Skeleton's in the Closet

by TA_Hybrid

Summary

Hector disappears in 1945, he's found 72 years later by a living child following after a Xolo dog... and more than a few skeletons are pulled out of the closet. Some slightly more literal than others.

Notes

This fic will be tackling some serious topics, the effects of gaslighting and mental/psychological/emotional abuse, dealing with isolation, and sexual abuse. There will be Ernector in this fic, but please do not pretend that it's in any way healthy. Keep those tags and warnings in mind please, most of the consent is very, very dubious.
Chapter 1

-1945 -

Shoes kick dust up from the cobblestones as he races down the street, a grin on his face. Cheerful greetings ring out as he passes, people waving and laughing as he passes them by. And he laughs himself, ringing out with greetings of his own, before he's turning down a side street and slowing down. Calming himself to a more sedate pace as he approaches the warehouse.

"Hey Héctor!" the greeting rings out loud and true in the space as he strides up and he offers a polite incline of his head to the grinning skeleton across from him. "You got extra today?" the man asks, nodding towards the cart, and he laughs.

"Do I?" cheerfully dipping around and plucking the list of addresses up with a small frown as he skims. "Guess it's just fitting!" he hums, running the route over in his head, and considering how he's going to deliver everything. He nods his head one last time, tucking the list into his belt-pouch and grabbing the handlebars of the bike, ready to set off.

"Héctor!" he's pulled up short by a call and looks back for a moment, one brow-ridge arched. "You going to come join us afterwards? Take a break, have a round of drinks?"

"Ehh... We'll see..." he hedges, awkwardly dipping his head and plastering on a smile.

"Hey, you sure you don't want company?" someone else calls, before he can properly mount the bike. And he hesitates looking back at his co-workers. "I mean, you were worrying about..." there's hesitation from the other and his grin drops away, his eyes drifting slightly to the side. He knows what they're to referring the prickling feeling, the feeling of eyes on him.

Of being watched. Still he shakes his head, mounts his bike and forces a grin. "Anyway, I've got deliveries to make!" he pushes off, and lets out a small whoop as he pedals. The wind in his hair, the movement, it's something fun. A small bit of fun, and for the first few deliveries it's pretty routine. He delivers the items requested, a variety of things, collects the signatures on his pad, and checks them off on the list.

It's all routine.

He goes down the list of addresses, takes notice of what each person ordered, and waited patiently when they decided that they took offence to how he's chosen to make the delivery. He's used to it really, and has no worries about being able to finish on time.

Even with the extra orders. He leaves the latest house and pushes off, letting out another whoop and racing down the street. Laughing, with more than some amusement as he goes down the road. He only has a few more deliveries to make now. A couple of music supplies, which he assumes are for a concert hall or something, and a few other oddities. There're only a few more deliveries to make.

He's feeling pretty good about finishing with some time to spare.

The road is clear, and he's making good time. Starting to think about the offer from his co-workers earlier, maybe he would go out with them for a round of drinks. Have a small break.

He's feeling pretty optimistic about how this day will go.
Until he's cut off. The road abruptly ending. He presses the breaks on the bicycle hard and frowns, staring at the blockage in confusion. Sure there's constant construction around the Land of the Dead, but he's been keeping track, and this path should have been clear. But it's clearly blocked off, so he takes a breath, huffs it out, and hops off the bike to see what's going on a little bit closer.

There's not really anyone around though, so he's eventually forced to go back to his bike, and walk it a way back, before taking another path. It's a back path, and as he goes down it he immediately feels a familiar prickle under his shoulder blades. At the end of the path there's a figure waiting. The darkness around them causes him to pause, an uncomfortable feeling curling just below his ribcage. The prickling at his back.

There's something wrong with this situation. But he's still got deliveries to make, and this is one of the quicker routes. Maybe not safe but, he takes a breath and forces himself to keep walking. Trying to ignore the prickling in his back or the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. The figure at the end of the path doesn't move, and he almost thinks that he'll be able to walk right past them.

Until he's doing so and a hand is lashing out and grabbing him.

Instinctively he's letting go of the bike and trying to pull away, eyes widening, as the grip tightens on his arm and the stranger tries to pull him towards them. He struggles, feet digging slightly in the ground as he attempts to yank himself backwards and away from them. It does nothing, the action useless, so he swings his other arm around.

An attempt to whack the stranger, it only results in that arm being grabbed as well and he's tugged forwards. Caught in a stranger's grasp.

The stranger shifts, keeping him caged in their grasp, but moving to slide a leg between his. And Héctor lets out a small panicky whine, renewing his struggles. The stranger lets out a low sound, spinning them around and pressing him against the wall, and Héctor's breath shortens. Panic raising, as his arms are kept in a tight one-handed grip and the stranger moves their free hand to cup his face. Stroking it.

There's a shout, distantly familiar, and the stranger is raising their head up. Before it's spinning with the force of a blow from the side. Héctor finds himself released but all he can do is collapse down. Pulling in on himself and staring, staring but not really seeing what's happening in front of him. He flinches back when someone kneels in front of him, gently calling his name.

"Héctor, Héctor." he blinks, trembling as he looks up, into familiar golden-hued eyes.

"Er-Ernesto?" his voice is faltering, before he's moving forwards, desperately. Arms slung around the familiar figure of his friend, head bowed and body trembling. He doesn't think to ask why Ernesto was there, it didn't matter.

"Shh, shh. It's alright, you're alright." Ernesto's voice is soft, his grasp gentle, safe. He lets out another whine curling into his friend. "Héctor. It'll be alright." He's gently pulled up and stumbles slightly. He leans into Ernesto as the other skeleton moves, going to lead him somewhere else.

"Let's get you somewhere that's a little bit more safe" but he stops, looking back at his bike and the cart attached to it, hesitating. "Héctor?"

"I-I still have deliveries" he says eventually, but he feels fragile. The words sound fragile as well, almost as though they're an excuse, rather than the truth, and he lets out a soft sound. Pulling back away from Ernesto and curling his arms around himself. He still needs to do those deliveries, it's his job but. He closes his eyes, a tremble still going through his bones.
There's a gentle touch on his arm and his eyes snap back open, finding Ernesto's. And he stands there, torn.

"Héctor... surely the deliveries can wait just a little while. While you rest. Rest and let yourself recover." Ernesto says, and he falters. A small glance back at the cart, his bike, before he's nodding his head. And this time, when Ernesto leads he follows. "Anyway Héctor... there're are a few things that we need to talk about..."

"T-Talk?" Héctor asks, blinking and looking at his friend. A frown creases his brows, and he looks aside for a moment, trying to think what they could possibly need to talk about. Unless. "My songs?"

"Si..." Ernesto's voice is soft, and he finds himself screwing up his face, about to say something about that, before Ernesto's pulling up short for a moment, turning back around. "But also it's been years Héctor... I merely wish to catch up. Share some stories, learn how you've been doing for all these years." The words sound genuine, the tone soft and sincere, and Héctor finds himself snapping his mouth shut. Looking at Ernesto and considering them.

Slowly, surely he nods his head.

He can talk with Ernesto, for a little while, but still, he needs to get back to his job at some point. For the moment, he just nods his head, and lets Ernesto lead him away. Ernesto leads him to a car, and he hesitates. Not sure if he wants to get into the vehicle with Ernesto. Still when his friend opens up a door for him and inclines his head.

He hesitantly settles himself down. Sitting on the seat beside Ernesto it feels familiar. And he lets out a small sigh, sinking onto the seat slightly, his hands fold themselves over into his lap. Beside him Ernesto lets out a quiet sound of amusement, and Héctor finds himself automatically swatting at him in annoyance. Which gets an eye-roll from the elder skeleton.

The ride passes without much fanfare.

Héctor doesn't pay all that much attention to the world outside, choosing instead to study his friend for the moment. It's been years. Twenty-four years, and then when they do meet again Ernesto had to... He feels a curl of shame in his bones, and looks away, out the window for a moment, watching the lights of the city pass by, before turning his gaze to his lap.

His hands are folded together resting there. Bones curling together and he closes his eyes, bowing his head slightly. Because he's not sure how to feel about this situation not really, he's grateful to Ernesto for sure, for rescuing him. But he's so upset at himself for even getting into that situation in the first place.

He should have turned around and found another route, even if it would have taken longer. He should have gone the safer route.

When the car stops, he initially doesn't notice. Which leads to him flinching when Ernesto moves a hand to his shoulder to catch his attention. He ducks his head a moment later, mumbling an apology before following Ernesto into the building. It's fancy. And he doesn't think that he's been in such a fancy place before.

