning to look back at his trumpet he saw Dante's head laying gently over the instrument, the dog whining sadly as he nuzzled the metal. Matty paused for a few moments as he tried to figure all of this out, but honestly it just didn't make sense. Papá didn't listen to music? How could that be possible? Music was one of the first things that came to mind when he thought about his father. Music was what built their family's foundation. Music wasn't just in Héctor Rivera, it was Héctor Rivera!

"I don't understand?"

With a deep sigh, Imelda walked further into the room. "Sit down mijo. There are some things that I need to tell you."

Chapter End Notes

The Papa Rivera Canning Company refers to this fun Easter Egg from Toy Story 4 where in the antique shop there's an advertisement for Papa Rivera Pork Lard that everyone at the Coco Locos Discord group found absolutely hysterical. Hector just can't escape the chorizo!

Seen Here: https://d13ezvd6yrs1xm.cloudfront.net/wp/wp-content/images/toystory4_brands_embed-700x223.jpg

Also slate my ass, you're gray son.
The Prodigal Son (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

You know what's hard? Drawing hands. Screw hands, who needs them?

Oh, and happy New Year Everyone. Here's hoping I'm more productive this year. Fingers crossed! (Oh right, that's something that hands do...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Mrrmmf!"

Héctor woke up from a sound sleep when something heavy and fuzzy plopped down hard on his chest and then spread out over his face. When sharp claws began to knead into his neck he flung it off him with a grunt, a small mewl of protest carrying over to the other side of the room. Sitting up in the bed and rubbing his stinging neck he looked out into the darkness to see two glowing eyes staring at him, a low disgruntled growl breaking the silence.

"Damn it Pepita." Héctor whispered, trying not to wake Imelda sleeping next to him. "Why do you always want to sleep on me? Sleep on Imelda, she likes you!"

The gray tabby cat simply looked at Héctor for a moment before turning towards the door and rubbing up against it. Ah, she wanted out. She had been in the bedroom probably all day. Rosita had told them earlier that she would take the cat home for the entirety of Matty's stay, so as not to upset his allergies, but apparently that didn't end up happening. She seemed a little... distracted by Martín's surprise visit. Understandable. He had never seen the girl so enraptured and giddy before.

With a sigh Héctor opened the door and let the cat slink off into the night, stepping out himself and breathing in the warm mid-May air. He didn't know what time it was, but it probably wasn't that long after everyone had turned in for bed. He found himself walking towards Matty's bedroom with a smile. Now that his boy was finally home, safe and sound, he wanted to see him sleeping in his own bed. Just to be sure.

Peering into the window his smile faded when he saw Matty's blankets rumpled and turned out, but the bed empty. Glancing about the rest of the room he saw no sigh of his son. Héctor stepped back and looked around the courtyard. Where was he? At this time of night? The bathroom? That seemed the most plausible. He couldn't think of any place else-

"YIP!"

"Gyah!"

Jumping nearly out of his skin, Héctor looked down to see Dante standing next to him. The dog grinned and panted happily up at him, his crooked tail wagging hard. As his heartrate came back down to normal rhythm his eyes narrowed as he looked at the dog critically.
"You're not really the same dog, are you?"

Dante didn't answer, not that Héctor was expecting an answer, but instead trotted over to the exit of the courtyard. It was then Héctor noticed that the green doors were slightly ajar. Dante looked back at Héctor, spun in a circle, and jumped a little with that same goofy smile.

Follow me.

Héctor sighed wearily but went after the dog as he made his way down the deserted streets of Santa Cecilia. He was wide awake now so sleep wouldn't come back to him easily, and at the very least he could make sure Dante didn't disappear again for another two years. But instead of wandering about aimlessly looking for a place to leave his mark, Dante looked like he was headed to a very specific place. And soon that place revealed itself to Héctor.

Panteon de Santa Cecilia.