No one's interested in a nobody musician like him after all. Even if he does have talent. And no one has ever believed him when he's told them before that he was friends with Ernesto. Well now he'll be able to actually provide the proof of that friendship, maybe. Still, his taken aback as he steps inside. It's all so clean, and white.
He's almost nervous stepping foot onto the mansion's grounds. Even just being in the entryway, it's a bit much to take in.

It's... kind of plain really, aside the recurrent skull and skeleton motif, but that's typical for everywhere in the Land of the Dead. He frowns as they pass by a pool though, noticing it's shape is very familiar. In fact, it's so familiar he finds himself glaring at it faintly as they pass. And Ernesto chuckles from ahead of him.

"Come on Héctor," he looks up at the call, seeing Ernesto already across the room, and he's still standing there, glaring at a pool. He shakes himself off and rushes to catch up, Ernesto smiling at him, before shaking his head. Leading him down the halls that all look the same and to a room.

It's a bedroom, and a relatively fancy one at that.

He arches a brow ridge, slightly bemused, it would be just like Ernesto to choose to talk in a bedroom. Still, he finds himself lingering in the doorway for a moment, eyes scanning the room. Taking in the large bed, the armchairs, the soft looking plush carpet and the twin plush armchairs sat in front of a fireplace. He's not sure if he should really enter or not.

Ernesto waves him in, and he takes a breath, holding it in his ribcage for a moment before walking in. He's guided to one of the two armchairs and sits himself down.

Once he's collapsed into one of the two plush armchairs there in the room by the fire, he just sighs. His eyes drift, falling to half-lidded and he relaxes into the cushioned material of the chair, feeling the heat of the flames warm his bones from where they are in the hearth. He lets out a small sound, closing his eyes for a moment just to bask in the feeling, before opening them again and forcing himself to sit up properly, turning his head so that he could look at Ernesto.

They're not, quite facing each other, the armchairs tilted so that they're more side-by-side, but it's close enough.

"Ernesto?" he ventures, fiddling nervously with one sleeve of his delivery uniform "You wanted to talk..."

-Dia de Muertos 2017-

"Dante... Dante... I don't think that we should be in here!" the young boy's voice holds a certain note of fear as he creeps around the fancy room. Following after his canine companion with an air of nervousness. The room they're in is fancy, far too fancy for himself and his canine companion. And he's acutely aware of that fact even as he continues to follow Dante.

The owner of the room clearly isn't in either.

"Dante." They really shouldn't be there. But his canine companion isn't paying attention to him, instead sniffing all around the room, until the Xolo comes to the closet. He sniffs at the door a couple times, before whining. The boy sighs, before looking around and opening the closet. Excited the canine bounds right on ahead, going through the closet and disappearing within. After a moment of silence there's another whine and the boy follows. Footsteps light and cautious.

He pushes clothing away and gasps.

There's another door back here. Almost blended with the wall, but there's the handle, just barely visible. Just within his reach. A hand reaches for the handle before he falters. He should really just go, back to looking for Ernesto De la Cruz, his great-great grandpa. But. Dante is whining again, pawing at the door, and there must be a reason. So he takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, fists his
hands, before breathing out and opening the door.

It opens into another closet.

There's a moment of disappointment, and Miguel deflates, before he realizes that Dante has bounded on ahead, eagerly springing forwards with purpose. Straight through the closet doors. And Miguel bolts after him, just barely catching the xolo before he leapt onto a bed in the next room. It's surprisingly dark in there, and Miguel finds himself blinking in the darkness before squinting.

He can't see anything.

Dante keeps squirming in his grasp, straining and trying to reach something on the bed. So Miguel focuses his attention that way. After a few moments he realizes that he can see movement. A subtle rise and fall of something in the bed. There's a skeleton in the bed. Partially curled up beneath the blankets with messy hair framing their skull on the pillow.

Miguel's eyes widen, this is not good. There's someone sleeping here.

Dante whines, pulling away from him again and Miguel stiffens as the figure on the bed shifts. The blankets moving, and Miguel pulls back. Bringing Dante with him. The figure on the bed moves again, stretching themselves out and Miguel ducks himself down. Bringing the xolo with him. But he soon loses his grip on Dante, and the canine flings himself forwards.

Up onto the bed, and at the poor skeleton who had moments previous been sleeping, just beginning to stir. There's what might be a yelp, before a small bit of laughter as Dante happily greets the man with eager licks all over his skull. The skeleton pushes the xolo away, or attempts to anyway before Miguel moves forwards, pulling at Dante.

The dog moves, and yanks him forwards instead. Which leads to him landing on the bed and coming face to face with the stranger. For a moment, there is more or less silence, only broken by Dante's eager panting. Only for a moment though, before they're both pulling back, the poor skeleton screaming as he desperately scrambles backwards, away from Miguel, falling onto the ground in his haste to escape.

Backing away himself, Miguel finds his hands moving in front of him, desperately motioning to try and calm him down.

"No, no, no, no no, no!" he says "Por favor cálmese" it doesn't seem to help, the skeleton's panic only growing, as he presses himself against the wall, eyes wide and staring at the boy who had invaded his space. But there's something familiar about the skeleton, now that he's out of the bed, and it makes Miguel frown for a moment, eyes narrowing as he tries to place the familiarity.

"You're ALIVE!" The shout, and the trembling point, the fact that the skeleton is still backed into a corner. Miguel winces.

"Yeah I'm alive..." he says, looking backwards, at the closet again. Fearing that any moment someone would come in. "I was just following Dante, and found... you..." he trails off, a realization crossing his mind. He lowers his arms and again regards the skeleton, who's watching him, wary. Still backed against the wall.

There are markings vibrant and almost playful seeming on his skull. Markings that look kind of familiar. And Miguel digs in a pocket, turning away from the skeleton. Pulling out a sheet of paper that he'd seen on the way here. It's an old missing poster, but he doesn't focus on that straight away instead looking at the picture of the skeleton on the poster. With a frown he studies the markings,
tracing them.

The markings are the same. They're the same. Something isn't adding up quite right here.

Miguel looks up from the picture, peering back to the skeleton, who's slightly less backed up now. Instead observing him in turn, a frown on his face. Almost as if he's trying to place Miguel. He shakes his head after a moment, considering the picture again, and reading the date that the skeleton in the image was last seen.

He looks back at the skeleton again, who seems to have decided that he's harmless. And his eyes are drawn to the clothing that he's wearing, some kind of gown. When he moves the gown shifts and Miguel frowns at it, the design a bit weird to him, with the sides not quite fully together. He chooses to ignore it, instead wondering at the date that the poor guy was last seen.

October 18th in 1945.

That's, a long time ago. Since way before Miguel was ever born. But it makes him furrow his brows, looking around the room that they're in. Now that his eyes have adjusted, grown used to the dim lighting. Everything is plush, incredibly comfortable looking and expensive, even the fine gown that the skeleton's wearing, and the carpet's soft, making his footsteps soundless. It... doesn't make much sense to Miguel.

Something really isn't adding up. Especially because the poster clearly lists him as missing.

Even with all this nice stuff around him, that one words rings in Miguel's head, missing means that there are people looking for him. And if there are people looking for him, then they must be worried about him.

And the poster was still out, sure he only found it because Dante was sniffing around, but... he should take this man somewhere that he can be found.

Or take him to the place listed on the poster as who to contact. Which is back to the Department, a groan makes its way out of his mouth and he wipes one hand down his face. Almost absently noticing how his skin has faded away from his fingertips all the more. It's alright, this is fine. He'll just have to deal with that, and worry about avoiding his family along the way.

Now he's just got the issue of figuring out how to get this skeleton to come and follow him.

He looks over to the man, where he's been distracted by Dante. Back to sitting on the bed, and letting the xolo rest his head on his lap. One hand idly petting the dog. There's something soft, almost familiar about it, and Miguel finds himself blinking before rapidly shaking his head. He needs to figure out how to get him to come with him.

Maybe if he just acts like it's normal and part of some kind of plan?

He looks at the poster one last time, before tucking it away into his pockets again and confidently striding back to the closet he'd walked through to get here. It's an act really, as he yanks the doors open and stares at the clothing. Trying to pick something, anything out to cover for himself. He's not going to drag around someone who's clearly in nothing more than their sleepwear after all.

His brows pull together when he actually looks at the clothing. A rather large amount of it seems to be made up of dresses.