He balked at entering the cemetery, never having been keen on visiting the site that held the remains of his baby girl, and even more so now. With Ernesto's giant mausoleum taking up so much space, sticking out in its size and grandeur and making sure it was the first thing that caught your attention, Héctor's stomach curled in sourness as he gazed at it. This used to be their playground, he and Ernesto, when they were little kids. Despite the morbid atmosphere they had some good times. Now his dead body, and his daughter's, had tainted it forever.

But the gate to the cemetery was also open, and Dante made his way in and towards Ernesto's gravesite without hesitation. As he watched the dog weave around the various crypts and gravestones, Héctor could see that Dante was not the only occupant there this late at night.

There, sitting on one of the gravestones directly in front of the mausoleum, was Matty. The sight of his son made Héctor relax a little and with a little shake to prepare himself he made his way in. Moving closer to him Héctor could see that Matty was staring up at the lifelike stone bust of Ernesto perched above the entryway, absently patting Dante's head once he had reached him and put his snout on his lap. He was leaning, nearly fully sitting, on one of the tombstones situated at the front with his crutches laying on the ground, with only the tiny embers of his cigarette giving off a faint glow in the night as he sucked down a puff-

CIGARETTE?!

"AHA!"

Matty whipped around to see his father staring at him and erupted into frantic, hacking coughs as he hastily flung the cigarette to the ground and stomped it out. "Mierda!"

Héctor crossed his arms and laughed. "I knew you smelled funny as soon as you got off the train! And here I was thinking someone else had smoked and gotten the stench on you. Tsk tsk tsk…"

"It's nothing!' Matty insisted as he caught his breath and wiped the tears from his eyes "Just a simple luxury when I had nothing else! I'll stop as soon as I can, I promise."

"Mmm hmm, sure." Héctor chortled and waved the lingering smoke out of the air. "I'll just keep a wide berth until then, eh? Couple of arm's length so I don't choke around you?"

"… Don't tell Mamá, sí?"

"Oh, I won't have to. If the crushing guilt doesn't compel you to tell the truth, your ashy fingers, smell and charred vocal cords will give you away in the end."
Matty growled and shook his head. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I should ask you the same thing."

In an instant Matty's face softened and he looked back up to the bust of his godfather. A fleeting expression of grief changed into a sad, wane smile. "I came to thank Tio Nesto."

Héctor blinked. "For what?"

"For a few things." Matty scooted along the gravestone and gestured to the empty spot. "Sit. I already apologized to this chica uhh… Nieve, so I don't think she'll mind you sitting down too. Plus she's been dead for over forty years, so…"

With a chuckle Héctor took the offered seat next to his son, tapering off as he too looked at the bust of Ernesto. That charming smile and faraway, confident look that charmed the world over. Charmed him as well. Fooled him, for so many years. "So, what do you have thank… him for?"

Save for a brief look from his son, Matty didn't address nor question the slight bitterness to his voice. He simply started his story.

"When I first heard that Tio Nesto died about two months had passed since then. Word travels slow in the trenches that doesn't include wartime activities. Especially frivolous topics like the deaths of famous people, and extra especially those who are not from Hollywood, like native Mexicans. So, when I finally heard about it, I… did not take it well."

"Probably better than I did,' Héctor thought, but he kept listening.

"I lashed out at everyone, intentionally got into fights. Martín tried to stop me, but I was just so angry I ended up fighting him as well. It got us both sent to the infirmary, where of course Wanda was there to tell me off for how foolish I was being… I said some things, called her names I'm not proud of… and she just lit into me."

"Now keep in mind up until this point I respected her as a nurse, but thought she was just a sheltered privileged white woman from America who came running to me because I spoke 'Mexican'. But she was quick to point out I was the sheltered privileged one… And I must admit she was right. Then in the span of about thirty seconds she told me an abridged version of her life, which I won't repeat out of respect, but… It was rough. It was bad Papá, something I wouldn't wish on anyone, especially a little girl!"

Suddenly Matty lurched forward and began to breathe hard, his hands clenching into fists on his knees and shaking. Héctor rubbed a hand on his back, whispering soothingly, "It's okay… I understand, it's okay."