Which makes him glance back at the skeleton for a moment. He's settled back down it seems, lying on the bed once more, with Dante happily panting and holding his attention. He, is a guy? Isn't he?
Miguel decides that he'll worry about it later, shoving the dresses aside, and trying to see if there's anything that's not too odd looking, or too fancy that he could grab.

There's an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach the more he looks at the clothing, the more he considers the situation. There's just something wrong, and he gets the feeling that he's discovered some big secret. It's exciting and terrifying at the same time.

But that feeling makes him feel like they really have to get out of there. Before anyone else appeared.

So he eventually just grabs the closest article of clothing that's somewhat decent. A hooded jacket, very distantly similar to his own. He bolts back to the skeleton who jolts slightly at his reappearance before he's shoving the hood at him and speaking almost too quickly.

"Put this on! We have to go!" The words are said in a rush, rapid as he glances backwards. They need to leave.

"G-go?" the skeleton leans backwards, away from him staring with wide eyes. The hood is held awkwardly between them, almost like a shield. "B-but, the doctor said-"

"Vamos!" Miguel's not waiting to hear any explanation. That feeling that they need to get out, and quickly is rising. And he's already on a time-limit anyway, the bones of his fingers clearly visible. So he just grabs the man and pulls him up and with him. Cutting off the objection.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, Wait!" There's not much a skeleton can really do when being manhandled, so he's only able to say that. "Where are we going?" he halts. Pulled up short by the question, standing in the closet, they're just steps away from the doors that open into the other bedroom.

"Uh..." he has to fish for an excuse. When a sign pops into his mind, one that he'd seen when he was making way here. "Ernesto De la Cruz's Sunrise Spectacular, of course!" He waves his hands slightly, pitching his voice and grinning at the skeleton who blinks at him for a moment, pulling on the hood finally.

"Neto's Concert?"

"Uh, si?" The skeleton tilts his head, looking at him. And Miguel feels himself forcing a wider grin, hoping that he buys it.

"W-will we be able to see the fireworks?" The skeleton shifts, hands coming together almost nervously, and posture hesitant. Miguel's not sure what fireworks have to do with a concert or the Sunrise Spectacular, but he finds himself nodding his head, before throwing his arms wide as Dante happily barks. Bouncing around them.

"Of course we will!" he declares, before dropping back down. Looking around, and reaching for the man's hand again, "Ahora, vamos!"

Now there is just figuring out which way is out. The skeleton stumbles after him as he moves out into the second bedroom and straight to the halls. Dante trots forwards, happily looking between them, tongue lolling out of his mouth as he pants. Miguel frowns, looking around, everything kind of looks the same. It was alright before, Dante led him here, but now.

Which way is out?

Dante sniffs at him, nosing his cheek and he huffs, pushing the Xolo dog away almost absently with one arm. He doesn't have time for- Dante's tongue swipes his face and he laughs.
automatically, before the dog is moving. Trotting down the halls.

"Dante!" he has to follow, has no choice really. "Dante!" he calls again, the skeleton man stumbling after him really. It's an odd progression. But soon he realizes that Dante is leading them outside, the canine knowing which way to go. As they find themselves in the main hall Miguel finds himself hesitating. The skeleton following him is looking around.

Eyes wide, and darting.

It actually makes Miguel feel a little bit guilty. Just faintly, the feeling curling through him at how nervous the skeleton is. But they don't have time. He leads him past the guitar shaped pool, to where Dante is by the doors. The xolo dog's tail waving at an incredible speed. There's just the matter of opening the doors and leaving now.

Stepping back outside sends a thrill down Miguel's spine. And gets an immediate yelp from the one he's leading. The poor man pulling backwards, away from him. Almost attempting to go straight back inside.

"No, no, no, no, no! It's alright!" he turns to the man, releasing his wrist and raising his hands up. Catching his attention as wide eyes turn to him. "It's alright!" the assurance is just repeated, he's not sure what else he can say. He's not sure what else he can do, not really. Dante barks, nosing at the skeleton, making him flinch.

A small whine, and the man's attention turns from him to the canine. Gaze softening, the fear leaving as a hand instead drops onto Dante's head and begins to rub. But there's still a tremble in the man's bones, and it's clear that the man's still not comfortable. But Miguel doesn't like the fact that they're still sort of just in the entryway. Someone could walk up and see them, and he has the feeling that being seen would be a very bad thing.

Still, he doesn't really want to force the man to move when he's looking so uncomfortable. Even with his attention on Dante.

"You going to be alright?" he asks, voice soft as the man finally seems to be calming down. Looking around them with wide eyes, and blinking an awful lot. Not that Miguel can blame him for that too much.

Even he's blinking a bit at the change from inside to outside. But he's already adjusted, the light change not being that drastic.

Slowly, the man nods his head, and Miguel lets out a sigh, gently pulling the man along as he makes his way across the courtyard. A pricking at his back, a creeping feeling that soon, at any moment someone would suddenly appear and spot them.

But nobody does.

So he's able to leave the estate grounds unchallenged. Exiting out into the streets, winding pathways and roads. He finds himself relaxing just the faintest bit when they're no longer on the grounds of the estate. Standing up that little bit straighter, and looking around a little bit more at ease. But there's still that prickle of a bad feeling at his back.

His teeth worry slightly at his bottom lip and he glances back at his new companion who's simply staring. It's almost like he's not quite seeing what's around him, or not really comprehending it. One of the two.

Still, he can kind of understand the feeling.
So he moves in the direction of a nearby side street. Leading the way, with Dante trotting alongside them happily. He keeps walking until they find themselves under and overpass, and there he settles down for a moment. For the most part his new companion hasn't really made a sound. Not since his earlier objections, and he worriedly looks at the skeleton.

Wondering if he's alright.

Now that they're out of the streets, out of view, he takes another moment to observe, but also.

"Uh, I'm Miguel!" he offers a hand, awkwardly, realizing that maybe he should properly introduce himself. "And that's just Dante..." the skeleton merely stares at his hand for a moment, before almost hesitantly taking it and shaking it. "Uh... and you are?"

"I'm Héctor..." the answer is soft, almost hesitant as his hand is released from the shake. "S-so... are we r-really going to see Neto's Concert and the Fireworks?"

Miguel can't quite answer though, because that name is familiar. Héctor, as in the mysterious friend of De la Cruz, the assumed true writer behind the songs. The man who mysteriously vanished and nobody knows what happened to him.

The nervous skeleton in front of him is Héctor? A skeleton who went missing, hasn't been seen for 72 years. This man is Héctor?

He looks across to Dante, after nodding his head, more or less automatically. This just got a whole lot more complicated.

Even beyond the fact that he found the poor guy by walking through a closet.
The warmth from the fire is barely anything as he waits for Ernesto's answer. As he waits for Ernesto to begin talking, since it was Ernesto who wanted to talk originally. He's, not as interested in talking for himself, much happier to just settle with the warmth of the flames soothing away his fear from earlier.

He's... safe here, there's no fear of a stranger coming from nowhere to grab him. But, there's still a prickle in his spine, a discomfort that stretches out as Ernesto takes longer to respond.

"I wanted to talk..." Ernesto's voice finally breaks the silence, soft and almost drifting. "I am just, not sure where to begin." Héctor's brow-ridge pulls inwards, there is something, not quite right in the words. But he can't quite place his phalanges on it, whatever is off is not making itself clear to him.

"Well..." he hesitates, "the start would be nice. What happened after I died Ernesto? What did you do? Why did you sing my songs? Why did it take me so long, nearly ten years to even hear my name attached to them after that, and even then... you... you were still claiming them why?"

The questions bubble up and overflow, pouring out in a rush. "Why haven't I been able to cross over? How did Imelda react? Did the letter get lost, did something happen? They're alright aren't they?"

"Héctor, Héctor!" Ernesto gets up from his place in the other armchair and comes around, gently raising his hands to soothe him. "Héctor, there was so much going on back then. Confusion and tension, people still upset after the Revolution and, it hurt."

"It... hurt!" there's a blazing in his bones at the excuse, because that's what it is. An excuse. "It hurt! Ernesto! I've spent years wondering what happened, I woke up dead after collapsing, and then Dia de Muertos... that... I didn't understand, why wasn't I able to cross? And hearing my songs, I mean you talked about me eventually, but that didn't explain..." he finds himself losing the ability to speak, not even sure where he's going with his speech. His hands curl, fingers digging into his carpals and metacarpals ever so slightly, a grounding pin-point pain. "And you're saying that it took you that long to talk because it hurt!"