Mumbling a terse apology, Matty reached a shaking hand into his jacket pocket and pulled another cigarette. Héctor chose not to say anything as Matty lit it, especially since he was able to relax once he had sighed out another cloud of smoke. He’d let him be this once.

After a few seconds pause Matty then smirked a little. "After all of that she said I was a spoiled little rich boy whose father was King of the Mexicans- something I'll start calling you now, by the way."

"Oh, thanks."

"And then she screamed at me, 'You are the sorriest son of a bitch on both sides of the Earth, and I pity the lowly cow who will be unfortunate to be your wife!' And then she… uh…” With a cringe
and nervous laugh, he smoked another drag. "She threw a bedpan at me."

Héctor's eyes bugged out and he cringed too with sympathy. "Ah… A, um… a clean one I'm hoping?"

"Nope."

"Uy…"

Matty hummed a chuckle and flicked away some ash, his smile growing warmer. "Anyway… After ignoring her for a few days I finally came around to apologizing to her properly. We talked more about her life and about mine. When she learned about Leti and Tio Nesto she apologized as well, and ever since then… we clicked. I started thinking about her more and more, and she said the same about me. I even learned-

Matty stopped short with sigh and shook his head. He didn't think Héctor wanted to know that he had learned to play all of Cole Porter's songs on the trumpet for Wanda. Even if one occasion had him blasting out 'I Get a Kick Out of You' while doing a lazy soft-shoe dance that had her in hysterics. He couldn't, not after what Mamá had told him.

"-Well we learned a lot about each other and from each other… And when I was hurt and dreaming, I felt a kiss on my forehead and such soft words that made me feel better… 'You feel better'… and for the first time in my life I didn't immediately think of my sister and feel better. I thought of Wanda. And when I woke up… she was there. She came to me, in my dreams and in real life, and I… I love her Papá. I never thought I would ever love someone as much as I do her."

Héctor wrapped an arm around his son. "I'm so happy for you."

"Me too. For the longest time I thought I would never feel anything for anyone. I thought there was something wrong with me."

"Oye." Héctor said sternly. "There is nothing wrong with you. You just… had to go to the other side of the world to find the one for you. And even if you never did find someone there'd still be nothing wrong with you. Claro?"

Matty nodded with a smile, leaning into his father's hug, and looked up again at Ernesto's bust. "So that's one reason why I have to thank Tio Nesto. He was sort of the catalyst for me to get to Wanda." With a hard swallow he reached into his pants pocket with a nervous fumble. "The other reason was… I had to thank him for uh… saving my life."

"Saving your life? What are you-" Héctor asked, but his words trailed off as Matty dangled something in front of his face, and confusion turned into silent horror. It was his pocket watch: the same one Ernesto had given to him when he was seven years old to celebrate the premier of their first movie. Shiny, golden and encrusted with diamonds with the words 'Seize your Moment' engraved into it.

Except now it was bent and warped into a misshapen, puckered mess. The diamonds had broken off and the gaps filled in with caked dirt, the glossy sheen scratched to oblivion. And in the center of the broken timepiece was a mutilated silver bullet slug, permanently jammed into the mess of metal. The words were lost forever.
Héctor numbly took the chain from Matty and placed the watch into his hand, and a slight tremble of fear of what could have been made him gasp. "Mateo…"

Matty stared down at the watch blankly, one hand coming up to rub his right pectoral, and continued.

"We were ambushed at Anzio, after weeks of no activity. Martín, several other soldiers and myself were held up in an abandoned town street behind a barrier when suddenly a grenade landed on our side. We were able to scramble away in time except for Martín. He was blasted into a wall, caved into a house. I could hear him screaming. He was alive, I had to get him. The others told me to retreat, but I couldn't. I promised him I would bring him to Santa Cecilia."

"I managed to snag a morphine syrette from a medic and made my way back to him. I was able to calm him down with a shot, but while I was digging him out I didn't notice a Gerry coming in behind me. He shot me in the leg, I turned around to shoot, but then he popped me in the chest."

"It was a cheap pistol but it did the trick just fine. I fell back. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't react when he stood over me and aimed at my head… That's when Martín managed to recover enough to gun him down… So, like I said earlier he saved my life too. The last thing I remember I was being carried away. I woke up on the deck of a ship sailing away from Italy, with Martín lying next to me and Wanda by my side. Out of commission for good."
"If it had been a more powerful gun then this watch wouldn't had made any difference. But because it was, and because I had it in my breast pocket that morning, I survived… With half my ribs broken and a badly bruised lung, but I survived… So in a way, Tio Nesto saved me. He let me keep my promise to you. I came home."

Héctor stared at the watch as he took in Matty's story, his fingers closing around the twisted metal. His one true fear ever since the day Matty had left nearly came true. Someone shot his son. Aimed a gun to his head. He would have to thank Martín profusely when he woke up in the morning. Staring up at the bust himself, Héctor took in Ernesto's smile and kind eyes… and felt nothing. Martín saved him, not Ernesto. No matter what Matty thought, a well-placed watch did not give him the honor of being his son's savior. This changes nothing, Ernesto. I can't forgive you.

"I know you think I went off to fight in the hopes I would end up dying. Right?"

Looking back at Matty he handed the watch back to him. He didn't feel like holding it anymore. "No… Well, I-…"

Pocketing the watch, Matty shook his head. "No, I don't want to die. Even when Leti did and I felt like I deserved to die instead, I didn't really want to. I guess I went off because I wanted to save people. I thought if I could save one person, that I could prevent their death, then I could feel better about my own loss. And I did save people. I saved a lot of people."

"And how do you feel now?"

The cigarette was now down the butt, and Matty stared at the dying embers with a shrug. "Leti's still dead. Barto's still dead. Now Tio Nesto is dead. And while I helped a lot of people I also killed a lot of people. They were the enemy sure, but I wonder if some of them were not the fanatics the news reels made them out to be. Maybe they were just boys who were forced to serve their country, with family hoping they would return home too… Ay, you were right. Many people were forced into this war, but I wasn't. I was being stupid."

"You get it from me."

This caused Matty to laugh softly, with Héctor joining him, as he stubbed out the cigarette at last. "Si."

"And it turned out fine in the end!" Héctor said. "Just think: You and Wanda will one day get married and we can be the family she never had!"

Matty's smile turned forced and he chuckled nervously, gripping his wrist. "Ah, yeah… About that…"

"What?"

"Wanda and I… are kind of… already married?"

"… What?"

"W-well, you see!" Matty stuttered while still maintaining a too-wide grin. "I was hurt, si? Emotions were running high, it was spur of the moment. A priest was there-Oh! She's Catholic, you'll be happy to know! Anyway a priest was there giving last rites to soldiers, so he was more than grateful to perform a small wedding ceremony. Martín was my best man, even though he was laying out on a cot and delirious the whole time, but he was still a witness! Anyway, we don't have a certificate yet but a los ojos de Dios… She's a Rivera!"
As his boy rambled on, Héctor was pleased to see more of his own mannerisms being shown on full display in Matty. Both so different from each other except when it came to love: It made them both idiots.

"I see… Doesn't count."

Matty blinked stupidly. "Que?"

"It doesn't count." Héctor said, crossing his arms. "You are not truly married until you tell your Mamá, who in turn is going to want to give you a big fancy wedding and invite everyone in town. Ceci will make Wanda's dress, we'll have a grand feast with lots of presents and your Mamá will wail and grieve over the loss of her son while clutching Miguel close to her vowing to never let him go. It will be beautiful."

Matty laughed and nodded in agreement. "Si. It would be nice to have a real wedding… But there's also one other reason why it doesn't count."

"And what's that?"

"I need to make Wanda some shoes."