"I, apologize Héctor." Ernesto's still in front of him, and he finds that he wants to hit his friend. "I did not intend to hurt you. I merely struggled to talk about your death, it happened so suddenly. Came on so quickly, as if it were something so much worse than Food Poisoning" there's a twist of something in his ribcage as Ernesto speaks, a niggling feeling that there's something in those words that he should be paying more attention to, but instead he just huffs. Arms crossing defensively over his ribcage as Ernesto tries to make the excuse.

Even if it hurt, he would have hoped that his friend would have given him proper credit. Not, the half-credit that he's actually gotten. Whispers of his name said in hushed voices filled with wonder and curiosity.

"I'm a mystery... Who is Ernesto's Héctor... do you know how that feels Ernesto? People don't believe me when I tell them that's me! That I'm the 'supposed' true songwriter!" his hands move, pressing lightly and motioning to his own chest. "Because... because... if I were, wouldn't I be able to cross the Bridge? After all, that Héctor is so famous and well known, the vanished best friend of Ernesto De la Cruz, Mexico's heartthrob!"

"I am so sorry Héctor..." Ernesto says, and there's such a break in the man's voice, a tone that
makes him snap his eyes up. Searching in them for something. "I never realized, if I had, I would have shared your photo... but even speaking about you, it brought up such pain. You should have had longer."

"And what about my family?" He demands, getting up from the armchair. That fire in his bones is crackling, snapping as he presses forwards. "What about them Ernesto? Did you inform them of what happened? Did you tell them anything? A letter? A telegram, anything? What happened?"

"I do not know Héctor, I sent a letter but there was no reply, so I assumed-"

"Assumed that you could claim the Guitar, claim the songs..." His hands curl as he narrows his eyes at Ernesto, who raises his hands up, again making a slight motion that's an attempt to calm him down. But he only waves one arm across in a cutting motion. "No! Didn't you ever check on them? Not even once?"

"I..."

"No!" He spins around, facing away from Ernesto. There's a tremble in his bones, and he finds himself looking down at his hands. The bones are still so white, stark white, almost shiny new. A celebrity white and yet he's unknown. "I... don't understand Ernesto... if you told them... why didn't you put up my photo... why didn't you put up my photo? Or share it with your adoring fans..."

"Oh Héctor..." he feels more than hears Ernesto move closer to him. His friend coming around to stand beside him, there's a gentle arm that wraps around him. He still stiffens, the touch sending a thrill of alarm and danger through him, but it's gentle and soft. Not restricting, and he eventually finds himself leaning into it just because it's familiar. "I never meant to hurt you..." Ernesto says again. "I had no idea that it would affect you. In the Land of the Living, this place is merely legend." That's true, when alive they had no idea that this place existed. They didn't really know what to expect upon dying.

It could have been heaven, could have been hell, or could have been merely nothing. So he can't really blame Ernesto for that, but it still hurts. He curls slightly, arms wrapping up and around himself, head lowering.

"I just... I want to understand Ernesto, why? Why haven't I been able to cross, is Imelda still mad at me? Were they hurt... why..." There's a tremble through his bones at the thought, at the knowledge that he can't cross, hasn't been able to for twenty-two Dia de Muertos celebrations, and he can't be sure that this year he'll be able to either. Even with a plan like the one he has. He knows that they're not dead at least, or he would have been called in to meet with them, to reunite with them.

It's a small reassurance. A small bit of relief, but it also makes him worry, because he doesn't know why, and he hasn't had much luck getting information from any incoming arrivals from Santa Cecilia, whenever he's tried to talk to anyone. They've given him this odd look, a look that makes him feel much like a small child caught trying to swipe fruit from the stand, or sneaking outside in the middle of the night by the Sisters running the Orphanage. It's horrible, and they only give him that look, before refusing to talk to him, to look at him ever again.

He... doesn't understand.

"I wouldn't know Héctor" Ernesto's arm curls around him, just slightly tighter, more firm. "It has been, some years since I went back to Santa Cecilia." There's something wrong, Ernesto's hold doesn't feel safe any longer, and he raises his head. There's an uneasy feeling bubbling up, rising in his ribcage. "It has been years since I had any contact with your family either" there's a definite
prickle now.

A feeling that's kind of familiar.

"Uh... Ernesto..." his mouth pulls down, that feeling really bothering him. "I... understand that, must have brought back memories." he slips from his friend's grasp, taking an uneasy breath and turning to face him. That prickle is shaken off and he offers a smile. "But still. You couldn't have visited once? At least to check on them?"

"I sent a letter, that should have been enough." The blaze is back in his bones, and he grits his teeth, forcing himself to hold back. "And besides, afterwards I was a bit preoccupied with my rising career... and she never demanded anything in regards to the songs, so I merely-"

"Assumed again... you assumed that it would be fine, that it would be alright..." his hands curl at his sides and he forces himself to take a breath, forces himself to calm down. "And maybe it was, but you... didn't mention me for so long, and, and... I know you can't have known what that song meant, can't have possibly understood but... that one, it wasn't yours to take..." There's a pause, a still in the air, and he finds himself shuffling, awkwardly moving one arm to grasp at the other, just above the wrist.

A familiar anxious move. Ernesto gazes at him, something distant in those golden-shaded eyes, something that makes him itch to move. To turn around and leave, besides, he does still have-

"Héctor..." he can't help the jolt that goes through him when Ernesto speaks his name again. "What refreshments would you like?" he blinks, trying in vain to comprehend and understand why Ernesto's only just now offering him any sort of refreshments. There's another prickle, and he's acutely aware that there's a guard somewhere behind him who's stepped up.

Ready to take any orders.

"J-Just water Ernesto..." he says, slipping around the older skeleton and settling himself back into the vacated armchair. Again, there's the urge to just, sigh and relax into the material. But there is something wrong, that prickling feeling is still there, and he's not sure if he's safe or not anymore. There's been a shift somewhere along the way.

Silence is their company until the drinks are brought out. There's something uneasy about it, even as he accepts the glass. Not entirely sure how much he trusts it.

"Well, we've talked about some of what I've been doing, getting famous in the Land of the Living... but what about you Héctor? How have you been these past years?" the shift in conversation makes him frown, even as he raises his glass.

He only takes a very small, almost experimental sip, it's... not that he doesn't trust Ernesto. It's more something in him is telling him to be wary. To be alert. And the question as well.

"Oh you know... this and that..." he finds himself saying, not quite able to look at his friend. "Nothing so glamorous as becoming famous... although... I am pretty sure I'm infamous for my antics..." he lets out a small self-deprecating laugh at the statement, before he shakes his head. "Done some performances every now and again, nothing big though... and..." he trails off, suddenly embarrassed.

Nothing he's done is that fantastical, nothing he's done is all that great or special. Nothing as glamorous as what Ernesto's surely been doing. A frown creases his brow-ridge again at that thought, and he mentally goes back over their conversation, there's a realization. Despite how
they've been speaking, Ernesto hasn't actually told him anything, just let him demand answers and made excuses.

Excuses. So many excuses.

He wants to go back to demanding answers, pressing Ernesto for them. Desperate to find something anything, to understand.

"And?" the word is a prompt more than anything else and he grimaces, raising the glass up to his lips again. Another small sip of the water. The liquid is cool and nice, perfectly chilled, with a slight hint of something, he can't place it.

"And... I've been surviving. Made some friends, gotten into trouble with some people for underestimating a situation or two, had various odd jobs..." he shakes himself off, a tiredness seeping into his bones as he speaks. "I mean, I currently do deliveries..." he mumbles, wondering where this creeping tiredness has come from.

Maybe it's the adrenalin bleeding away.

Or it could be the warmth of the flames still flickering in the hearth. He finds his eyes drawn to them again, watching as they shift and dance behind the grate, and fighting back the urge to yawn. There's... something in the flames, and beneath the onset of tiredness there's a niggling feeling, a voice in the back of his head trying to tell him something.

"You know, I should really get back to that actually" he says, fighting his eyes back open and shaking his head. "I still have several deliveries to make, and I shouldn't be too late with them. We can meet again some other time... catch up properly..."

Ernesto doesn't respond, quiet in his armchair. Again there's that prickling, and he wants to crane his head around, peer properly at his friend. He does, and notices that Ernesto is focused on the flames, staring into them, a look of deep thought on his face. He finds himself rolling his eyes, familiar with that look.

"Alright... what are you thinking about, Ernesto?" he asks, raising his glass again, wondering when it got so empty. "Some performance that you have?" he teases, before losing the fight against the yawn. He finds himself slumping back, letting himself flop into the plush material.