That was exactly what Héctor wanted to hear. Héctor's heart melted and he smiled warmly at Matty, pulling him into the biggest hug he could give him. They sat there for a moment, holding each other, when Héctor noticed three other cigarette butts among the other two. "How long have you been here?"

"…About two hours. And it took half an hour to get here. It was a mistake to come here alone, I lost my wind and have been stuck here ever since."

"You stubborn little- All right, wrap your arm around me and lean in. Papi will take you home, cielito."

"Callate."

With one arm around his son's waist and the two of them each holding onto a crutch, they slowly started to make there way back to the house. "And it's not just you and Wanda. Martín is quite taken with our dear Rosita, and I think the feeling is mutual. Two new romances in one day! It's very exciting, no?"

"No." Matty said with a huff, panting a little in exertion as they walked. "It was maddeningly irritating. Everyday it was something else with him: 'What's her favorite color? What does she like to do? How tall is she? Is her voice low and sultry like a vixen or sweet and clear like a faerie?' It's kind of high and squeaky. 'Ay! Like a faerie then!' He drove me crazy Papá!"

"It couldn't have been that bad."

"Sorry, but I don't want to tell him what her favorite food is while we're under heavy fire."

"…Okay that's bad."

As the two laughed down the street Dante followed close behind them, sniffing the air as they walked past and whining a little at what he smelled. His boy was older now and hurt. When he had disappeared so long ago, to place where Dante could not follow him, the old dog's heart ached for him. But whether he would come back to their small town or to the Land of the Dead, Dante would be sure to greet his owner with much gusto as well as many happy licks. He was a good boy, after
all, and that's what good boys did.

But he was tired, his sight was failing, and his bones had ached something fierce. He wasn't sure how much longer he could exist amongst the living, so the choice to go to the Land of the Dead had been an easy one. As his body regained its strength and his eyes became as sharp as they were in his puppy days, Dante was content to wait for either outcome of his master's fate in the company of skeletons and fantastic creatures.

But then earlier today he had felt it. The boy was back home where he belonged, and Dante wasted no time in tearing across the marigold bridge to get back to him. And he did greet him with plenty of slobbering kisses and received many hearty pats and rubs. It felt so good to see him again.

But his boy was different now.

Ever since he had known him the boy had a storm brewing inside of him, so dark and heavy that sometimes not even the best licks on the face or the funniest tricks could get him to smile. He was a good owner, yes, but he was so sad at the same time. So broken. Dante didn't know what he could do for his boy and it broke his heart.

But now… aah, that was a little better. The storm was not completely gone, but now it was more like a cloudy day with a few drizzles. And streams of sunshine were now breaking through the clouds. Dante guessed that had to do with his boy's new mate. She smelled nice and her voice was pleasant to hear. Had to work on her petting though. Very amateur, but she showed some promise. But the way he looked at her made the sun inside of him shine brighter, so she was a keeper in Dante's mind.

His boy was going to be okay now. He didn't have to worry about him anymore.

The old man on the other hand?

Woof…

As Dante watched Héctor walk his son down the road, he was startled when something snaked against his side with a soft purr. Looking down he saw gatita arching her back up his flank and rubbing her whiskered cheek against him. With a smile he gave her a sloppy lick on the forehead in return. With a growl she glared at him then sat down to get to work on cleaning off the slobber. As the two animals watched the men walk off into the night, Pepita turned towards Dante.

'So what are you thinking?'

'I think… that I have a new boy to look after!'

'… A rather old boy.'

'A boy is a boy! Even girls are boys! It's a fact.'

'Hmm. Well, it's going to be difficult to guide him. I've been with him for over a year now. Not only is he hurting, but he's stubborn.'

'It's okay. I'm a good boy who always helps his master. No matter what.'

And with that the two animals followed the two men on their way home, both of them unaware that they were being scrutinized by beings more powerful than they could possibly comprehend.
"What is this?"

"Um... a ball?"

"Good. And what color is it?"

"Red."

Victoria turned toward Miguel and gave him an affirmative nod, who eagerly scratched out a big check mark onto the piece of paper in front of him. Wanda was sitting across from them both at the kitchen table, with Héctor next to her reading a newspaper. Every so often however he would lower the paper to watch his granddaughter rummage through her small pile of trinkets and treasures laid out in front of her, chuckling with mirth. As Miguel finished making the mark on the page, he looked at his pencil and gasped.

"Ooh! Victoria! Ask her about this!" he said, holding up his pencil.

"Okay." Victoria nodded, and again spoke to Wanda in her limited, but very articulate English. "What is that?"

"A pencil."

"And what color is it?"

"Yellow."

"Oye oye..." Matty hobbled into the kitchen on his crutches, freshly shaved and cleaned for dinner with Facundo, Julio and Coco trailing behind him. Looking at all the random junk scattered on the table he turned his attention to the two children, frowning. "What are you two doing?"

"A scientific experiment, mijo." Héctor said as he folded the newspaper up.

Matty blinked. "Scienti- what?"

Pointing the pencil directly at Wanda, Miguel said, "She has blue eyes!"

Matty glanced over at Wanda, who as if on cue blinked her large blue eyes curiously at him with a slight flutter of her eyelashes. With a slight sag Matty momentarily grinned and chuckled dumbly at her, then with a hard shake and throat clearing he glared down at his brother. "Si, she has blue eyes. Your point?"

"We were wondering, since her eyes are blue, if she saw things differently than us." Victoria spoke up, smiling proudly. "So we're showing her things to see if she can tell us what she sees. If she gets it right she gets a check mark."

Matty spluttered. "What the-? Why in the world-? How long have you been doing this?" Glancing down at the paper in front of Miguel, he gaped at the page filled with over fifty tally marks on it. "Ay Dios mio! Yes, her eyes work just the same! Experiment over, now stop pestering her and clear off this mess. Ahora, chapparitos!"

As the two children scooped the items into their arms amidst their giggling, Matty made his way over to Wanda to finally explain what they were doing to her in English. She tipped her head back in laughter as Matty shook his wearily and rolled his eyes, apologizing for his brother and niece. Wanda grabbed his chin to look into his eyes.
"It's cute." Wanda insisted.

"It's annoying, is what it is."

"Speaking of annoying," Wanda suddenly whispered, drawing him away from Héctor slightly. "Have you talked to your father about this whole no music' thing?"

"…No."

"Why not? Matthew it's been over a week."

With a sigh Matty shook his head. When Mamá had told him how Ernesto's death had hurt Papá so much that he had grown to despise music, he was determined to help him in any way he could. Possibly even get him to change his mind about it. He had the perfect moment at the cemetery to ask his father if he had anything else to tell him. A way of getting him to talk about his problems with music.

But when Héctor had looked up at Ernesto's bust in the mausoleum, Matty didn't just see grief. He also saw anger, bitterness and even a little wild fear. Papá wasn't just heartbroken over Tio Nesto's death. He was traumatized. Something Matty all too well understood, and he knew at that moment he couldn't just force him to confront the past.

Not yet anyway.

"You can't push these things, sweetheart." Matty whispered. "I will one day, but not now. You understand, right?"

Wanda raised an eyebrow at that, but with a hum she smiled. "Claro."

As the two of them kissed sweetly Imelda came in at that moment carrying two plates full of food. Seeing her son with that woman made her poor heart ache and she let out a long-suffering sigh, causing Matty to pull back from his girl with an annoyed sigh of his own. Setting the plates down she reached over and grabbed Miguel's face, smooshing his cheeks together and making him look her in the eye. "Miguel, you are never going to get married. Understand?"

Miguel nodded with puckered lips. "Shi, Mba-mbá."

"Mamá, where's Rosita?" Coco asked as Miguel rubbed his cheeks back into place. "I thought she said she would help you with dinner?"

"Ay, who knows. That girl's head has been in the clouds all week."