Distantly he feels like he should be panicking, there's something wrong. Even if this is the come down from adrenalin, this isn't-

"Héctor?" Ernesto's voice is far away, distant. He blinks blearily able to see his friend's face. "You look exhausted Amigo... let me find you a room..." he wants to argue, he wants to say that he's not tired, but he can't.

His eyelids droop, that heavy feeling of exhaustion seeping into every bone in his body. And before he can think to do anything, there're gentle hands on him, lifting him. Ernesto's voice is distant, soft and soothing, reassuring. He lets out a small hum almost absently. A small wriggle, curling towards Ernesto, who holds him just slightly closer.

The hold is secure, familiar, safe.

Héctor's eyes slip shut.

Miguel is facing a huge problem. The man, the skeleton in front of him is Héctor, and not just any
random Héctor but if Miguel's suspicions are anywhere close to the truth then this is Ernesto's Héctor.

But there is still something that's just wrong. And he can't quite pick out what it is. Sure the skeleton, Héctor is quiet, but that's not it. Or it's not all of it. But he can't put his fingers on what exactly is bugging him about the whole situation. Even when he thinks back to how he found the man, it's off, but he's not sure why.

That feeling is back again, that itchy feeling that they need to move, before they're found. Dante sniffs around, trotting forwards and bumping against Héctor slightly, until the man rests a hand on his head and almost absently rubs the xolo's head. Héctor's eyes are focused on the boy though, not really on the dog.

Miguel takes a deep breath, and straightens himself up.

"Alright, we have a plan!" he says loudly and boldly, because they do have a plan, of some kind. He has an idea of where they need to go. Héctor startles slightly at how loud his voice is and he finds himself grimacing for a moment before waving his hands slightly, making the calm down motion. "Hey don't worry, Héctor, it'll all be alright. You'll get to see the fireworks!" he splays his hands out.

A bursting motion with them and the skeleton nods his head, still hesitantly but it's something. It's something, and Miguel can work with it. He takes one of Héctor's hands again, and pauses, he needs to pick a direction. It had seemed so easy before, follow after Dante, but now. He's got no real direction. Not aside back to the Department of Family Reunions. And he doesn't even know where that is.

So he just picks a direction and gently leads Héctor along, if it's the wrong direction he'll just deal with it. It's moving at least, although they're still sort of in the back streets for the most part. Giving him the chance to make sure that his new companion is really alright.

The poor guy is still looking around blearily and confused, so lost, so bewildered. It's painful to see that. Because there's no reason that he should be that nervous right? It's not like the world is that scary of a place, it's just the world.

Miguel finds himself taking another breath, and looking around for himself, looking around for any kind of markers to tell him where he should go. Looking for something, anything that would give him a direction to go in. There's nothing, so he just keeps moving. Keeps going.

Past other branching alleys until they're once more pulling out into the streets. Nobody even looks their way, which is a momentarily relief.

But the sight of the foot traffic causes a small whimper from Héctor, and Miguel's eyes widen as he snaps his head around to check on the man. Héctor's staring with wide eyes at the crowd, and shrinking back slightly, back into the relative safety of the alley that they had just left.

"No... no, por favor, it's alright..." he says softly, trying to reassure the man. But Héctor doesn't seem to even be hearing him, not really. He's about to try leading him back into the clear alley when Dante lets out a whine and bumps against the man. Héctor stiffens for a moment, before looking down, his fear softens, and again his hand rests on the xolo's head. "It's... alright..." Miguel repeats and Héctor turns back to him.

He looks out at the crowd, a nervous chew on his lips considering. He's going to stand out. It
wouldn't be a problem, not really, he managed to make it all this way without anyone catching him. Before he was on his own though and now, Héctor lets out another small sound. His eyes dart to the man, who's pulled the hood up, almost tugging on it.

It's an action that mirrors Miguel's own hood being up. But also, once Héctor finishes doing that and finds no real relief. A hand moves to grasp his other arm just at the wrist.

Nervous and scared, and it's again mirroring.

"It's just... people!" Miguel says, voice soft. He looks back out into the crowds passing them by. "They won't hurt us. They won't bother us as long as we don't bother them!" he speaks more confidently this time and pulls himself up. There's a thrill going through him, because they're pretty far away now.

They have to be.

That prickling feeling the need to move is gone, he doesn't feel like they're close to danger anymore. But there is still an itch, they need to get to the Department, Héctor needs to get to the Department. So he takes a deep breath, offers his best reassuring smile to Héctor and leads him out.

Nobody even looks their way.

He counts that as a success, nobody cares. Nobody's even looking their way. But still Héctor lets out a small almost whimper sound. Only following him because he's got a hold on one of his arms Miguel thinks. And that makes something twist within him. He doesn't want to be forcing him to come along with him.

He doesn't want to be pressuring Héctor into anything, that would be wrong. But so would leaving him where he was. There's something just wrong with the situation. And the way that Héctor is acting, there's something about it that just makes Miguel feel uncomfortable. He doesn't know what it is, not really but it's wrong.

So he keeps leading the man down the street.

He wants to talk, do something to fill the silence, to distract Héctor from the fear that he can practically choke on.

"So... I guess you don't come out much huh..." it's an awkward start to any conversation, but not really a serious one. More joking than anything else, and he's not expecting-

"No." Héctor actually responding almost leads him to tripping over his own feet.

"Oh..." he says, suddenly feeling incredibly awkward. "Well this must be something interesting right?" he awkwardly offers, peering at Héctor who's still looking around with such wide eyes, barely paying attention to him. "I mean, there's a whole world out here, a new place to explore." Ahead of them Dante barks, the xolo waving his tail eagerly and dropping down as he barks back at them.

A whole new world.

There's another twist of something in Miguel's stomach at that thought. An itch in the back of his head, because that really can't be right, can it. Again that poster comes to mind, this man, Héctor, he hasn't been seen for 72 years. That's a long time.

Miguel found him in a closet, or through one, but still.
There's a rising bubbling feeling in him. A rising tension, a sort of eager energy. He has no idea what he's doing, no idea where he's really going either but he's stumbled upon something big, and he's gotten the problem to at least partially follow him. So that it can get solved. Something is screaming in the back of his mind, this is dangerous, he doesn't know what he's doing, but he ignores that voice, because he can help.

He's doing this, whatever this is.

Slowly as they walk, Héctor seems to calm down at least a little bit, but there's still a very clear nervous energy that Miguel can feel from him. How can he fix that? he's not sure, so he looks around, and starts to point out anything interesting that catches his eyes.

From planters and hanging gardens, to various alebrijes, to the different shopfronts, it's mostly babble. Filling the air with something other than silence and distracting Héctor from that ever present fear that he seemed to be carrying around. It was a horrible feeling, sent something rolling in Miguel's stomach.

That fear.

It wasn't natural, couldn't be natural.

No one's that-

There's a scream from somewhere up ahead and a figure blitzes by them. Shouted words that Miguel can't even catch and following after the man is a small alebrije.

"José?" A soft question, almost inaudible. But it's just barely loud enough and Miguel's head snaps to look at Héctor, the man's looking back in the direction of the skeleton who had just blitzed past them.

"You know him?" there's a note in his voice that he can't quite help. A small bit of hope, a small rising eagerness, there's a beat. Héctor looks at him, brow-ridge furrowing in. A look in those eyes that says that his thinking before slowly he shrugs. He doesn't offer any further statements and Miguel droops. All that excitement leaves him at once and he kicks at the cobblestones beneath him slightly moody. "Alright, let's just..."

Dante barks, eager and happy, before letting out an almost howl and charging on ahead.

"Dante no!" He calls desperately pursuing his companion. Héctor lets out a small yelp at the speed, but all things considered he keeps up fairly well.

Down the street, splitting the crowd really, he offers only a few short apologies as they go through. While Héctor's completely silent, just letting himself be dragged along by him. The only sound he's making is a small huffing sound. A sound that transitions into something of a whine.

Ahead of them Dante has stopped finally.

Stopped at something that looks kind of like a trolley. Dante eagerly pants and looks back at them. There's a moment of hesitancy from Miguel, he's not sure if-

Héctor lets out a small sound. He moves forwards, curiously looking at the trolley. Walking right up to it and standing by Dante. Peering at the method of transport curiously. Miguel slowly steps forwards for himself, more slowly and hesitant, there's something not quite right, a prickling down his spine at the situation.
The trolley isn't on a track. Not really, and there's something off about that, but Dante is still eagerly nosing around it, there has to be a reason that the xolo lead them here. There's a prickling at Miguel's back, an uneasy feeling as he creeps out further into the open.

More and more into view.