Julio shook his head. "No, she's probably just taking a nap. I'll go get her."

Julio walked off towards Rosita's bedroom while the rest of the family settled down to dinner. Helping himself to a large portion of chicken Facundo leaned over to Matty. "Alright, so you don't want a parade in your honor. That's fine, actually humble of you. Then how about a ceremony at the plaza where I personally give you the key to the city and unveil plans to erect a statue in you likeness. It can go next to Ernesto's! In fact, I have a plan to erect statues of all of the people that have made Santa Cecilia the fastest growing town in Oaxaca!... Which is basically all of the Riveras."

"Si si, that's great Facundo, but let's talk business!" Oscar said, both he and Felipe huddled close together with glee. "Matty, Felipe and I thought up another brilliant idea this afternoon and we need your opinion!"
Ignoring the groans from everyone else, Felipe held up several different colors of leather swatches. "What do kids like to collect these days? Marbles, baseball cards, stamps, et cetera. Well, in order to capitalize on that, we present to you the latest upcoming trend… Rivera Collectible Shoe Tongues!"

"…Ay…"

Before anyone could wrap their heads around how ridiculous that concept was, there a loud commotion coming from down the hall. First there was the hoarse shout of a man, then another, a giant thud that rattled the walls, and finally the high pitched screaming of a woman. As the screaming continued a bolt of terror raced through everyone and caused them to leap from their seats and race down the hallway.

It was coming from Rosita's bedroom.

Héctor was the fastest, reaching the door before anyone else, and ran into the bedroom. "Rosita, mija, are you all- AAH NOOO!"

He immediately covered his eyes and tried to burn away the image from his brain, but the damage was done. Rosita was in bed, in perfect health, pulling the blanket high enough to cover herself but leaving her bare shoulders exposed. Julio was splayed across the floor, staring up at the ceiling and looking dazed. And on top of him was Martín, naked as the day he was born except for the wrapping around his amputated leg, both hands covering his privates in a futile attempt to keep his modesty. And all of them were screaming hysterically.

Imelda was the next to come charging in, pushing past her gagging husband. In one millisecond she was able to take in and process the scene in front of her, spin around, catch Miguel as he tried to come in, and fling him back out into the hallway. Matty came in next and also covered his eyes in disgust.

"Ay, cochino!" Matty cried out. "Guácala! Amigo are you serious?! In my house?!"

"I am so so so sorry!" Martín cried out, trying to keep himself covered with one hand while gesturing wildly with the other. "We were sleeping, and Julio came in and shouted and I panicked! My first instinct was to tackle him! I didn't know it was him at first! I am so sorry!"

Matty's brows raised. "You tackled him with one leg? That's actually impressive."

Beneath him, Julio wheezed, "Get… off… of… me!"

Martín rolled off Julio and huddled into a curled position on the floor, his one knee drawn up against his chest. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

By now the rest of the part had managed to cram their way into the bedroom. Coco gasped with her mouth covered and looked at Rosita in shock, who had now begun sobbing in earnest. Wanda buried her face into Matty's shoulder as she tried to keep herself from laughing, while Oscar and Felipe groaned in disgust.

"Honestly, what is it about these people? Why do they think they can do this while there are children present?"

"It must be the house. It might have a lustful curse on it."

Facundo marched over to Martín, his face growing redder by the second, and growled at the poor boy. "You… you vile, repugnant little cretin! How dare you lay with my daughter! And under the
same roof as our generous hosts! How dare you insult them like this! Committing carnal sin without the sanctity of marriage!"

Coco and Matty exchanged looks at each other, then towards their parents with cocked brows. Héctor and Imelda both flushed red and lowered their heads in shame. "It's fine, no comento…"

"It is not fine!" Facundo roared out, reaching down to grasp Martín by the hair and wrench his head back painfully. "You desecrated my daughter! You deserve to be thrown out into the streets, you disgusting, putrid-"

"Papá stop!" Rosita screamed as tears rolled down her cheeks. "He loves me and I love him! He asked me to marry him and I said yes!"