There's a rumbling sound from somewhere. Distant and it's easy enough to ignore. Easy enough to ignore as he finally walks up to the actual trolley and joins Héctor and Dante in observing it. There is a track here, it's just the trolley has been tilted, pushed off of the track just enough. But, it could be easily-

There's a jolt of something, an awareness that they're not alone all of a sudden.

His head snaps up, looking around and searching for whatever is giving him that feeling. Meanwhile Héctor's clambered into the trolley, Dante whining and following him in. Miguel looks around, slowly turning and taking in the area around them, buildings that stretch up and reach impossibly into the sky and yet, this area is kind of run down.

Just slightly, and there's a prickling feeling.

Something moves, a flash of green, a ripple of feathers.

No, no, no, no! Miguel bolts to the trolley, he looks around one last time before scrambling in and searching. Down the other end Héctor's sitting in one of the seats with Dante lying across his lap. There's another rumble, that sound closer this time. Héctor raises his head up, peering curiously through one of the windows. Another rumble, followed by what could almost be a feline snarl.

They aren't safe here.

They aren't... The whole trolley rocks. Héctor lets out a yelp and Dante while, there's a creaking sound and Miguel finds himself grasping tightly to the nearest bar. Another rock, something is batting against the side of the trolley. Bright yellow glowing orbs peer in at them and everyone there freezes. Another yowl and the trolley rocks again.

There's a whine, a distant squeaking sound and then the trolley is rocking in another way. A more familiar way. It's moving. It's moving. Héctor lets out another small sound, folding himself down in his seat and there's another yowl from the green thing.

"Go away!" Miguel shouts at it, moving himself backwards, barely maintaining balance until he's able to be closer to Héctor. His hands curl into fists, but Dante is whining, ears low and tail near to the ground. He's making a funny sound, almost like he's-

The thing falls back, letting out an odd sound as they're plunged into the darkness of a tunnel. There's still a yellow glow for a while before that fades out and Miguel can only let out a relieved sigh and slump into the seats opposite Héctor who blinks at him before almost awkwardly offering him a light pat on the back.

"Gracias Héctor..." he mumbles, the sound is almost tired, more forced out than anything else. He feels horrible, that was so close.

What was that thing. And Dante is still whining, looking back in the direction of the giant green monster. Tail and ears tucked. He takes a deep breath, frowning for a moment, before moving ahead. Planning on seeing if there is anyone controlling this thing. He reaches what he assumes is the front and... it's empty.
There are a lot of buttons and pannels, flashing lights but he hasn't got a clue. Dante lets out another whine and he comes back with a sigh.

"It'll be alright boy..." he soothes. "That thing can't follow us in here..."

"Alebije..." Héctor's voice is unexpected and he lifts his head to stare at the man who's looking back in the direction that they came from. "T-that was someone's alebrije..." the man clarifies, hands awkwardly fiddling with the bottom of his gown and Miguel frowns.

"Oh..." he says. "Well it still can't follow us in here! So we'll be fine!" he declares before nodding his head pleased with himself. They're safe, they're perfectly safe. But Dante continues to whine, looking back in the direction of the alebrije left behind and pacing slightly at that door. It's weird and makes Miguel feel uncomfortable. When the trolley pulls out the light elects an instant yelp from Héctor, who tugs at his hood again.

And as the trolley slows.

"The Plaza De la Cruz..." Héctor raises his head, curiosity in those eyes. "I guess this is our stop..." Miguel mumbles as the trolley comes to a halt.
Chapter 3

Soft.

He lets out a small sigh, the light material comfortable over his bones. It's like he's floating, lying down on something that's so soft. He nearly just slips right back into the land of the unconscious. He nearly lets himself drift away, but there's something wrong with that image.

He shifts, eyelids fluttering, and browridge pulling tight, something isn't right.

There's the distant sound a door being opened. Footsteps and voices, just slightly too quiet. He can't make out any words, but one of the voices is familiar. Distantly, and it pulls him closer to awareness. There's a sense of someone approaching him, a presence. There's something familiar in it as he feels the soft object he's on dip with the additional weight.

He shifts again, and there's a sound distant but familiar. The presence is familiar.

He's safe here.

A small breath, he finds himself drifting again, there's still a heady tiredness in his bones. And he's in a safe place, with someone who he knows and is familiar with watching over him. He finds a position and settles, breathing slowing slightly, evening out-

There's a movement, a gentle brush of his bangs from over his forehead and he feels his expression screw up slightly. Eyes flutter beneath still closed lids once more before he shifts. There's a distant chuckle, familiar and he finally lets his eyes flutter open. Dark, he blinks, a confused sort of grumble escaping him as he rolls himself over. Flopping himself slightly as he hears a second chuckle.

"'Nesto?" he mumbles, slightly confused. "What..."

"Hush Héctor... you collapsed only a short while ago." Ernesto's voice is soothing, familiar, and something in it wants to lull him back to sleep. There's a furrow of his browridge again, and he tries to peer at his friend through the darkness, struggling to understand what he's hearing what's been said.

"I... collapsed?" he eventually manages, and that does sound accurate but-

"Si." Ernesto shifts and he can feel his friend draw closer to him. A gentle reassuring touch. "Considering what you nearly went through, it's not surprising..." he feels a frown pull at his mouth, tugging it down and drawing his browline tighter together. There's an uncomfortable curl in his ribcage at the reminder, but even still that's not- "And as I understand, you've been working hard right?"

"I... Yes?" He pulls up short. "I always work hard!" he huffs, crossing his arms slightly defensively over his ribcage. He can't be sure he's giving Ernesto a look, but he's trying. "I've been saving up, working so that I can get things ready..." and to get himself some leeway for Dia de Muertos as well, but that's more personal. The rest of his savings.

He shifts, thinking about that, and curling in on himself slightly. Hands rub slightly on his humerus bones. Why is Ernesto bringing that up, it prickles, because there's also something-

"You have been letting yourself rest right? You could make yourself sick if you're not."
"Wha- Of course I have been Ernesto!" He snaps letting his hands return to his sides and pushing himself up "As if you're one to speak about making themself sick!" He knows that he's pouting, he knows that he's being ridiculous, but still he huffs. As if Ernesto has any right to sound so worried for him over him overworking himself.

There's another chuckle and he doesn't need to be able to see to know that Ernesto's shaking his head amused at his weak counter. Had he a tongue he'd stick it out at his friend, as it is he stretches himself out. Raising one arm above his head, before swinging himself around, finding himself seated beside Ernesto.

"Tch, you're just as bad, and you know it!" he grumbles, curling his hands onto his knees and frowning. There's something niggling at him, an echo of a feeling and he squints into the darkness around them. "What time is it anyway?"

He feels a yawn creep up on him again. There's still the distant tiredness, and it's dark. Ernesto doesn't answer him immediately and it prickles, until he realizes that there isn't really a clock in the room. No ticking in the background, just quiet.

"It's late Héctor. You were unconscious through the afternoon" he scrunches his face up, something niggling "You should rest properly, let yourself recover. You don't know what brought that on, it could be a sign that something's wrong Héctor"

Ernesto sounds worried, he sounds like he's just trying to get him to rest, let himself recover from his apparent fainting spell, but there's something that's just off with his voice. A slight shade in the tone that he can't quite put his phalanges on. But it makes his frown, browline pulling tight as he can't look at Ernesto.

Instead trying to look around the room, why's it so dark?

He looks around, searching for any kind of break in the darkness. He can vaguely make out other furniture, his eyes slowly adjusting to the dim lighting but. There're no curtains, no window, and there's a prickling feeling when he looks around. The room is comfortable, cosy, but there's something a little bit off. He's not sure what it is as another yawn creeps up on him.

Beside him Ernesto shifts again, and he pulls himself back just slightly, side-eyeing his friend in the dark. Immediately Ernesto shuffles away, giving him some space to breathe and he lets out a huff of air.

"That's... not really an answer." he finally says, curling himself up a little bit. Feeling uncomfortable. "And I can rest... at... home." he mumbles, a coil in his ribs at the thought. A little bit of embarrassment even without Ernesto being there and taking him home yet. The idea of Ernesto seeing his current residence at all though, it makes him uncomfortable. Acutely aware of their vastly different status positions now.

What has he got to his name, aside a little ramshackle apartment, sparsely decorated aside the furniture and a dozen or more papers from discarded plans for crossing that bridge? A couple of miscellaneous items, including a beat up guitar?

It's not much, unless he counted his bank account and savings and those were for the future. He was working hard, saving up. For various things, though mostly it was for one thing really. He lets out a small sigh at the thought, the hope. He'd get enough eventually, buy a nice house, a nice suit in preparation for...