"-beautiful, thoughtful, blessing in disguise! Come here, mi hijo!"

Facundo grabbed Martín and crushed him into his chest, squeezing hard as the boy gasped for air in pain. "Ay, you beautiful, beautiful man! Thank you for making my dreams come true!" Raising a fist into the air, Facundo happily crowed, "Do you hear that Vicky? Our Rosita is to be wed! You can now rest in peace! Ay, Gracias a Dios!"

"Papá are you insane?!" Julio asked in disbelief, having finally pulled himself off the floor and leaning heavily against the dresser. "They've only known each other for a week! This is madness! Mamá Imelda, please say something to end this!"

Everyone looked towards Imelda, who in turn nodded and raised her head high. Clearing her throat, she walked over to glare down at Martín, making him shrink in her presence. Kneeling down she place her hand on his shoulder. "Tell me niño… Do you have any interest in the shoe business?"

Julio sagged back to the floor with a pitiful sob and Coco launched herself onto the bed to hug her best friend, unconcerned with her nakedness. "AAH! Rosita this is so exciting! We'll get Ceci to make you a wedding dress, but better than mine ever was! Twice as frilly, twice as lacy, twice as… No four times as many flowers! And with diamonds! This is going to be the greatest day of your life!" She hugged her some more with an excited squeal as Rosita hid her beet red face in sheer embarrassment.

With a smirk Matty walked over to Martín. "Well amigo, you wanna have a double wedding with me and Wanda?"

Near tears himself and still in the iron clad hug of his future father-in-law, Martín cried out, "What I want are my pinche pants! Por favor!"

Outside of the bedroom and down the hall, two little children and a baby listened to all the screaming, yelling and laughing that came behind the closed door. Soon enough little Elena grew bored and began to tuck into her dinner, which consisted of rice and beans strewn about her highchair table. The other two tried to make sense of what exactly was going on with all the grownups.

"What did you see?" Victoria asked, having stayed behind to watch over her little sister while the adults decided to act like children themselves.

"Not a lot." Miguel shrugged. "I think Señor Reyes and your Papá were wrestling, but your Papá was losing."

Victoria nodded sagely. "Papá doesn't fight. I don't think he knows how." Having grown bored herself, she jumped off her chair and brushed off her dress. "I'm going to go to bed."
Miguel blinked. "Before dinner?"

Victoria shrugged. "Abuelo Facundo said I could rest in peace now that Tia Rosita was getting married, so I guess I have to. Buenas noches, Miguel."

"Buenas noches, Victoria."

After Victoria had left, Miguel peered down the hall to where all of the adults were still gathered. He didn't know how long they would be gone for, but it would give him some time to work a little before they came back. Shushing Elena to keep this between them, Miguel pulled out his pencil and a folded piece of paper from his pocket. Laying it flat onto the table he looked at his work so far.

The figure he had drawn was nice, but it was missing something. Ah si! A moustache! Nice and thin, almost like a second mouth. No, better make it a little thicker. And a big circle over his head like a halo! Add a little lump on top and now it's a sombrero!

He'd have to put it away soon, but Miguel was more than pleased with the progress he had made so far on his drawing of Tio Nesto. It was almost perfect!

He couldn't wait to add it the other items of his shrine!

Chapter End Notes

One year later, on their wedding anniversary, Matty gifted Wanda with a little porcelain cow in honor of "the lowly cow who was unfortunate enough to marry him."

This resulted in a swatted arm and a threat to spend the night on the couch, but she was soothed when he gave her a real gift. But it became an annual tradition: No matter what gift he gave her it always came with a new porcelain cow. And it ended up being something she looked forward to the most.

Some were plain and simple cows, but as the years passed the cows became more kitschy and hilarious. Wanda's personal favorites being groovy psychedelic cows from the 60's and a set of Star Wars themed cows.

And towards the end of their marriage Wanda ended up with a very respectable sized dairy farm of 70 little cows.

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