"Héctor, do you really think that anyone wants to be travelling at night?" Ernesto's arched brow is
practically heard in his voice and he rolls his eyes. "Just rest here for one night. Por favor. You can go home in the morning."

"I..." he hesitates, mulling over the offer.

The bed he's still sitting on is comfortable. He is still tired, and... it can't hurt. So he eventually takes a breath. "Alright... Gracias Ernesto. But only for tonight!" he shakes his head, stretching himself out a little bit. "Only for tonight, I'll have to apologize for the late deliveries, and explain..." he trails off, grimacing, and his hands curl into the soft sheets.

There's a light chuckle, and he feels Ernesto get up more than he sees him do so. The other moves in front of him, and there's a pause.

"Buenas noches, Héctor." he nods his own head slightly, accepting the statement as he lets himself fall back onto the bed and flop there.

"Buenas noches, Ernesto..." he yawns. "See you in the morning."

"Sí." Ernesto says something else, soft and quiet, but it's too low for him to properly hear as he drifts all too quickly back into the grip of sleep. Back into that floaty comfortable darkness.

--

He comes to once more with soft sheets and a comfortable mattress supporting him. A distant sigh, he just wants to continue to lie there, his eyes closed and wrapped up, cocooned in that comforting soft warmth.

He doesn't want to leave the bed that he's in, resting peacefully and safe and-

He stretches himself out, shifting beneath the blankets and taking a breath. Letting out a small mumbled sound that might have been words before letting out a small yawn and with some false starts opening his eyes.

The room is as dark as it was the previous night.

He blinks, bleary and confused, hair falling across his eyes, and a slight daze. He's still half asleep really, and wrapped up in the warmth and the pleasant comforting softness of the material covering him. He shifts, head lolling on the pillow, his eyelids drooping once more, and he lets them close for a moment, humming slightly.

Before he's stretching, taking a deep breath and slipping himself out of the bed. The carpet is plush beneath his feet, and he pauses for a moment, gaze drifting down towards his feet, wondering where his shoes are.

Eventually he shakes himself off, deciding that it doesn't matter. He was just moments prior in a nice comfortable bed after all. In fact it would have been weirder if he did still have his shoes on. Still he looks around, trying to figure out what to do for a moment.

The darkness, there's something about it that bothers him.

It's odd, because he has no way to know what time it is not really. The room is still dark, and looking around there're no windows or anything, no curtains, nothing that he could walk over to and fling open to see if there were any indication of the time there.

Not even a clock.
It's disconcerting.

There's not even the smallest outline of a break in the darkness indicating a window. Nothing that he can pick out at all, and the lack of a distant ticking, the sound of a clock. It makes him shiver, something is just wrong with that. A prickle goes down his spine, and he shivers, rocking slightly with his feet on the plush carpet.

He's not even sure where the door is. Not in this darkness, sure he can faintly see shapes, the barest outlines of the furniture if he squints, but- He takes a breath, and lets himself have some time. Settling himself back down on the bed, sitting there until he's blinking and the dark isn't an obstacle anymore.

It's quiet.

Almost too quiet and he shifts, rubbing up his humerus bones. Rubbing nervously, his uniform feels weird in this dark place, ill-fitting. Wrong, and he's not entirely sure why. Maybe it's because he's in a dark room with a bed, it feels more like he should be in pyjamas at the least. Rather than his delivery uniform.

But he didn't come here with any other clothing...

How long has it been? Is it morning yet? Where's-

There's a creak, he turns his head. Whipping around, ribcage jolting at the unexpected break in the silence. He blinks for a moment, the light spilling from the open door disorientating, outlining a familiar figure. There's relief as he finally recognizes them.

"Ernesto!" he stands up, moving slightly towards his friend before hesitating. There's a moment, where he's not sure why he's hesitated before there's a distant squeak. Ernesto steps further into the room, and mere seconds later a trolley is wheeled in. He finds himself leaning slightly forwards. A deep breath, just letting the smell of the meal wash over him for a moment. Basking in it. Before he shakes his head. "Ernesto... I really can't..."

"At least remain for Breakfast before you go Héctor. I can't simply let you go hungry now can I?" He frowns, watching Ernesto with a slight furrow to his browline.

"I... I suppose not..." a hand creeps towards his wrist and he feels awkward. There's an itch under his shoulder blades as the trolley is wheeled closer. The selection is more than enough to start his mouth metaphorically watering as he just takes a deep breath for a moment. He still feels incredibly uncomfortable, not sure if he should really accept anything.

But, it wouldn't be polite, so he accepts the offering. The meal passes in relative silence, just pleasant company really and there's a distant feeling of nostalgia as he munches on some of the chilaquiles. Almost absently he hums as finishes.

It's somewhat nostalgic really as he places his plate back down on the trolley and stretches himself out. Still feeling distantly awkward but slightly more at ease now that he's eaten, but there is still one thing of importance that he has to do.

He stands up. Ernesto follows his movements, the older skeleton still finishing off the last of his own plate. There's a faint prickle under Ernesto's gaze, but he shakes it off and smiles at his friend. A hand snaking around to rub the back of his head, faintly awkward.

"Anyway... I really do have to go now Ernesto." he shifts, eyes scanning the room, searching for his shoes. There's a prickle when he can't spot them, a twist and he nervously shifts again, trying to
"Of course." Ernesto's voice is startling in its abruptness and he snaps his head around, ready to bark a response, but it dies in his mouth and he just finds himself staring as his friend gets to his feet and brushes himself down. "But-"

"Ernesto!" he crosses his arms, cutting off his friend's attempt to find some other reason for him to stay there before he even starts. "I really, have to go! I'm going to have to catch up on those deliveries... and figure out something to tell Román about why I took-"

"No need to worry Héctor!" Ernesto cuts him off and he narrows his eyes, feeling his face scrunch up slightly. "It's been handled."

"Ernesto" his voice rose just slightly in warning, and he felt that prickle again. This feels familiar, something about that. The way Ernesto say's that it's been handled. "You can't just- You can't-" he feels himself deflate slightly, losing the words and huffing out a breath. He uncrosses his arms and rolls his eyes. "I don't need your help all the time Ernesto..." he rubs at his face slightly, before shaking his head. "Alright, okay, whatever... I still have other things that I need to do. We can always catch up properly later."

"Of course, I understand Héctor."

Miguel feels a twist in his stomach as the trolley fully stops. A creak echoing in his ears. The skeleton, Héctor, slowly stands up, peering out the window with curiosity while Dante makes one final whine before moving to beside the man. He takes a breath while Héctor takes in the sight, eyes darting around the plaza.

It makes something in Miguel's stomach twist.

It's off. Again his mind goes back to the poster and the dates that were on it. The amount of time that Héctor was missing. He takes another breath Héctor turns just slightly, looking back at him. It weirdly feels like the man is waiting to see where he will lead. Waiting for any indication of where they'll be going from here.

Dante let out a small sound, eagerly wriggling, paws up on the window and Héctor leaned slightly away from the xoloitzcuintli. Dante wriggles and he has to grab for the dog before the xolo can leave the trolley.

"Dante..."

"They're setting up..." Héctor's soft voice catches his attention once more and he raises his head. Looking at the skeleton who's staring out the window still, a hand on the glass, while the other is fiddling almost absently with the sleeve of the hooded jacket he was wearing.

"Setting up?" he feels the furrow in his brow as he looks out again. And he slowly realizes that Héctor's right. They appear to be setting up for something, a competition of some sort. It sends a different twist through him, a coiling echo and longing.

The Dia de Muertos Talent Competition.

He feels that curl, another breath, and his grasp slackens just enough. With a joyous barking trill Dante is off.

"Dante no!" He calls, grabbing at empty air as he tries to stop the xolo from zipping off. There's a
moment, where Héctor winces, shying back and he grits his teeth, curling his hands. Caught between chasing after his companion and- "It's okay! It's okay, Dante can take care of himself!” he turns around, motioning with his hands. Trying to calm down Héctor.

Calming down the poor guy feels much more important than running after Dante and finding him. Especially because he knows really Héctor needs it more. But what can he do, what would-

"Hey, do... do you want to get closer?" he decides to ask instead, diverting the topic and Héctor's eyes dart slightly. Considering, another shift, pulling in on himself again. "I mean, it sure looks interesting." and he's curious.

Curious about what this is really for.

There has to be a sign nearby or something. Some kind of explanation. Something anything.

Still he waits, waits for an indication from Héctor that they can get closer to the actual crowd. It's painful as the man wavers, not quite coming to a decision one way or the other. Not committing to either staying within the trolley or stepping out. And he's not going to force the man to step out, he's not going to-

"Corona?" he blinks, head snapping around for a moment in absolute bewilderment. Héctor's gaze is on something in the distance. Eyes focused, he frowns, turning just enough to see if he could spot whatever it was. A small green shape, just barely visible in the crowd. An alebrije.

"Corona?" something curls in his chest at the movement of the small shape. The way it stops, raising its head up and looking in their direction. It causes a prickle to itch up his spine, an itch that he swallows. It's just an alebrije, beside him Héctor nods, something in his gaze softening. Relaxing merely at the recognition of the alebrije.

Wait-

His head snaps up, turning back to Héctor, eyes widening in realization. Héctor can see that distant small shape, he can recognize it. The skeleton even looks distantly excited at the sight of it. Toned down excitement, but there's still that faint tremble of it, the small way that the man shifts, leaning just slightly forwards.

It's very subdued, hesitant, but still excitement.

It twists through him, and something about that feels wrong. Earlier Héctor had sounded almost bewildered, confused at the recognition of someone.

As if he couldn't be sure even after recognizing the other that he really recognized them. And now, he takes a breath, shaking his head and forcing a grin.

"Corona huh, well-"

"This must be Neto's contest" he falters, mouth hanging for a moment as he scrambles to match that information with the rest of it.

"Neto's... contest?"

"Sí" Héctor's voice has dropped again, softened as the skeleton tilts his head slightly. And he turns his head, to watch, watch as those eyes dart, searching the crowd even as his hands twist, curling more in the sleeves of his jacket. "F-for his parties..."
"Parties?" the prickle raises up his back. Like an ant it crawls higher, and he finds himself squirming. Looking out across the crowd once more, finding that little spot of colour. It's much harder, as more people arrive, setting out, calling to one another. So many skeletons, and more alebrijes, a wide variety of creatures that he can't even begin to name. They're just alebrijes. He swallows.

"Sí..." Héctor's voice is barely a breath, and the answer doesn't even tell him anything. But the lack of that small alebrije leaves him squirming. There's a distant familiar howl and his head snaps up.

"Dante!" he feels a swell of relief recognizing the sound. "Now come on, we can come back later maybe..." he is curious. But right at that moment, it felt more important to listen to his instincts. Something was wrong, something was wrong. So he listened for Dante, took a deep breath and reached for Héctor's hand. "Come on, I think he's found something!" he hopes.

He hopes.

Héctor lets out a small sound as he leads him. Stepping out of the trolley the sound level immediately changes. He hadn't realized how muffled the sounds of the crowd was even just standing barely in the doorway. But as soon as he's stepping onto the cobbled ground the volume increases. He winces slightly, shaking his head. He feels Héctor pull back and away, letting out another slight whine, the skeleton's free hand once more returning to his hood, pulling on it.

A tug almost like a shield.

He takes a breath, they don't have the time to stop unfortunately.

They don't have the time.

So he leads, keeping them at the very edge of the crowd. Feeling incredibly nervous about been spotted again. But as long as they keep moving with a purpose.

"Corona!" he falters, stumbling just slightly. Héctor tugs away slightly, moving towards the crowd just enough before faltering. There's a moment where he can't think of what to do, a rising tempo in his heartbeat, a pulse that hums in his ears, before the skeleton is pulling back, shying away from the crowd of people setting up the stage for the contest.

Miguel can feel eyes.

He can feel the curious glances of people, those who're taking notice of them at the very edge of the crowd.

He takes a breath, and plasters on a smile, a small glance at his fingers, just the barest of glimpses. It's still only his fingerbones visible, his hand is otherwise fleshy, with just that faint glowing outline.

So he gives a grin, and waves.

Nothing to see here, nothing to see, just keep moving and-

"Corona..." there's a small yip. His head turns, gaze lowering down and he stares as a small shape wriggles its way out from the crowd. Almost comically the small canine pulls itself free and some of the crowd split around it, people muttering. Héctor lets out a soft sound and Miguel feels something in his chest shudder. "H-hola Corona, d-do you want to see the fireworks with us?"

"Uh... we need to-" he tries to draw Héctor's attention back, spotting a familiar blue uniform on
someone in the crowd. Someone with a xoloitzcuintli of their own by their feet, ears flickering in their direction. He does not need that blue suit to get any closer, to look at him a little bit closer.

Because in that case-

He grabs Héctor's hand, and without any real warning tugs the skeleton away. "We have to go!" they're not on a schedule but, that uniformed stranger is coming their way. Héctor lets out a small cut off yelp and he drags the older skeleton away, straight in the direction that he can still hear Dante in.

Away from the stranger in a uniform, and the xolo that's with them. Small rapid pawsteps follow them, sharp little snapping yaps.Demanding really and he can hear Héctor faintly try to respond to the smaller alebrije as they turn down some steps and he slows on the decline.

"Cha-chamaco! Por favor, reduzca la velocidad!" he stops at the bottom of the stairs, not sure which direction they should head in now. Barely behind him, Héctor trembles and he grimaces at the sound. There's another small yap, and he turns his head up, staring back up the stairs and seeing the small alebrije, a chihuahua he realizes standing there.

It's not following them down, and he wonders why.

It doesn't matter, he shakes his head.

"Dante! Dante!" he calls out, searching for the xoloitzcuintli. "Dante! Where are you boy?" it prickles at him, especially when the chihuahua, Corona, lets out one last series of yaps and turns around leaving them.

"Adiós Corona!" Héctor waves after the small chihuahua, but his chest tightens, a sense of danger lighting up in him. Because surely the small alebrije will be racing off to whoever owns it. To whoever it guides, they have to-

There's a loud bark, and before he can give way to too much panic an eager tongue swipes over his cheek. A familiar lanky canine form pressing up against him and yapping to catch his attention.

"Dante!"

"H-hola perro" Héctor adds his own greeting to the canine, shifting his gaze from up the stairs down to the xolo who eagerly wiggles around and barks again.

"You want us to follow you boy?" Miguel asks as Dante moves off down the street, looks back at them, darts over, yaps and then darts back in that direction. "Alright, come on then, Héctor, let's see what Dante wants to show us!"

They follow after the xolo in relative quiet.

It prickles really, something about the whole event sticking with him, turning over in his head. And he frowns as he walks, Dante trotting ahead of them, tail waving in the air happy and proud. He feels his brow draw in, thinking over the whole event, the posters, the stage, the fact that-

"You... you're familiar with that contest?" his voice is faltering, as he puzzles over that simple fact. It doesn't quite fit with what he knows of this situation. Héctor has been missing, unseen for 72 years, he found him in a closet room. And yet the skeleton hums, slightly nodding his head, confirming the fact that he knew and recognized the contest "How?"

"Neto tells me about them!" Héctor glances down at him where their hands intertwine, a furrow of
his brows in clear confusion. "A-and he talks about his parties, a-and his shows. L-like the Sunrise Spectacular..." there's a falter in the man's voice, a stumble in their steps and he stops. Just barely in a shadowed arc, looking up at Héctor who's staring after Dante ahead of them. The xolo happily panting, waiting for them. "H-he talks about how the new songs are received, th-those who perform at his parties, a-and the fireworks show..." there's a pause an intake of breath. "I-I've been curious about that, he always says it's so amazing."

"So why haven't you?" he releases Héctor's hand and the skeleton almost seems to hug himself, shrinking back a little bit. The movement strikes as familiar and he feels his brows furrow observing the movement. "Why haven't you ever attended-"

"I-I-" Héctor falters again, his hands tapping sightly against his humerus bones as he takes a breath. Again it strikes Miguel as odd, as off. Something that twists through him, feels wrong. Héctor looks away. Not quite finishing the thought, before the skeleton shakes his head. "I-I mostly just, stay in my room..." he eventually says, not quite meeting his eyes.

"But why? Doesn't it get boring in there?" or lonely, it strikes Miguel suddenly. He doesn't really know if Héctor's talked to others. It creeps in, the thoughts about how he found the skeleton, how there wasn't really a door to that room that was in the halls, just one through the closet, or at least that was the accessible one.

Héctor let out a small shaky breath, not answering his question and Miguel feels himself grimace. He shakes his head, and looks back to Dante, who's still waiting for them. Another breath, and he shakes his head one last time. He'll just worry about it later, Dante lets out another bark, and Héctor shifts slightly. Still waiting for him to take the lead, but clearly ready to follow after the canine.

"We're coming Dante!" he calls. He straightens himself up, and nods his head. "We're coming!"

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